

Negotiating with teenagers

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This text is a fake scene, an example. It has been described as a negotiation between a mother and her teenage daughter. But the same can occur with a boy and his father or mother or both. Finally, try to imagine another example paying attention to the emotions at stake.

You are cooking dinner and you help your 6-year-old daughter with her homework. Suddenly, Clara, 13-year-old, the eldest sister, arrives *"Mum, tomorrow is Esther's birthday. We will go altogether to the celebration. It is in her housing development. We will be back at 12, the hour we are allowed to. Can I go, can't I?"*

Your first reaction is to answer with a definitive NO which will trigger a snort and a slam while your daughter leaves saying with regret *(I can't believe the way you are, I am the one, THE ONE! who NEVER can stay out until 12. There will be no problem! Everyone can..."* etc. etc). After, there will be an argument, more snorts, angry faces and whatever the decision you may take, you will always have a doubt (I have been too strict because I didn't let her go, I have been too lenient and now I will not be able to get any sleep) ... and next week, it will be the same! With other things such as going to a concert, some clothes, ...

Let us go back. The moment of the question is not accidental. Since childhood, children know unconsciously be appropriate and some key questions are made when we are busy and therefore, there are a lot of chances that we are not paying attention and the answer can be positive. Or they ask separately their mother and their father saying that the other one has said yes. So, we must avoid to answer quickly. We can say: *"Honey, I know it is important for you but I am busy. We will talk after dinner."* Or more briefly: *"I have to think about it"*.

And when it is time to talk and negotiate, bearing in mind a **list of things that we should NOT do or say** and another with strategies which make communication easier.

This is the first list.

- 1.- **To reproach** (*"Last time we picked you up, you made us wait half an hour"*)
- 2.- **To lecture** (*"I do not think it is good that young people have so much freedom"*)
- 3.- **To threaten** (*"Who knows what you do and what you have. I am sure someone offers you tobacco or drugs..."*)
- 4.- **To compare** (*"Look at your cousin Victor, he is sixteen and he is so formal"* or *"When I was young ..."*)
- 5.- **To play the victim** (*"I won't be able to sleep until you come back"*)

6.- **To make sarcastic remarks** (*"You're always ready for parties but you don't collaborate at home..."*)

7.- **To insult** (*"I think that the girls of your gang are very superficial"*)

If we notice, the list includes some sentences which we ourselves often say and that we have heard a thousand times in our family. It is a pity that we do not remember what we felt when someone gave us answers of this kind: fury, anger, ...

This is the second list

1. Admit the teenagers' feelings. That means LISTEN AND NAME those feelings. (*I see you are anxious about going to that party*). This is a good start and make collaboration possible.

2.- Explain your own viewpoint. For that purpose, we must speak from our own emotions. So, we must use sentences which begin with *"I believe"*, *"It makes me worry"*, *"I think"* to describe the problems that one notices. We also need to talk about our own expectations:

For instance:

- *"It makes me worry that in that party you take up smoking or drinking alcohol"*
- *"I believe it can be dangerous that you come back home alone at that time"*
- *"It makes me worry that you will be tired to prepare the Maths exam next day"*
- *"I would like to know if there is to be any adult supervising"*
- *"It makes me worry the idea that someone who has drunk alcohol drives you home and you can have an accident"*

This can also facilitate the expression of the teenage feelings, positive as well as their fears. This is not easy. Some feelings are conscious but others are more hidden.

Let us analyse some examples:

What can a mother feel or think?

- Fear that her young child comes home alone at night.
- Fear that your gang can have negative influences over their daughter (tobacco, alcohol, sex)
- Fear that the child loses opportunities to study (tiredness of the party, other influences...) and their academic

performance gets worse.

- Uncertainty about if it is right to answer yes.
- Uncertainty about if it will be better to keep on saying no.
- Uncomfortability in arguments.
- Resentment because when she was a teenager, her family was very strict.
- Envy because she did not have these opportunities to have fun.
- Anger because father does not participate in these decisions.

And, what can a daughter feel or think?

- Desire to be autonomous and independent.
- Desire and excitement towards trying new experiences.
- Fear and uncertainty about possible risks or proposals (*Do I really want? Would I dare?*)
- Fear to make some serious decisions (to smoke or say no...) in your gang.
- Fear to be rejected by her gang if she does not participate, if she does not rebel, if she does not do the same...

3.- Listen to the daughter's view. That means doing it without judging, interrupting or criticizing. That way, Clara's feelings can better appear.

- *"It makes me very happy because we have prepared a very funny surprise and Andrés is coming to, his cousin too, I met him this summer and he is very interesting."*
- *"My friends and I do know that we are not going to smoke although some classmates already do"*

4.- Deepen a bit in your feelings. Remark negative and positive aspects that are found in the teenager's arguments.

- *"I see you feel like going to the party and that you would like to see that child..."*
- *"Hmm, I see that your friends and you have clear ideas about smoking. I guess"*
- *"How do you plan to come back? Remember that we have got the car in the garage and at that time there is no bus"*

5.- To propose alternative plans.

- *"I can help Esther's mother to prepare the party and so, we will clean altogether and then I will pick you up"*
- *"We can organize a party here, if we ask for the community site and then we will all clean"*
- *"You can come at 11,30 with Julia who lives nearby and you can take the last bus together"*
- *"I will call you at 11,30 and at 12 O'clock dad will pick you up."*

A negative answer is also possible as long as it is justified. For instance, if the child has bad academic results. This would be presented as a natural consequence of not having studied enough and giving room for possible changes and stimulating them to make decisions autonomously and responsibly.

This list seems very simple. The key point is in feelings,

which are there, that are natural reactions but denying them usually makes communication difficult. When we deny our fears we tend to have an arrogant attitude. And when we deny other person's feelings, and resentment and anger are generated. Finding it out and naming it solves a lot of situations. Noticing the underlying feeling over a sentence avoids conflicts and misunderstandings. So, we lack some training in this topic. It pays trying it. Furthermore, it can serve as a model for our children to carry out their own negotiations.