ARGUING WITH TEENS

Relentless but biological

by David Erik Nelson

Your teen has a brand-new adult brain — logic-oriented and hungry to find patterns — and needs someone to help her learn to pilot it. This clearly is the perfect recipe for a long, terrible row that results in nothing but bruised feelings, setting the stage for future fights. Once you or your teen is upset and adrenaline has dumped into the blood flow, it takes at least 30 minutes for your system to normalize. Call a timeout; there is no sense continuing the discussion until everyone has settled down.

Minor tussles about homework, curfew and chores are, in most families, an almost daily occurrence. Teenaged tenacity in these arguments is epic, and can drive even the most patient parent to screaming frustration. This often results in tears and regret, and seldom with real progress. By setting the same standards in these arguments as you would in an argument with a friend or coworker, you will avert a great deal of unpleasantness.

First, keep in mind that this relentless arguing is biological. The brain of a small child is geared towards absorbing new information as completely and quickly as possible — which is why, for example, young children can pick up a new language via simple immersion so quickly. Shortly after puberty, the human brain goes through a drastic process of reorganization and restructuring to become an adult brain. The adult brain copes relatively poorly with integrating new information, but is terrific at sorting, comparing, correlating and recalling information — the reason you enjoy complicated TV dramas that your kids find B-O-R-I-N-G.

Your teen has a brand-new adult brain — logic-oriented and hungry to find patterns — and needs someone to help her learn to pilot it. Every clash with your teen is an opportunity to model sound reasoning.

There are four important strategies vital to steering an unproductive argument into a productive discussion: be respectful, don't get angry, leave the world out of it, and don't presume you are right.

Respect. Always give your teen an opportunity to say her piece without interruption. Teens are idealistic, and crave to be logically and ethically consistent. If you set a respectful tone, you'll go a long way toward keeping the discussion civil and productive. Also, respect your teen's logical capacity; don't use insulting strategies, such as "Strawman Arguments." In a Strawman Argument, you present the weakest possible version of your opponent's position, refute it, and then claim that you've entirely refuted their reasoning. The most popular parental Strawman is the Lemming Accusation ("Well, if all of your friends jumped off a cliff, would you?") Since you don't actually believe that your son's only reason for wanting an earring is that his buddy has one, don't stoop to asking insulting rhetorical questions.

Don't get angry. Anger triggers the release of adrenaline, the hormone/neurotransmitter responsible for the "fight-or-flight" response. Augmenting strength, endurance and quick response at the expense of logical thinking, adrenaline makes it all too easy to speak before thinking, keeps you will

Leave the world out of it. Only discuss one topic; neither party is allowed to drag in other issues. If your son gets into a fight with his sister at dinner, it isn't pertinent that he left his new bike out in the rain last week. The time to discuss the bike was either last week, or the next time he fails to watch out for his valuables. Likewise, if you and your daughter are arguing about whether she can get her belly pierced, it is not pertinent that you "never let her do anything" or that you missed her big soccer win back in May. An argument permitted to rove all over past, present and future is like a bull in the china shop.

Fallibility. Going into any argument you automatically take your own fallibility into account: you believe one thing, your opponent believes another, and you know that if she clearly presents indisputable facts in her favor, you will grudgingly agree. You need to accept that — however unlikely it seems — your kid might be right. Openly admitting I'm not entirely convinced I'm right" or "maybe there's a reasonably explanation for all of this, and I'm willing to take it all into account" is a major concession that your teen will appreciate.

We all say we want our kids to be better than us, and the teen years are, physiologically, when this happens. Arguments with teens aren't only inevitable, they are a vital part of their intellectual development. Working through these arguments productively strengthens your family bond, and helps your teen maintain her egalitarian, youthful idealism and temper it with adult rationality.

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