

10 Things not to say to your child

1. "DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT YOUR FRIENDS SAY"

"I used to get teased at school. Kids in my year would call me awful names. But when I told Mum, she'd just say I shouldn't worry what my friends said. She didn't realise how much it hurt. I was angry at her for not understanding."

"Dad would tell me not to listen to the names I was called. But how can you not listen when that's what you hear all day. I needed him to hug me and help me not tell me it didn't matter."

Friends and peers matter to teenagers. What they wear, do, like, dislike and, especially, say, makes a huge difference. Parents can't underestimate the impact that other teenagers have on their child.

That means that when a teenager is upset about what someone has said to them, it doesn't help to tell them not to worry about it. What a parent thinks is comforting to their teenager is often interpreted as meaning that they don't really understand what's going on. The more that happens, the less a teenager will feel that their parent cares about them and the less they'll want to talk.

2. "YOU'RE USELESS"

"When Mum tells me off, she always ends up shouting at me that I'm no good. She doesn't tell me what I've done wrong or how to do it right, just that I'm useless or something. I guess it's because she's tired, but it still hurts."

Picture the scene. Its just before school and your fifteen year old tears downstairs with school bag open behind them. "I can't find my Coursework", they scream. For a parent rushing out to work themselves, it's easy to lose your temper: "You can't do anything you're told, you're useless!"

There's no doubt that teenagers need telling off from time to time. Where it can go wrong is where it becomes general instead of being specific. Attaching a character insult to a criticism lowers the self-esteem of a child.

3. "YOU'RE MY LITTLE DUMPLING!"

"My Dad calls me ugly all the time. I think he's joking, but I'm not sure."

It's not unusual for parents, especially Dads, to give their children nicknames. What they may forget is how much more sensitive to jokes and humour children become when they hit their teens. The thing that once bonded father and child, like a term of affection or a pet name, can become a source of real hurt.

For some teenagers there is more to this than just heightened sensitivity. Holding onto old jokes may also be a signal to them that Mum or Dad isn't prepared to let them grow up.

They see themselves as older and more mature and so the story of how they wet themselves on Santa's knee does not go down so well, especially in front of others!

4. "LET ME DO THAT FOR YOU"

"My parents won't let me do things if they think there's a chance I'll make a mistake. I bet they've mucked up lots of times."

"Dad doesn't trust me to do anything."

"The first time my Mum saw my iron a shirt I could see the tormented look of horror on her face. As I ironed over the buttons, almost melting them onto the front of the shirt, her face was a picture. But she let me do it. She could have grabbed the shirt and done it herself. It would have taken less time. It would have saved a lot of hassle for her. But she let me do it and I appreciated her faith in me, however misplaced!"

How many parents would have snatched the iron from their child and said, with exasperation, "Give it here, I'll do it"? But what can seem like a helpful hand may actually have a negative effect on a child's self-esteem. Most teenagers want advice on how they can learn to do something: many parents make the mistake of thinking this happens by them taking over the task and leaving the teenager to watch. Parents need to advise and help their child but they also need to let them realise they're not expected to be perfect straightaway. If they don't, they risk their child losing motivation and feeling undervalued. After all, what's the point of trying something if Dad is only going to grab it off you when you make a mistake?

5. "THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS"

"Dad never admits he's wrong. When we argue and he knows I've got a point, he just says something like 'Well, that's just the way it is.' It makes me feel like he doesn't really respect what I've got to say."

"If Dad would only listen to what I say."

'But why can't I go to the party?' 'Because I said so!' It's a quick way to end an argument and, at the end of the day, parents are responsible for their children. But phrases like 'because I said so' or 'that's just the way it is' can make a teenager feel that they are not being taken seriously. Teenage years are when a young person is developing their views and beliefs. They will want to discuss them: in fact, their school curriculum will be encouraging them to do just that. Parents need to remember this and be prepared to offer reasons for their views and decisions. When that doesn't happen, it can leave a teenager wondering if they're really valued.

6. "YOU'RE A DISGRACE TO ME"

"I'll never forget Mum standing there shouting at me. I knew I done something wrong, but it was the way she said it, like I was nothing and I'd never do anything right again."

"I can still remember my Dad telling me he was ashamed of me. Twenty years later, I still think of it and, if I'm honest, it still hurts."

Whether it's a bad report from school or getting into trouble with the police, being the parent of a teenager may mean you'll have to deal with them when they've done something seriously wrong. But how a parent deals with that can make all the difference. It may be no bad thing for a teenager to feel guilty, but parents need to find the balance in being ready to forgive and support their child rather than adding to the condemnation. Teenagers need to know their parents are not ashamed of them, just of what they've done.

7. "IF ONLY YOU COULD BE MORE LIKE YOUR SISTER"

"Every time I did something wrong it would be thrown up at me: well, Jamie never did that."

"My Mum and Dad always used to make a fuss of my sister. She was the one who won all the prizes and did really well in exams. They never said to me that I wasn't as good, but then, they didn't need to. That was obvious."

Comparing children to their brothers and sisters can be one of the most significant factors in determining their self-esteem. Younger brothers and sisters can feel that they have to match the success and achievements of someone older in the family even if their own skills lie in different areas. Parents need to ensure that each ability or skill is equally valued so that their children receive equal praise whether their abilities lie in areas such as computers, exam results, dancing, acting, sports, music, etc.

8. "PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER"

"I remember when I came home crying because I'd been hit by someone. Dad just told me to stop being such a cry-baby. I guess he was trying to make me feel like it wasn't a big deal, but instead I felt like he didn't care and I didn't matter."

Where families don't like showing emotions, teenagers can often end up feeling like they've failed if they cry or are upset. But it certainly doesn't stop them feeling that way: they just end up hiding it from their parents. And that, in turn, can mean they think their parents don't really care what they feel. Teenagers in this situation will often end up sharing less and less of what's going on in their lives with their Mum and Dad.

9. "YOU'LL NEVER MANAGE THAT"

"Mum always believed in me, whatever I wanted to do. It made me push myself."

Every parent knows the situation, a child comes in from school and says "I think I want to be a pop star, a brain surgeon, a ..." Whatever the ambition there can be a temptation on the part of parents to instill what seems to be a sense of realism in their children. But there's a thin line between helping a child be realistic and crushing their enthusiasm.

The opposite can also be true: "My four older sisters were all doctors, so, from an early age, I was expected to do the same. The expectation drove me into an unwise degree

choice, an unhappy two years and meant I disappointed my parents.” Where parents set expectations for teenagers that they either don’t want or can’t reach, they end up feeling they’ve failed.

10. “DAD’S GONE AWAY FOR A FEW DAYS”

“When Dad left, I blamed myself.”

“When Mum and Dad argued, it was always something to do with me, like a school trip.”

Teenagers often blame themselves when their family breaks up, however illogical it might be. Parents will have to continually reassure their children that this isn’t the case. What also causes problems is trying to protect a teenager by hiding what’s happened from them: like pretending that Dad is only away for a while. Most teenagers will have already worked out what’s happening: keeping things from them only makes them feel undervalued.