



Negotiating with Older Kids

The other night, I got into an argument with my daughter. She was making unreasonable demands, and I just sent her to her room. Do you have any tips for handling my teenager when she being unreasonable?

When kids are little, they will do what is asked because they worry about their parents' reaction. The teenage years, however, don't work like this. Sometime during the high school years, kids really strive for the independence. They begin to expect more freedom, and they challenge the adults in their life. When this happens it is time to change your approach. Many family therapists work with parents on a skill we call "responsive listening". When your kids are argumentative or are just being difficult consider the following approach.

Let your teenager rant and rave for a few minutes. It is a great stress reliever and clues to your child's emotions will often be hidden in her frustrated words. This is not, however, a time to chat. Tell your angry adolescent that when they calm down, you will be happy to discuss the situation. Once this happens, have your son or daughter explain their wants and feelings. Ask them what their concern is, restate their comments to clarify understanding, and postpone saying "no". In other words, spend time having a dignified discussion. In most situations, kids will feel much better if mom and dad just listen. Lastly, if you do have to impose a rule or consequence, negotiate down. For example, if your child wants to stay out until midnight let them bargain you down to 11:00, which is what you really wanted anyway. This allows a teenager to feel like they have some control over their situation and that they are part of the process.

Responsive listening sounds much easier than it is and it can be difficult to avoid the "heat of the moment". It is, however, an excellent and effective strategy, so stick with it. Your kids will begin to understand that you will listen, and they will, in turn, begin to act more adult as well.