

Parent Teen Conflict-The Control Principle

By Brenda McCreight, Ph.D

Parents and teens have been having conflict since the dawn of time. After all, the parent is the most significant sounding board the adolescent has as he learns to use the improved and expanded thought functions that go with adolescent brain growth. Adolescence is also a time where the youth has to begin learning how to fit into society, and to determine where he wants his place in the world. The resulting conflict between parents and children is an ideal format for the youth to integrate the values of the parent and to add a few of his own. But, for the parent, the conflict feels less about his teen's learning processes and more about plain old arguing and challenges to parental rules and values.

So, how can you, the parent, use this conflict in a way that adds to the teen's healthy development, while you stay sane and avoid feeling like one of the walking wounded?

The answer is to be guided by the Principles of Action that will allow you to keep your calm, to get your point across, to role model appropriate behavior, and to walk away feeling good about how you behaved - no matter what your teen does or says.

The Control Principle is basic to the conflict resolution because much of the argument, whether it's about curfews, drugs, school, peers, or whatever, is really about who is in control. And folks, you know it needs to be you, the parent. But, the Control Principle shifts the dynamics so that the Control you seek isn't about controlling the behavior of the teen or the outcome of the argument – the Control is about you managing to stay in charge of your own behaviors and not letting yourself get caught up in the side issues or the emotional charge that your teen is putting out.

To use the Control Principle, you start by sitting down as soon as you realize that the conversation is going into an argument. That's right – sit down. This is a gesture that's familiar to all mammals on a very basic level. You are not trying to dominate by height, by physical strength, or any other way. You sit. Find the nearest chair and paste your bottom to it. You might feel uncomfortable as your teen hovers over you, but stick with it. It will lessen the threat signals to your teen's brain and help you to calm yourself.

Take some deep breaths. Don't hyper ventilate, just make sure you get some oxygen to the brain and through your system. This will facilitate clearer thinking on your part and will reduce some of the adrenalin that was beginning to surge through your system.

Next, lower your voice a bit. Not so much that you can't be heard, but enough so that you aren't part of the shouting match and enough so it forces the teen to strain a little to hear you. He shouldn't even consciously notice that you've lowered your voice, but it will cause him to slow down somewhat in order to hear you and that will help de-escalate his own volatile mood.

Check your fear level because once you determine whether your feelings are about fear or anger, then you'll have a better handle on them. Ask yourself if this conflict is about something that involves a high risk to your teen's safety or health and then get to the feelings underlying your part in the conflict. Tell your teen that you're worried or frightened for him. Acknowledging that your fear is guiding your part in this conflict will help you stay on the topic and control what you say.

If the subject of the conflict is not causing fear in you, then reduce your investment in the outcome. If it's about your daughter's math grades (important but not immediately life threatening), then state your point, listen to her side, and begin problem solving with her. Find out what you both want, and how you can negotiate a middle point. Once she realizes that you are not just trying to win, then she will likely begin to give in herself. And, for those teens who only want to win, you can afford to back out of the conflict altogether. Just say once what you have to say, listen once to her side, then end the conflict. You both have better things to do with your time.

The Control Principle is about learning to control what you can – YOU. That’s right, you are all you can control. You can’t control your adolescent, you can’t control your spouse or your boss or your neighbor. Maintain control of your body, of your breathing, of your own noise level, of your feelings, and determine whether you should engage further, or negotiate, or disengage.

Remember, parenting is as much about role modeling as it is about everything else - so showing your teen that you are in control of yourself will help him learn to do the same. And that’s the Control Principle.