

How to Ruin Your Relationship With Your Teenager

by Michelle Lehnardt

<https://www.scarymommy.com/how-to-ruin-your-relationship-with-your-teenager/>

One evening my sons came home with the same exclamation, “It’s amazing how many kids hate their parents!” We talked for an hour or so about why, and I’ve interviewed several teenagers over the last few months for further clarity.

The good news: most teenagers are very forgiving of parental missteps; they recognize their own faults and readily forgive others’. Even better, in a healthy relationship, teenagers love you for who you are. Yes, they might act embarrassed when you hug them in front of their friends or even drop them off in front of the high school. But they really don’t care if you’re overweight, frumpy or wear outdated clothes.

Even the best of us will recognize our own failings in the following list, but look at it as an opportunity to improve rather than berate yourself. All relationships take work, but your communications with your teenager can be lifesaving. The largest problems can be solved when you have a good relationship, but even the smallest problems can cause disaster when your interactions are filled with tension.

1. Not Listening

Years ago, I heard invaluable advice: “Once your child reaches the age of 13 or 14 they know your opinion of everything under the sun. Your job from now on is to shut up and listen.” I remember feeling a bit defensive the first time I heard this counsel. I had so much knowledge yet to share! And besides, things change—how would I offer my wisdom on future problems? But there’s the crux of it all. Things change. As adults, we think we know all about the teenage world, but our swiftly moving planet has spun beyond our intimate knowledge of the ’70s, ’80s, ’90s. And here’s what I’ve learned: when you take the time to listen, truly listen, your kids will ask your opinion.

2. Criticizing Excessively

I think we all know the evils of fault-finding, but in parenting, criticism (to some degree) is a necessary evil. Parent to child is one of the very few relationships where you do need to offer correction. It’s our job to teach kids to comb their hair, take out the garbage, do their homework, etc. Censure should be given kindly and sparingly. No one can handle a barrage of disapproval; especially teenagers. And remember, kids are criticized all day by teachers and peers; home should be a haven of acceptance and love (as well as occasional reminders to trim their fingernails).

3. Grilling Them With Questions

Perhaps this complaint sounds contradictory to the first. How can a parent listen without asking questions? But I think we all know there’s an enormous difference between asking and listening. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? Don’t you hate it when someone peppers you with questions without even waiting for your answers? Sure, ask one or two questions, but then just sit back and listen. Allow for pauses in the conversation.

When teaching, I like to get a great discussion going in the classroom. I’ve learned to ask a question and then wait. As the moments tick by, I lean on the podium and say, “It’s OK. I can wait.” Without fail, I learn the most from my class when I’m willing to let the room grow silent. It’s the same when talking to kids. When the conversation lulls, simply say, “I’m listening.” That pause, the permission to gather their thoughts, implies safety and leads to real conversation.

4. Telling Embarrassing Stories or Complain About Them Publicly

I can scarcely go to any social gathering or social media without hearing someone trash talk their kids. They act like it’s normal to talk about how their kids have ruined their lives. More often than not, their child is listening to this barrage of insults. Can you imagine standing in the corner of a room hearing your parents talk about how terrible you are? People act the way we treat them, and if parents handle kids like

they are rotten, they either will be, or they will cut their parents out of their lives. As one boy told Hans, “My parents’ house is just a place to sleep; why would I want to be in a place where everything I do is wrong?”

5. Stereotyping Their Behavior

“Teenagers are all crazy/selfish/irresponsible/lazy.” Somehow, it’s socially acceptable to belittle teenagers. Yes, there’s that whole brain development thing going on, but most of the teenagers I know are doing an incredible job at managing complicated lives. I see kids putting in hundreds of hours in service, playing instruments, creating computer apps, juggling AP classes, playing sports, performing in plays and dance...all while working a part-time job, nurturing their sibling and doing the dishes at night. So maybe we should cut them a little slack when they forget the dishes?

6. Fighting the Wrong Battles

We all know the stereotypical story of making a kid sit at the dinner table until they’ve finished their broccoli. Parents need to ask themselves before making a stand, “Is it worth it?” Teenagers are facing so many big issues, their choice of vegetable really doesn’t matter. In fact, most battles don’t matter. If kids are given the freedom to choose in many areas of their life, they will be much more likely to listen to parents’ opinions on the big issues. Whenever I write about media, I get all kinds of accusations about my crazy strict parenting. But if you ask my kids, they’ll tell you I’m an extremely lenient parent. As Hans says, “We don’t have many rules.” In truth, our rules are based on guiding principles and we let other things slide.

7. Expecting Instant Compliance

Too often, parents expect kids to jump up and comply with their requests in a way they’d never demand of their spouse or themselves. It takes a minute to wrap up what you’re doing and empty the garbage/put your shoes away/bring in the groceries. Unless there’s a fire, let’s give kids the same respect for their time we’d want for our own.

