

Reducing Conflict with Your ADHD Teen

Objective

To identify strategies to reduce conflict and improve your relationship with your ADHD teen.

What to Know

The teen years can be difficult for both parents and adolescents – especially if the teen has ADHD. Parenting a child with ADHD is stressful, and studies have found an increase in parent-teen conflict when the teen has ADHD.

Effective parenting requires you to place certain expectations on your teen, such as completing homework, participating in household chores, or getting organized. Teens with ADHD have a harder time complying with requests and need more reminders. You might even have to supervise your teen – leading to annoyance or even anger. When you repeatedly ask your teen to do something, and your teen fails to do it (because of inattention, disinterest, or lack of ability), conflict can escalate. You may find yourself lecturing, yelling, or punishing your teen, who responds with anger or negative behaviors.

Researchers have identified strategies that parents rely on that support and contribute to behavior problems among teens with ADHD:

- Yelling, screaming, arguing, or threatening – but failing to follow through with consequences.
- Allowing the teen to set the tone during interactions.
- Having a “whatever” attitude.
- Using harsh or extreme disciplinary measures – especially when fed up.

What can you do differently?

- Consistently and clearly communicate and connect with your teen.
- Explicitly state household rules and expectations.
- Establish consistent rewards and consequences.
- Set aside time when everyone is calm to discuss areas of disagreement or conflict.

Here are additional strategies that will help you reduce conflict and improve your relationship with your teen.

1. Find the discipline approach that works for your family. Avoid being too strict or too lenient. Use problem-solving and negotiation to allow your teen to offer input and take responsibility. Try a strategy, evaluate it, and try something different as needed.

2. Keep it short and remain calm. Avoid saying too much when you are upset. Try to listen more than you speak, make your point, and move on.

- 3. Team up.** Parents should agree about discipline, and each should support the other. Avoid setting unenforceable consequences, and discuss what will (realistically) work.
- 4. Identify what matters most.** Identify which issues are non-negotiable. Discuss them and your expectations.
- 5. "I'll think about it."** You do not always have to immediately offer an answer to your teen. Announce that you are glad you listened to his/her ideas or input, and you need to think about them for a day or two. You can promise a follow-up conversation.
- 6. Ignore minor issues.** Try not to complain to your teen about everything.
- 7. Avoid making arguments personal.** Sometimes it is best to ignore your teen's protests. Your job is to guide and monitor your teen – even if he/she does not like it.
- 8. Connect.** If you want to know what is going on in your teen's world, step into it. Attend school events, talk with other parents, get to know your teen's friends, and spend time truly getting to know your teen.
- 9. Show you care and keep it positive.** When you see your teen, are you tempted to yell or make demands? Instead, smile and speak kindly. Put problems aside to show your teen love and affection. Use praise as much as possible.
- 10. Be present.** Focus on the current situation or issue. Rehashing past problems does not accomplish much. Skip lecturing and saying, "I told you so."
- 11. Be compassionate but firm.** Teens, like everyone else, dislike being criticized. Disorganization, impulsivity, and forgetfulness are typically not purposeful behaviors. Avoid excusing voluntary behaviors; your teen might be impulsive, but shoplifting or unnecessary risk-taking is unacceptable.
- 12. Stay one step ahead.** Anticipate problems and either proactively attempt to resolve the issue or recognize mistakes happen and figure out how you will handle things in a constructive and calm manner.
- 13. Be concrete.** To avoid misinterpretation, write down basic rules and consequences. You can create "contracts" that are bidirectional – from parent to teen (for example, household tasks, curfew, car usage) and teen to parents (for example, payment for supervising younger siblings). Some behaviors (for example, use of alcohol/drugs, truancy, etc.) should be addressed in a contract, and demonstrated infractions incur a non-negotiable consequence.
- 14. Practice social skills as a family.** Your teen might have difficulty interacting with others. Help your teen develop skills such as listening, not interrupting, and maintaining a conversation. Teach your teen how to express feelings in a healthy way.
- 15. Set appropriate boundaries.** Your home is not a democracy, but conducting family meetings to discuss issues as a family is reasonable.

16. Offer choices. Allow your teen to choose between options to promote confidence and autonomy.

What to Do

This worksheet includes many ideas that you can implement to reduce conflict and improve your relationship with your ADHD teen; choose three from the list above that you can do right away.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Over the next month, when conflicts arise use one of the strategies from the list. In the chart, record the date, the situation, and the strategy you used. Note how your teen responded and what you could have done differently.

Date	What happened	Strategy used	How your teen responded	What could you have done differently?

What was most challenging about this exercise? Why?

Did your teen respond positively when you tried different strategies? Why or why not?

What strategy worked the best? _____

After one month of trying different strategies, did you find there was less conflict, more conflict, or about the same amount of conflict with your teen? Explain.

Did the relationship with your teen improve? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
