

Getting Along With Your Teen: Mistakes to Avoid & Strategies to Use

Strategies are adapted from Phelan (1998)

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There are several strategies that parents often use with their teens that are so destructive to the relationship, if used on a regular basis, that they have been referred to as the “Four Cardinal Sins.” In families where there are significant difficulties with teenagers, these four mistakes usually occur all the time – however, they only *make the problem worse* (despite the parents’ good intentions to solve problems in these ways) because they *increase the teen’s desire to act up*. Therefore, you should avoid these at all costs:

1. Spontaneous Problem Discussion

This involves a well-meaning parents seeing a problem (e.g., something, like a term paper, needs to get done) and saying something about it. The problem with this is that the teenager’s motivation to discuss this unpleasant topic at that time is about zero. Chances are he or she is doing something else at the time, and doesn’t want to be interrupted with unpleasant things, so it is highly likely that the conversation will go poorly. If you want to talk to your teenager about something sensitive, and you really want the conversation to go well (i.e., you really want to solve the problem, not just vent your anger and have another argument), it is usually best to make an appointment with your teenager to discuss the topic. Tell him/her what you want to talk about (short and sweet!) and agree on a time to get together. Take him/her out to eat if you want.

2. Nagging

Nagging involves repetitive verbal reminders about something that you want to see accomplished. Nagging never works well and only produces more tension in your relationship. That is because it often occurs spontaneously, and parents haven’t really thought about it much, or simply don’t know what else to do. So what should you do instead? First, decide whether the issue is really important. If it is, then make an appointment with your teenager to discuss the issue in a calm way, with the goal of solving the problem.

3. Insight Transplants

This usually takes the form of a parental lecture, often explaining why some type of teenage behavior will not lead to success in life, and describing what the teenager should do instead. What you are saying may be perfectly reasonable but unfortunately, it will only make your teen more irritated with you, and will accomplish nothing. If you are thinking about giving your teenager advice, it may be better to do in the form of a two-way conversation rather than a lecture. Also, don’t get your hopes up that your teen will immediately make the changes you have suggested. Actually, you will be more successful if you can somehow let them come up with the right answer themselves, so give them a chance to do some problem solving during calm moment!

4. Arguing

The best advice for parenting teens is probably to never argue with them! The three Cardinal Sins described above usually lead to major arguments, which only damage your relationship with your teen more. Avoiding arguments doesn’t mean you have to keep your mouth shut and always let your teen have his/her way. The key is to discuss problems calmly, with the goal of *solving* the problem, not just of winning the argument. Say what you need to say. Invite your teen to come up with ideas for solving the problem. Be ready to compromise. If your teen wants to argue, don’t try to counter their (often ridiculous) arguments. Simply postpone the discussion for a little while until your teen has calmed down, and *leave the room*.

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How To Get Along

Fortunately, there are also several ways of improving how you get along with your teens. None of these strategies is particularly easy, but they are positive substitutes for the Four Cardinal Sins:

1. Active Listening

This involves trying to understand what your teens is saying and thinking, from his/her own points of view, and then communicating this understanding back to your teen and checking whether that's really what your teen had meant to say. This is not easy because it requires that you hold back your counterarguments, advice, problem solutions, etc. until you have made sure you truly understand your teens feelings first. Active listening should always be used at the beginning of any problem solving discussion.

2. Talking about Yourself

Instead of focusing on your teens and what you see as their problem, talk about your own thoughts, concerns, feelings, and experiences. Just make sure there are no hidden messages or moral in what you are saying, since those are a sure "turn off" for teens. Also, pick something that you *like* to talk about, e.g., "You won't believe what my boss said to me today!" You will be surprised at how many teens are very interested in what their parents think about their jobs, their friends, about middle age, about their own teen experiences, etc.

3. Shared Fun

Any two people who regularly have fun together usually have a good relationship! It may be difficult at first to find something both you and your teen can enjoy doing together, but it's crucial for your relationship that you make an effort to find something. *Keep the fun time positive* – it's not the time to discuss the problems you have been having with your teen. Also, one-on-one time is much better than taking the family along. The easiest thing to do with a teen usually is to go see a movie, then go and get something to eat afterwards. Most teens won't object to this kind of shared fun!

4. Positive Reinforcement

This includes specific praise for jobs well done, positive comments, expression of love and affection, etc. When your relationship with your teen is already bad, it may sound impossible to find *something* praise-worthy about him or her. But keep in mind that the easiest and quickest way to improve your relationship is to make an effort to find and point out more positive things about your teen! Simply let them know when you think they have done something well, even if it's a small thing. Comments such as: "Thanks for helping me move that stuff" "Looks like you put a lot of effort into this" can go a long way of letting your teen know you appreciate him/her. We all like to be appreciated for the things we do, and it makes us more likely to repeat the good things we have received praise for!

Other Resources for Parents:

Thomas Phelan: *Surviving Your Adolescents* (Paperback, 1998)

Foster Cline & Jim Fay: *Parenting Teens With Love and Logic* (Hardcover, 1992)