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Tools for Parents. . .

Helping Your Teen Negotiate With You*

What happens in your family when your teenager needs permission to do something or tries to change something? How much frustration, stress, and conflict do you see generated? What would you prefer instead? What specific process have you taught your teen to use when he/she wants permission from you or wants to change a family rule? Too often parents do not give teenagers clear and helpful guidance in the area of family negotiation. Clearly, as the parents we are the authority and we have the “final say” about permission and rules. We do not lessen or lose our authority when we use the negotiation process described in this resource material. Instead we are simply trying to involve the teen in the process both to improve the current situation and to equip the teenage for effective survival in adulthood. The following ideas may be of benefit to you as you try to work with your teen in his/her preparations for adulthood.

Be Approachable and Available.

Let your teen know that you as the parent are open to requests and negotiations while making it clear that you are the parent and must assume ultimate responsibility for what you allow your teen to do. Tell your teen clearly that you will consider every serious request which you receive.

It’s extremely important to be available to your teen. Obviously, some times are better than other times for discussing requests. Let your teen know what times are usually “bad” times or “good” times for approaching you. If it’s a “bad” time, offer a specific time later when your teen can return to talk. If you have to postpone the discussion, try to appear thankful and pleased that your teen did choose to approach you.

Clarify your Preferences.

Try to assure your teens that you want them to be able to do everything they want to do and that you want to grant permission as often as possible. If you have to say “No,” you’ll have a good reason, even if you choose not to share that reason with them.

You may find it beneficial to clarify that you’ll definitely say “No” when a request fits into the following categories:

- *Illegal or in violation of the family's moral/ethical values
- *Puts the teenager's health or safety in jeopardy
- *Interferes with other priorities (individual or family)
- *Violates specific restrictions when the teen is already "grounded"
- *Other categories or possibilities: _____

Respect your Teen.

As parents we always want our teens to show respect toward us. We must first model that respect when we relate to our teens. Belittling or "putting down" the child does not show respect toward them. It is very important that our teens feel listened to and understood. We need to listen to the teen's request without quick responses or numerous interruptions.

How can you reassure your teen that you did understand his/her request? One sure way is to take time to paraphrase the request back to the teen, asking for clarification if necessary, before giving your final answer. Teens are more likely to accept a "No" response if they think the parent actually understood their request.

Stay in Control.

As the parent you need to stay in control of yourself and the situation. Getting angry with your teen will not help. You can reschedule the discussion for a later time if you feel yourself getting too emotional for productive problem-solving. Sometimes a "time-out" is necessary!

You can listen to your teen without allowing him to manipulate you into saying "Yes" when you need to say "No." After you've given your final answer, do not allow the teen to continue the discussion with inappropriate or disrespectful behavior.

Build a Relationship.

Regardless of your response ("Yes" or "No"), let your teens know that you appreciate their coming to you with requests. Compliment them on the positive ways they handled the situation. You might suggest ways they can improve the negotiation process, or you might ask them for their suggestions about changes you could make. The important thing is that you work together to build a positive relationship and that you help your teens move consistently toward responsible adulthood.

(*Adapted from Doub, George T. and Scott, Virginia Morgan. *Survival Skills for Healthy Families: Family Wellness Workbook*. 1987.)

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Supplement: Copied below is the information given to the teenager. The material presents a process the teen can use with his parents when he is requesting permission or suggesting a change in a family rule.

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Tools for Teens. . .

*Negotiating With Your Parents**

There are many times when as a teenager you have to get permission from your parents to do something you want to do. There are also times when you want to get a family rule changed or modified in some way. The process you choose to use will determine your success rate (or “batting average”) at getting a “Yes” answer from your parents. The steps described below can help you to improve your efforts and to increase the potential for a positive response.

Step #1: Prepare your Case!

Know what you want. Describe as clearly and specifically as you can what it is that you want from your parents (permission to do something, getting a rule changed, etc.)