8. Maintaining Constant Suspicion

When we expect the worst of people, they usually comply. Yes, parents should be cautious and careful; we should all know the signs of depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, promiscuity etc. But if parents create an environment of rigid rules, suspicion and distrust, kids are drawn to dangerous behaviors. Parents can keep safeguards in place without destroying relationships. At my house, we keep our two computers password protected and my kids know I regularly check the history. It’s not that I don’t trust my kids, it’s simply that I know pornography is readily available and especially tempting when kids are tired, lonely or bored. It’s like keeping guns in a cabinet—the lock exists to protect innocents who might be curious about something that could destroy their lives.

9. Being Stingy With Your Apologies

It seems that some parents are a little like 3-year-olds and believe an honest, sincere, “I’m sorry” will cost them money, pride or status. Every time you yell at your kids or unjustifiably punish them, you’re placing a brick in a wall between you. Remorse and forgiveness can remove those bricks, but if you let them pile up, you’ll build a hard wall between yourself and your teen. Every parent messes up, but we should apologize easily and often. Our kids benefit from our example when we show remorse for our wrongs and try to do better. In turn, teenagers will learn to apologize quickly and forgive easily—both positive habits for a happy life.

10. Making Them Feel Less Important Than Your Phone/Car/Friends/Golf Clubs etc.

My teenagers hate, hate, HATE when I talk on the phone while driving with them. Even if they aren’t in the mood to chat, they don’t like to be treated like a bag of groceries on the seat next to me. Sometimes, I need to take the call, but I find my kids are happier if I keep it short and offer an apology. I don’t spend nearly as many hours with my teenagers as I did when they were little, and I need to have a listening ear when we are together. It’s not that teens need to be treated like they are the center of the universe—they just need to know they matter to you. And if they do accidentally scratch the paint on your car or dent a

golf club, they need to know they are more important than any object. When kids feel valued, they value their relationship with you.

11. Nitpicking Their Appearance

We all know teenagers are sensitive about their appearance, but somehow we can't help pouring on our advice, critiques and opinions. At 11 or 12, boys really do need reminders to shower, comb their hair and wear deodorant, but by 13 or so, both boys and girls know most basic grooming. Anything from here on out should be gentle reminders, not nagging. It helps to set a family standard—everyone showers, does their laundry, brushes their teeth, eats their vegetables, gets some form of exercise each day etc.—rather than making it personal. Parents should help—provide acne medicine, healthy food, opportunities to exercise, help with buying clothing, etc.—but persistent fault finding only hurts relationships.

12. Comparing Kids With Each Other

Ugh. Another behavior we know we should avoid, but somehow almost every parent at some point falls prey to the temptation of comparing a child to their siblings, the neighbors, a cousin or acquaintance. For me, the best way to avoid this behavior is thinking of how I'd feel if my husband compared me to my sister, my neighbors, an acquaintance...

13. Expecting Prowess at Sports, Dance, Music

I'll never forget sitting at one of my son's baseball games and watching a father scream and yell at his son for striking out. Over the years, at various sports games, music recitals, and dance tryouts, I've seen dozens of parents who scold and belittle their child for not performing up to standard.

I'll also never forget my friend Judy Wolfe addressing the children in the audience at her son's funeral: "I'm going to tell you one of your parents' great secrets. You know all the fuss they make about your grades and making the team and getting awards?" Her eyes swept through the room as she noted the many children and teenagers filling the chapel.

"This competition, this drive to measure up: It's all a show. Your parents are in love with you anyway. From the moment you were born they adored you—all you had to do was show up."

If you've read this far, you're a parent who loves your children and works hard to create a joyful family. I believe every one of us possesses more good sense and intuition about our children than a dozen parenting books. More than anything else, we just have to remember teenagers are still learning. We are all still learning. And we need to offer each other patience, forgiveness and the ability to laugh it off.

Even as I write this, I can see holes in the list, hear arguments from detractors. Just because I try hard not to expect too much, doesn't mean I don't expect a lot from my kids. I expect good grades, washed dishes, clean language; I expect my kids to hike six miles, practice instruments, weed the flower beds, read books, help the neighbors, befriend the lonely, and be kind. There's an old but persistent fallacy about parents always maintaining the upper hand, but creating happy, loving, open relationships with our children holds far more power than any form of discipline. Teenagers who are armed with solid values and loved as individuals will thrive even in the harshest climates.

The best reason to cultivate happy relationships? Teenagers are so much fun. They fill the house with music and laughter, interesting conversations, pranks, and spontaneous activities. And if you're lucky, they'll invite over more teenagers to share stories and food and dreams and more laughter. I have no fear for the future. The teenagers I know are bright and spunky, full of ideas and unexpected kindnesses. I'm just glad they'll talk to me; I'm always happy to listen.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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Writer and photographer Michelle Lehnardt loses at chess every time to her five sons, one little daughter and brilliant husband, but they'll never beat her at Scrabble. She writes at Scenes From the Wild.