



## How to Talk to Teens: 3 Ways to Get Your Teen to Listen

By [Megan Devine, LCPC](#)

You know the drill: you're trying to talk to your teen about curfew. Or dinner. Or absolutely anything—and they pretend they can't hear you. They start an argument with you, or give you an eye roll and a "Whatever." Or they turn up their music. They won't lift their eyes from their screens. They scoff or grunt in your general direction. There's no eye contact, no acknowledgement, and absolutely no hint of, "Yes, Mom, I understand what you're saying to me."

*"Your teen tunes you out because he can—after all, you can't force him to listen."*

### Why It Can Be So Hard to Communicate with Teens

Look, defiance and annoying behavior is par for the course when you're parenting teens. I'm not talking about abusive behavior; I mean those little everyday acts of [defiance](#). This is when your child tunes you out, rolls their eyes, and refuses to speak clearly in whole sentences. Do you know why teens do this? They do it because they CAN!

[Related: How to stop disrespectful child and teen behavior, starting today.](#)

Understand that ignoring you gives your child a sense of power. As [James and Janet Lehman](#) tell parents, "Your kids watch you for a living." In other words, they know what pushes your buttons. Ignoring you makes them feel as if they have a little bit of control in a situation where they might feel they have none. One of the only things entirely in their control is where they focus their attention. They tune you out because they *can*; they do it because you can't force them to listen.

The trick here for parents is not to engage in the battle of inattention. As with any power struggle, the more you try to *make* your teen behave the way you want, the more your child will resist. If you get into an argument about his rude indifference, rather than (for example) about following curfew, in a sense your child wins. This is because he's moved you off of the curfew issue (where he actually doesn't have any power) and into an arena where he *does* have power: choosing to ignore you.

In other words, if your teen can draw you into a power struggle, he won't have to hear about the rules. If your tween daughter can appear to not be listening, she can later claim complete lack of knowledge of the rules. And if they're clearly not listening to you, how can they be held accountable? They may as well stick their fingers in their ears, shut their eyes tight, and say "La la la la—I can't hear you!" like an over-grown toddler.

## Power Struggles, Rudeness and Indifference

Given that feigning indifference and refusing to engage in polite conversation is typical during the teen years, how can you effectively communicate with your kids so they will hear you?

Here's one way to deal with your teen's lack of listening skills: act *as if* they hear you. If you know your child has no hearing deficiency and does not currently have ear phones on—and you are speaking clearly in a language she also speaks—assume she can hear you. Look at her and state your rules and expectations clearly and calmly: “In order to have the car in the morning, you have to be back home by 9 pm tonight. I know you want the privilege of driving, so be sure you make it home by 9.”

If she claims she didn't hear you when she wanders in at five past ten, instead of arguing about her listening skills, you can say: “You know the rules. You didn't make it home by nine, so no car in the morning. You get to try again tomorrow night. In by 9, you get the car the following day.” Don't get sucked into a power struggle with her. If she tries to pull you in, turn around and leave the room.

See how that works? When you sidestep the power struggle over communication styles, you are able to focus on the topic at hand and deliver your expectations clearly. Do what you can to be clear and direct, even when talking to the back of your child's head as she stares at a cell phone screen. Then hold her accountable for her choices. Don't debate whether or not she heard you—that's a detour conversation, and it won't get you to where you need to be.

If holding your child accountable routinely devolves into your teen saying “But I didn't hear you!” you could have a brief discussion about paying attention and how she might listen differently next time. Remember, if you keep your cool and stay focused, everything is teachable.

To be sure your message is coming through loud and clear, remember these tips:

1. **Keep your eyes on the prize.** What's your goal? What is the one piece of information you want to relay to your child? State your information clearly and don't allow your child to drag you off course.
2. **Don't take it personally.** When your child ignores you, yells at you or pretends not to hear, remember that he's trying to feel more powerful in this situation. Remind yourself that a power struggle or screaming match will only make things worse. Even if you're annoyed, [keep calm](#) and state the facts. If he tries to pull you in, turn around and leave. You don't have to attend every fight you're invited to.
3. **Don't debate your rules.** If your teen lobs a zinger at you in order to start an argument, keep the conversation focused on your expectations, not on your teen's ideas about fairness. The truth is, if you argue about your rules with your teen, it leads him to believe the rules are changeable. Instead, stick with the facts: “I know you disagree with the rules, and you'd rather not listen to me. The truth is, you don't have to like the rules—you just have to find a way to follow them.”

Remember, keep your cool, stay focused on the issue at hand and don't let your child knock you off topic. Believe me, your teen knows that eye rolling, muttering under his breath and having a bad attitude irritate you. He's doing it *on purpose*. The more you insist that he demonstrates “active listening” (in other words, paying attention politely and acknowledging your request), the more he will

fight to ignore you. Don't go there. Repeat this mantra: "Power struggles are never a good use of my time."

### **Parenting in the Age of Texting**

I'm personally not a fan of parenting-by-text. I know, I know: some people swear by it. Some parents even have whole conversations with their teens about rules and expectations via text. You might even feel like, if it weren't for texts, you'd never have any contact with your child at all.

While it's true that text messages can be a good way to keep in touch with your teen, I would encourage you to have more important conversations in person. Do the big work of presenting rules, consequences, and expected behavior when you and your teen are in the same room. Try to stick with the phone for *quick reminders and encouragement*. For example, this text: "I know you want the car in the morning, so remember to get yourself home by 9," is a better use of texting than a whole long argument about why your daughter needs to be home, threatening to take away the car, or trying to get her to engage in dialogue with you about other things. There's just too much room for misinterpretation, claims of "not getting that text," and all sorts of other things that get in the way of clear, direct communication. Bottom line? Use text messages as reminders of your expectations, not as a way to discuss your expectations.

### **What You *Can* Control: Your Own Response**

When your child moves beyond the silent treatment and yells or fights with you, it's even more important to control your own responses. Remember, all through [The Total Transformation Program](#), James Lehman says, "There's no excuse for abuse." There's no reason to keep engaging with your teen if they're being verbally abusive. An effective way to deal with this situation is to say: "Don't talk to me like that; I don't like it. The rules don't change just because you yell at me about them."

If yelling and abusive language is an ongoing issue in your family, please check out these articles on targeting that behavior:

[Angry Child Outbursts: The 10 Rules of Dealing with an Angry Child](#)

[Kids Who are Verbally Abusive, Part 1: The Creation of a Defiant Child](#)

[Part 2: How to Stop Threats and Verbal Abuse](#)

If you need help navigating the challenging obstacles that make up the teen years, remember that our [1-on-1 Coaches](#) are here for you. They've helped thousands of families just like yours to come up with sensible, effective solutions to tough parenting problems. And the best part? They're super great listeners – you'll never have to fight to be heard!

Read more: <http://www.empoweringparents.com/how-to-talk-to-teens-3-ways-to-get-your-teen-to-listen.php#ixzz3iTO6L7az>