Get it together. Gather all the information you predict your parents will need to hear from you. Pretend that you’re the parent and ask yourself what information you would have to hear before being able to say “Yes” to your teen’s request. (Examples: Where? When? With whom? Transportation? Alcohol/Drugs? Activities? Emergency plans? Telephone numbers? Financial costs? Adult supervision? Etc...)

Know your goal. Your goal is to provide everything your parents need to know so that they will have no questions to ask you about details. If they have to ask questions to get more information from you, then you’ve not prepared effectively. Your success rate goes down with every question you make them ask. If they have no follow-up questions, then you know that you were successful in your prep work.

Plan for health and safety. If you were the parent you would never let your teen do something or go somewhere if you had any doubt about his/her health or safety. So, if you cannot reassure your parents with solid information about your personal health and

safety, expect them to deny permission. (That's what you'd do if you were the parent, right?)

Choose your requests wisely. As you think through the request process you'll know that there are times when your parents will have to say "No" because of unique circumstances. For example, you will get a denial when you are asking to do something that is illegal or is in violation of your family's moral/ethical values. Your parents must say "No" if your request will place your health or safety in jeopardy. They have to say "No" if your request violates specific restrictions because you are already "grounded" for a prior offense. They could also say "No" when your request interferes with family plans already made or with family priorities. You might be able to negotiate about these last two circumstances but you'll want to be very careful to show proper respect.

Step #2: Set the Scene!

Approach both parents. It will be to your long-term advantage to talk with both of your parents at the same time, if at all possible. You want them to think that you're not trying to divide and conquer. Also, you want them both to hear your request from you personally. That way you'll know that they both hear all the details correctly. (You know what will probably happen if you approach only one parent with your request. That parent will want to consult with the other parent before giving an answer. What if some of the important information is forgotten or is not shared with the other parent? Then the other parent will have to say "No" due to insufficient information. It is definitely to your ultimate advantage to present your case to both parents at the same time.)

Choose your timing. Consider the best time to approach your parents (when they're not busy, preoccupied, too tired, etc.). Ask them for a few minutes to talk now, or you can work out a time to talk later when it's more convenient for them. Nail down a specific time and be sure to show up at the designated time.

Step #3: State your Request!

Speak up. Talk clearly and loudly enough for your parents to hear and understand your request. If they cannot hear you, expect them to say "No." Try to be considerate and respectful in your tone. A demanding and disrespectful style will definitely hurt your case.

Acknowledge your parents' authority. Let your parents know that you understand that they have the final say. Reassure them that you will accept their answer, even it's a "no" and you're very disappointed.

Make your request. State your request briefly and clearly. Share the key information about details, health, safety, etc. Remember, your case is much stronger if your parents do not have to ask you questions to gain necessary information.

Check for understanding. Ask them if they understood your request. Perhaps they will paraphrase back to you what they heard. Then you'll know that they "got it." If they are able to "feed back" your request accurately and they have no questions to ask, then you will know that you laid out your case clearly and successfully. Congratulations!

Step #4: Accept the Response!

If they say "Yes" . . .

Thank them for the permission granted.
Remember to fulfill your agreement with them.
Let them know if changes occur which may require renegotiation.

If they say "No" . . .

Keep your "cool" and be respectful!
You might ask, "Is there any other information I could get for you which may help you change your mind?"
You could offer trades or compromises. ("Is there anything I could do to earn your permission? Wash your car? Clean the house? Complete some job?" Or, "What if I came home a little earlier?")
If they still say "No," accept it positively and respectfully (like you promised you would). Remember, you're building a process for many other requests in the future. It's possible that your parents may deny your request just to see your reaction. If you handle things maturely, they'll respect you and may even change their minds. At least your positive reaction will help them say "Yes" to future requests.

Thank your parents.

Regardless of which response you get, be sure to thank your parents for listening to you and considering your wants. Keep in mind that you're building your own future with your parents. If you've done a good job in this negotiation process, you will increase your success rate (or your "batting average") for future requests.

(*Adapted from Doub, George T. and Scott, Virginia Morgan. Survival Skills for Healthy Families: Family Wellness Workbook. 1987.)

(Revised January, 2012)