

ADOLESCENCE

How to Wrap Advice as a Gift a Teenager Might Open

When parents have something to say that they really want teenagers to hear, these approaches can help get the message across.



By Lisa Damour

Dec. 19, 2018

The giving season is again upon us and if there's anything adults are always eager to share with our teenagers, it's our own hard-earned wisdom. But why do our well-meaning efforts to advise our teenagers often get a chilly reception? Usually, it's because we've got our attention trained on the wrong thing: the thoughts we're hoping to pass along, and not how it feels to be on the receiving end of such lessons. When you have something to say that you really want your teenager to hear, these approaches can help get your message across.

Ask Permission

The most powerful force in a normally developing teenager may be the drive toward independence. Unsolicited coaching — even when it is excellent and well-intentioned — goes against the adolescent grain.

An easy fix? Before dropping knowledge on your child, ask permission. In practical terms, this might be saying, “Hey, I found this interesting article on managing digital distractions. Do you want to take a look at it?” If you find your teenager grousing about a problem for which you have a solution, try, “I’ve got an idea that might help. Do you want to know what I’m thinking?”

According to Vanessa Cánepa-Prentice, a 17-year-old from Seattle: “When parents ask if we’d like to hear what they have to say, we just might be open to it.” Should your teenager decline your pearls of wisdom, don’t press it, and don’t get discouraged. We often strengthen our connections with young people when we find ways to honor their autonomy.

Lose “When I Was a Teenager ...”

Adolescents tend to tune out anything that comes after “When I was a teenager ...”. Indeed, my own informal surveys have taught me that young people find uttering these five words to be the second most annoying thing parents routinely do. (The first? Entering a closed room to address the teenager therein, then neglecting to shut the door on the way out.)

Citing our own adolescence can be a conversation killer, since our kids often reject the premise that their teenage years have anything in common with ours. On this they’ve got a point. We did not come of age while submerged in digital waters, and what we accomplished as high school students pales in comparison to what many young people now achieve, such as the demanding course loads that many of today’s high school students take on.

Even when addressing the timeless aspects of adolescence, reminiscing aloud may not be prudent. Though teenagers are often unfairly critiqued, it is true that adolescence can be a phase of marked egocentrism. As a psychologist, I have learned that teenagers — who may regard their travails as singular and unprecedented —

sometimes dismiss even compassionate efforts to draw parallels between anyone else's experiences and their own. This goes double when that anyone else is a parent. Be sure to focus on the here and now for your teenager, not the there and then for you.

Appreciate the Limits of Your Understanding

We often try to guide teenagers on topics that are foreign to us but familiar to them. For example, many adolescents can name a dozen e-liquid flavors, several e-cigarette devices, and tell you which of their classmates vapes, with whom, where and under what conditions. Given this, it's fair to assume that our teenagers might have the same this-oughta-be-good reaction to us saying, "We need to talk about vaping" that we would have if our teenager said to us, "We need to talk about your mortgage."

Not that we should clam up about vaping and other important health and safety topics. But we should own what we don't know. If we start by asking, "Would you explain vaping to me?" and follow that up with earnest questions, we reduce the odds of an eye roll when we eventually offer that we read an article on the hazards of nicotine and ask our teenager if she wants to see it.

Don't Make It Personal

Our teenagers care what we think about them. Which accounts for how injured they tell me they feel when, out of the blue, their parents approach them with a lecture on the dangers of pain pills, perhaps after watching a frightening documentary about the opioid epidemic.

While the adults may feel they are checking a critical parenting box, the adolescent might be wondering, "What have I done to make you think I'm headed toward life as an addict?" or "Don't you know me at all? I'm your kid who's reluctant to take Advil."

We can keep these interactions on track by talking about teenagers in general, instead of putting our own child on the spot. Dr. Olutoyin Fayemi, a pediatrician near Boston, has very direct conversations with adolescents in his practice but notes that, "it's a whole different story" when he gets home to his own daughter and son, who are 14 and 17.

There, he looks for teachable moments that arise "in the paper, with one of my kid's friends or at school." When watching a TV news story about an accident involving a car packed with teenagers, for example, Dr. Fayemi chose to make only a general comment that things are much more likely to go wrong when adolescents drive with distractions.

Help Weigh Options, Don't Weigh In

When teenagers seek out our advice, it can be hard to resist voicing an opinion. But an opinion may not be the most helpful response. As Vanessa, the Seattle teenager, explains, "It's best when I have choices, when my parents don't say there is only one way to go." She appreciates when they ask what *she* thinks or when they say, "Here are some of the things you could try, but it's up to you how you might solve it."

As much as we might want to simply tell our teenagers what to do, we equally know that doing so won't serve them well in the long run. Our aim, of course, should be to help them learn to make good decisions on their own. And when we do have hard-won perspective that we're longing to share, let's package it so that our teenagers are most likely to be receptive — both during this gift-giving season and all year round.

Lisa Damour is a psychologist in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and the author of “Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood” and the forthcoming “Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls.” @LDamour • Facebook

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