



Want Your Teen to Talk To You? Cancel the Consequences!

Move your parent-teen relationship from so-so to excellent

by Judy Arnall, BA, CCFE, DTM

Do you want your teen to:

- Share their thoughts, feelings, problems and worries with you in a real, meaningful conversation without attitude and sarcasm?
- Do chores and pitch in on family projects without being asked?
- Enjoy family activities and want to spend time with you?
- Be responsible and accountable to their studies and their jobs?
- Solve their problems by discussion rather than avoiding them by drinking, sex, gambling, and drugs?
- Care about your feelings, needs, and worries and modify their behaviour in response?

This is not utopia. Many families already enjoy this kind of relationship with their teens. However, the one factor that promotes this kind of parent-teen relationship is completely dropping all punishments.

I teach parents of teens good communication skills. Many parents wonder why their teens don't talk to them even when they "try" the communication skills. I ask if they use "consequences" as discipline. I have never had a "no" answer in 18 years of teaching parenting classes. The simple answer is that teens are not stupid. They simply don't open up to parents who want an open relationship in terms of sharing, but then promote a closed relationship in terms of punishing their children. Parents can't expect openness in one area when they hurt their child in another area.

We tell parents not to use physical punishments anymore. So many parents don't spank. However, many parents of young children now use time-out as a discipline tool which is essentially an emotional punishment. When children are older and too big to drag to a corner, they use the disguised punishment called "consequences." Yes, consequences is indeed a punishment. We adults like to call it by this euphemism, but the teens know better. It is a punishment designed to hurt the child and hopefully, teach a lesson.

Realistically, there are many consequences or outcomes to any choice. Most consequences that parents force on children are hurtful and negative in some way. Even when there are multiple outcomes that will solve a problem (many of which are not hurtful or negative), parents will still choose the one outcome that will hurt a child in some way, in the thinking that it must hurt to make the lesson stick. The problem is that it rarely teaches children to make better choices. Teens know that the parent is the one sticking it to them, and that they are not "choosing" the outcome, but the parent is imposing their outcome on them.

Health care professionals who promote the use of consequences forget one simple fact that every parent of teens know. Teens are humans. Teens have feelings, independent thought, and are in total control of the quality of their relationships that they choose to have-including close relationships with their parents.

What is the typical outcome of "consequences?" Teens have the ability to push back and do. They can "leave" by shutting down communication and stop talking and basically shut the parent out. They can "passively resist" by using "attitude" and "snarkiness" or they can "actively resist" by engaging in behaviours which parents would rather they not engage in; drinking, drugs, vandalism and school failure. Some teens "submit" to the consequences but suffer from internalizing conditions such as cutting, anxiety, eating disorders or depression.

Consequences have no place in any love relationship whether between partners or parent-child. Imposing a hurtful consequence on another person is not respectful. If you want an open relationship with your teen, you have to earn their respect for you, by showing respect for their feelings and dignity. Respect is simply treating another human being as you would want yourself to be treated. If you wouldn't give your partner, or friend, or neighbor, or sister-in-law a consequence, why would you give your child one? They are human beings with real needs and feelings too.

If you want to avoid teen rebellion, cancel the consequences. So what to do instead? Use the "adult" method of solving any conflict; problem-solving and negotiation. Teach teens a valuable skill in getting along with others whether it's their boyfriend, boss, co-worker, coach or teacher. Learn how to resolve normative family problems so that everyone wins and have their needs met. Then, teach your teen how to do it. Practice together. There are many classes such as P.E.T. available to teach parents how to problem-solve with their child.

How to tell if your consequences are punitive or problem-solving

How to tell if consequences are punitive? If you threaten a certain outcome to get compliance, then it is being used as a punishment, which could invite a power struggle. If you come up with a "consequence" and insist on it, rather than getting input and brainstorming from your child on how to solve the problem, it's probably a punishment. If your child thinks it's a punishment, rather than a way to make amends or solve the problem, then it probably is a punishment! Ask your child for their opinion. Is the solution meant to hurt them or does it solve a problem? Is it the only way?

The best outcomes focus on teaching restitution, making amends, and solving problems. If a child spills a drink because she was careless pouring, she wipes up the mess. No further "consequence" is needed. A child who hits another child needs to be separated, calmed down, and told the rule. The restitution part might be to offer the other child a toy, hug, or an apology. If a child doesn't do his homework, no amount of taking away the cellphone is going to make him study and appreciate learning. Problem-solving with him what the underlying issue is, goes further to uncover the true problem - is it boring? Too hard? He doesn't see the point in doing it? Work at solutions from the problem.

Look at the child's need or feelings

Here is another way to look at it. Your son rides his bike without a helmet – again. You've nagged, begged, pleaded, and informed him of the dangers of riding without. Next, you've issued "consequences!" You've taken the bike away and put it in the garage for a day, then a week, and then a whole month. You've done everything the parenting books say for a consequence to work. It's reasonable. Anyone can live a day without a bike. It's respectful. You're not hitting or calling him names. And it's related. No helmet, no bike. Simple to understand. But the problem is he is still riding a bike without a helmet! The situation could turn into a huge power struggle every time you take the bike away. Clearly, the consequence has not worked. Why not? Because the consequence was a punishment; it was not the result of a brainstorming session designed to solve the problem.

Consequences don't work because the underlying need/feeling (NOF) of the child is not addressed. A child who consistently refuses to wear a bike helmet, even after having the bike locked away several times (and this is a common logical punitive consequence that parents take), may have a good reason for not wearing it. Perhaps he is being teased because it looks babyish. Maybe it's prickly or doesn't fit right. Active listening and mutual parent-child problem-solving are better tools used to uncover and address the underlying need.

Make sure outcomes are solution-focused rather than pain-focused. A common concern is, "Won't my child ever learn the consequences of his actions if I don't set up logical consequences? The more unpleasant the better?" Of course, he will. The rest of the world will be happy to teach your child the consequences of his actions. Sometimes, it will be painful and inconvenient for him, but only you, the parent, can provide the safe haven of your loving relationship to teach him how to solve problems, make restitution, and amends. That's the harder job. The outside world is too busy to teach him those. You can!

Benefits of problem-solving:

- Uses the wisdom and experience of the teen, as well as of the parent.
- Only the process needs consistency, not the outcomes. Outcomes are flexible enough to meet everyone's needs.
- When everyone participates in making rules, the rules are more likely to be respected.
- Parent's and child's needs are deemed equally important, and both are met.
- Everyone feels listened to, loved, and respected.
- Teens and adults get practice in problem-solving, brainstorming, and creative thinking skills. These soft skills are essential for success in today's world.
- The method strengthens relationships by facilitating growth, good feelings and intimacy.
- The method allows parents and child to deal with conflict rather than avoid it.
- Doesn't require the use of power, bribes, or punishment.
- Not a compromise, which is still half-win, half lose. Both parent and child would have to give something up to get needs half met. Problem-solving allows both parent and child to have needs fully met by focusing on needs and not positions.
- The child learns self-discipline and responsibility.
- Problem-solving enables children to work out their conflicts respectfully with siblings and friends which is great training ground for all future relationships.

So drop the consequences and treat your teen like the adult they almost are. You are in the final third of parenting when you have a teen in the house. This is your last chance to teach your child a useful lifelong adult skill - problem-solving. Use it for all your teen conflicts and begin to enjoy an adult relationship with your soon-to-be best friend!

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Judy has written bestsellers:



Judy is authorized and certified to teach:

