

# The Smart Way to Argue With Your Young Teen

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**Disagreements are a sign of growing maturity, but parents need to walk a fine line to maintain their authority without getting tuned out**

What's the best way to argue with your young teen? WSJ's Andrea Petersen and Yale University professor Alan Kazdin discuss how parents navigate disagreements set the stage for conflicts over bigger issues that come up in later years. Photo: Getty

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The most formidable adversary in an argument may be a young teen.

Between the ages of 10 and 13, conflicts with parents surge. Children this age become more independent and begin to forge their identities. At the same time, brain development makes them more impulsive, sensation-seeking and sensitive to peer pressure. The tumult can take parents by surprise, especially because the period right before adolescence is often relatively harmonious.

For parents, learning how to effectively argue with tweens and young teens is crucial. Navigating disagreements over screen time and sleepovers sets the stage for conflicts over bigger issues—like sex and alcohol—that come up later.

Therapists say argumentative young teens are healthy ones. They are learning how to handle disagreements and advocate for their own point of view, skills that are critical for successfully navigating adult relationships. Arguments also indicate that children are separating from their parents and asserting themselves.

“It is worrying if [arguing] doesn’t happen,” says Brad Sachs, a family psychologist in Columbia, Md. More deferential children “may not be doing the hard work necessary to forge an independent identity.”

Carl Pickhardt, a counseling psychologist and author in Austin, Texas, notes that arguments also give parents important information about what is going on with their children and what is important to them. “What you don’t want is a mystery child,” he says.





ENLARGE

When arguing with a young teen, parents should strive to listen, negotiate and compromise. Illustration: Rob Shepperson for The Wall Street Journal

What's the best way to quarrel with a young teen? Psychologists say certain strategies are key. First, figure out what you're willing to compromise on. Alan Kazdin, a professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University, advises parents to imagine 10 years in the future. Then, compromise on things that are temporary (like goth makeup or laundry strewn on the floor) and stand firm on things that could be permanent (tattoos).

“Where parents go wrong is they have the view of the slippery slope. If I give in here, it will all fall apart. The opposite is true.” When parents are rigid, children are more likely to be more oppositional, he says.

He suggests that parents instead come up with three possible solutions and let the child choose. He also says parents should listen to their child's point of view, banish the sarcasm and name-calling and refrain from bringing up past behavior. But parents shouldn't accept disrespectful language from their children either: Warn them that the discussion will be over if they keep it up. Praising teens when they are being civil is important, too, and much more effective at changing behavior than levying punishments.

While it is obviously tempting, yelling isn't helpful, either. Children can feel intimidated or overpowered and they are likely to miss the lessons parents are trying

to teach. Teens will also be more likely to resort to yelling in their adult relationships.

Adrienne Rizzo says most of her arguments with her daughter Jaylen, 11, revolve around the child cleaning her room (she resists) and taking a shower in the evening (she delays, wanting to watch one more YouTube video or spend a bit more time with Pokémon Go).



ENLARGE

Most of the arguments between Jaylen Rizzo, 11, and her parents, Adrienne and Paul, occur when Jaylen resists cleaning her room and delays taking her shower. Photo: Jaylen Rizzo

### Try This at Home

- **MOM:** Time to turn off your phone.
- **TEEN:** But I just need to finish this game. And all my friends get to stay up later.  
*Five minutes later.*



- **MOM:** You need sleep. Remember, we've already agreed that this is the time the phone goes off. You know the consequences: no phone time tomorrow.
- **TEEN:** That's a stupid rule. You never let me do anything. You're mean.
- **MOM:** I'm sorry you feel that way. But that's not how we talk to each other in this family. If you keep using disrespectful language, the conversation is over.  
**TEEN** *grumbles and rolls eyes but acquiesces.*

"I'm really tired and I really don't feel like getting up," says Jaylen, a sixth-grader in New Jersey, about her evening showers. Raising her voice, Ms. Rizzo finds, doesn't work. Jaylen "turns it around and asks, 'Why do you always have to yell?'" Ms. Rizzo says. Instead, Ms. Rizzo has found that Jaylen is more likely to listen and not yell herself if Ms. Rizzo keeps her voice low and almost monotone.

When things get particularly heated, Ms. Rizzo has found that the most powerful parental move of all is to keep cool and walk away. A victory in an argument with a teen likely won't feel that satisfying to parents. Don't expect a "you're right."

Psychologists say that parents need to walk a fine line between being too lenient and too strict with young teens. If they are too permissive, they won't have the authority later on to set limits on activities that can be potentially dangerous. And if they quash arguments and require complete compliance, teens won't learn how to advocate for themselves and negotiate with others.

"They are more susceptible to peer pressure because they are not used to having any input," says Joseph P. Allen, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia. "When their peers say, 'Let's go get a six-pack and drink it behind the school,' they say, 'OK.'"





ENLARGE

There are a few nonnegotiable rules in Kai, left, and Corbin Markle's home. The brothers are required to attend family functions, including each other's sporting events. Photo: Scolnick Family

Kali Scolnick and Jeff Markle say they give their sons Corbin, 13, and Kai, 11, a good amount of say in how the boys spend their free time, accommodating trips to the mall and meetups with friends. But the couple does have a few nonnegotiable rules. The boys aren't allowed to associate with children who use alcohol or drugs. And the brothers are required to attend important family functions, including each other's sporting events.

“We all show up and support each other,” says Ms. Scolnick, who has her own consulting business in Portland, Ore. A few weeks ago, when Kai had a kung fu tournament and Corbin wanted to stay home to sleep and then hang out with friends, Ms. Scolnick and Mr. Markle wouldn’t budge. Corbin, an eighth-grader, dug in, too.

“I do support him,” Corbin said of his brother to his parents. “But I don’t think watching someone is supporting them.” The argument continued until Ms. Scolnick and Mr. Markle told Corbin he had to come along or face the penalty of losing access to his phone, TV and computer. “That got him up and in the car,” says Mr. Markle, who works in the transportation business.

Corbin says that once he got to the tournament, he thought “maybe this wasn’t just such a bad idea. I did see their point.”

But that doesn’t mean he expects things to go more smoothly the next time there’s conflict with his parents. “I find fun in arguing,” he says. “That is just me being a teenager.”

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