

# **Grunts and Eye Rolls, Finding a Better Way to Communicate**

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Sometimes it can be very frustrating communicating with an adolescent.

The old saying “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” is particularly relevant when dealing with adolescents. Not only are they undergoing huge personal physical, social, psychological and emotional change, but communication patterns are also undergoing a transformation. This is NOT the time to throw your hands up and say “My house (class), my rules”. This is a time to think about how we can communicate more effectively to build on what is hopefully a positive relationship.

Consider these strategies:

## **I. Talk less and listen more!**

Adolescents are not children – they often want to talk less, and we need to be better at either picking up the right cues to open a conversation, or when to simply listen and not talk (or offer unsolicited advice!) at all.

## **II. Right time, right place:**

Discussions with an adolescent should never be about winning the point. Concession is sometimes the best path when dealing with non-important matters. Confrontation can be very wearing, and potentially damaging.

Timing, location and tone of voice are critical elements of productive conversation with a teen. Avoid raising issues, which have been simmering away inside, when you are tired or already upset or angry about something else.

Never humiliate or embarrass an adolescent in front of their friends. If an argument erupts and their friends are around, it’s better to hold your tongue until you can discuss the issue in private.

Adolescents are not the only ones who don’t respond well to sarcasm. If you are expecting to build an adult relationship, think about what you say, how you say it and what ‘tools’ of conversation you use....before you say it!

## **III. Active listening:**

Active listening is a cornerstone skill of US clinical psychologist Thomas Gordon’s model for building and maintaining effective relationships. The model is based on communication and conflict resolution skills, and is a model which has been adapted for use by parents, teachers, business and leaders over the years. Active listening requires our full attention. We don’t interrupt; we don’t make hasty comments; we don’t judge; we don’t ‘join the dots’. We listen to what has been said and then we confirm our understanding. The tendency to assume and make decisions before we know the facts can lead to the common adolescent response: “That’s NOT what I said. You NEVER listen!” Maybe they’re right?

## **IV. I-messages (another Thomas Gordon skill):**

To avoid constant confrontation with teens, it’s a good idea to swing your responses around to an “I” response rather than a “you” response.

I-messages assert how the person who is speaking feels or believes, or how the behaviour of another person (in this case the adolescent) has made you feel. You do not put the other person on the defensive and you are not judgemental – great habits to avoid when dealing with adolescents!

An example of an I-message: A comment such as “You said you would finish that job by lunchtime, and it still isn’t finished. You can’t be trusted to get a simple task done on time” could be replaced by an I-message such as, “I thought we agreed that this job would be finished by lunchtime. I really needed it to be finished before we can move on to the next task.” This kind of response sends the message that you are unhappy about the behaviour and the consequent inconvenience it has caused, but you have not immediately put them on the defensive. Also, you have not made it an attack on them personally, but rather on the behaviour or action.

#### **V. Negotiate and compromise:**

This is NOT about rolling over and giving in to adolescents. This is about recognising their need for increased independence and responsibility as part of growing up. Resolving conflict by focusing on concerns, rather than taking sides, leads to an increased chance of finding a solution that is acceptable to both groups. Negotiation and compromise are part of the real world – learn how to negotiate and compromise with teens and you may very well be pleasantly surprised by the outcome.

#### **VI. The Age of Technology:**

Forget about nagging a teen to “Just pick up the phone and call!” How young people communicate is vastly different now. There is a much heavier reliance on text messaging, social media, video chatting and email. We need to be well informed about how teens communicate with each other...but keep the lines of face-to-face communication well and truly open at home. Remember to put YOUR phone away when you have the opportunity to spend some time chatting with an adolescent. Having your attention diverted by your own phone, or other device, sends a very bad message. Send the message loud and clear that face-to-face time with them is a priority over anything you are about to share on Facebook or Twitter. Be careful what you model...they ARE watching!

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