



I'm sorry

ADMITTING MISTAKES TO TEENS: WHY IT'S HARD AND HOW TO DO IT

Parents aren't perfect—we make mistakes. When our kids are small, they quickly dismiss our blunders, convinced of our superhero status. They write essays titled “My Mom’s the BEST!” and shout “My dad’s stronger than your dad” on the playground. We can do no wrong. But the teen years take down superhero parents like kryptonite. Suddenly, we’re held to account for every slip-up, bad decision, and character flaw—it seems we can do no right.

TO ERR IS HUMAN NATURE... TO POINT IT OUT IS TEEN-NATURE

If good intentions were enough, parenting would be easy. But noble intentions don't prevent parents from making mistakes that belittle, betray and alienate teens. We yell when they bring the car home late (again). We search their rooms or read their text messages because we worry about their choice of friends. We tune out and push harder when they say they're flunking advanced math, because we believe they can do better.

The adolescent's world “is rich in insight and complex connections; it's also full of ambiguity and mixed messages,” explains Michael Riera, PhD, Head of School at Redwood Day School in Oakland, Calif. and author of *Staying Connected to Your Teenager: How to Keep Them Talking to You and How to Hear What They're Really Saying*. Teens struggle for clarity amidst confusion, and their growing cognitive skills make them especially good error detectors. With lightning speed and laser-like precision, teens spot the difference

between what parents say and what we do—and they point it out. Don't worry—your teenager isn't out to get you. She's just showing you she's a perceptive thinker, willing to argue until she's blue to defend her beliefs. It's a good thing. Really.

MESSING UP IS EASY... FESSING UP IS HARD

Admitting mistakes isn't easy. Parents are likely to deny, rationalize and justify what went wrong for several reasons, according to Carol Tavis, PhD, social psychologist and co-author of *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*.

To begin with, we feel lousy when our behavior conflicts with our beliefs. Psychologists call this cognitive dissonance. Because yelling at our kids is out of line with our self-concept as good, capable and caring parents, it's hard to admit we messed up, says Tavis. We're more likely to justify our actions—“I had to yell to get the point across,” “She deserved what she got for breaking the rules,” or “He knows I love him.”

To make matters worse, justifying our errors leads us to see what we believe. If you think your teen will make poor decisions, or fear wayward peers will influence your kids for the worst, you'll unconsciously seek evidence you're right. This “confirmation bias” justifies your previous actions and sets you up for repeating the same old mistakes. It's easy to convince ourselves we're doing the right thing even when our actions diminish our real influence in teens' lives.

Parents may fear admitting missteps will diminish their authority. But this couldn't be further from the truth. Adolescents don't want parents who are experts, who know all the answers and can solve every problem. What they want, says Riera, are parents who embrace the role of consultant—teens need to know they can count on us to stick with them as they explore new experiences and confront challenges on their own terms.

THE HIGH PRICE OF ADMISSION

"Admitting mistakes doesn't come easy... even in our smoothest relationships," says Michael Gorsline, parent coach and family therapist in Portland, Oregon, and author of the Awareness Connection blog (www.enjoyparenting.blogspot.com). While you may feel less like a superhero on the inside, you'll build credibility with your teenager by fessing up. Teens lose trust in parents who won't admit they're wrong, especially if the errors are obvious. Wouldn't you? Admitting mistakes restores that trust and communicates respect for your teenager and your relationship.

When you say "I was wrong and I'm sorry," you set the right example, reminds Tavris: It is important to take responsibility for our mistakes; apologize for them; and then learn from them so we do not repeat them. Teens' fears of punishment, embarrassment, or rejection make it hard for them to admit their mistakes, too. A deep connection with parents makes it safe for teens to admit wrong or hurtful actions and to grow from their experiences. They need to learn that making mistakes doesn't mean they are bad, stupid or unlovable. It just means they're human.

BRINGING YOUR "A" GAME

Next time you miss the mark as a parent, make it right. Wait until you've calmed down. Then, initiate a conversation with your teen in the car or late in the evening, when he's tuned in and ready to chat. Take a deep breath and follow these steps for coming clean and reconnecting.

- **Lead with empathy.** Gorsline recommends parents take their teen's perspective. Say "I bet I'm not your favorite person right now," or "You are probably really angry with me for what I did." This validates their feelings and shows you understand your actions were hurtful.
- **Think discussion, not confession.** It's easy to get wrapped up in your guilty feelings and make the conversation all about you. Don't get sidetracked with a lengthy explanation or make excuses for what you did—these are justifications in disguise. And it doesn't have to be an overblown, on-your-knees apology, says Riera. Directly acknowledge your error, then allow your teenager to respond.
- **Pay it forward.** Talk about how you might avoid the problem in the future, says Gorsline. Ask your teen for suggestions and listen without defensiveness—or at least keep your defensiveness to yourself! Make sure you both come away with lessons learned and an agreed-upon game plan.

As teens gain independence, parents sense their authority slipping away. Struggling to hold on to the relationship they had with their kids in the past, parents may justify bad decisions and hurtful behavior, pushing teens away in the process. But it doesn't have to be that way. Every parenting mistake is an opportunity for re-connection with your teenager. But first you have to admit it.

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Saturday, Sept. 22

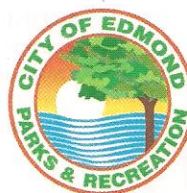
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