

Parent-Teen Arguments

Dr. Marlo Archer

Why must teens and parents argue about EVERYTHING?!?!?

Parents asked me this question so many times that I began offering a support group to “new” parents of teens called, “What Happened To My Little Sweetheart?”

At my clinical practice, we find teenagers to be fascinating and exciting people. We, of course don't have to live with them every day like their parents do. Therefore, we aren't as frustrated with them as their parents are and we tend to see the issues a little more clearly because we aren't emotionally involved. This has allowed us to work with a wide variety of teens from different social and ethnic groups and assemble a bit of information about teen behavior that transcends all demographic categories.

A TEEN'S JOB

The true job of a teenager is to learn how to be an adult before they become one. They have lots of ideas about how this should be done and so do their parents and the ideas rarely match. Teens tend to focus on all the rights that adults have and parents tend to focus on all the responsibilities that adults have. That's Reason Number One that teens and parents argue.

NEW COGNITIVE ABILITIES

Teens acquire a new way of thinking that they couldn't do as children. It's called “abstract reasoning” and it includes the ability to imagine how hypothetical situations might be. They can now imagine what it might be like to have their own apartment and all the freedom that comes with living on one's own. That's very exciting and they want it NOW. Lacking the experience of ever actually having done it, their idea of how things could be usually lacks several things that the parents have learned by experience and the parents try to help the teen by pointing out where the teen's ideas are flawed. Reason Number Two that teens and parents argue.

Abstract reasoning also allows them, for the first time, to really question why things are the way they are. They truly begin to understand all the injustice in the world and it's very upsetting. They can't believe they are going to have to be an adult and live in a world like that and they try to fight it by challenging rules, traditions, customs, just about everything the parents hold dear. Reason Number Three teens and parents argue.

LEGAL CONFUSION

The whole notion of “teenagers” is something our society created by choosing to limit adult freedoms and responsibilities until certain arbitrary ages. It is possible that you might not be legally able to drink alcohol at your own wedding. It is possible to be ticketed if you are coming home too late from the Army Recruiter. You can be left in charge of the lives of several small children 6 years before you are allowed to own property in your own name. It really makes no sense.

Because it makes no sense, it confuses everyone. The teen is confused because they have some adult rights but they don't have access to others. Parents are confused because they don't really know when they are still responsible for their teen and when their teen is responsible for himself. Typically, no one really knows the “right” answer.

Reason Number Four for arguments.

TEEN'S MENTAL CONFUSION

It's pretty clear to teenagers that children have few rights and little responsibility is expected of them. Teens also easily understand that adults have many responsibilities and they get lots of rights. The thing that the teen doesn't really know is whether he is a child or whether he is an adult. The answer is that he is neither and both. Well, that's very confusing! Teens flip/flop between child and adult in their own heads hundreds of times a day. They're not real sure if they want to be a child or an adult. It's very frustrating to them. Frustrated people don't behave very well. Reason Number Five for the arguing.

PARENT'S MENTAL CONFUSION

The flip/flopping is even more confusing to parents because you can't SEE it happening. Parents don't know if the teen is currently a "child" or an "adult" and they have to make a guess. The guesses, because they are guesses, are wrong quite a bit. Getting things wrong is very frustrating and, as we said before, frustrated people don't behave very well. Argument Reason Number Six.

Further, parents aren't really sure if they want the teen to be a child or an adult. As much as the teen wants the rights of adulthood, parents want them to behave like a responsible adult. However, as much as the teen wants the freedom of being a child, parents want to hang on to the sweet image of their child as a little baby. Parents can easily imagine the teen to going to college and they even push that, but the thought of their teen having sex is mortifying and they fight it at all costs. It's all very confusing and upsetting. Upset, confused people don't behave very well. Reason Number Seven.

FORCING THE CHILD OUT

A wrong guess about which mode the teen is currently using can actually cause a flip/flop. That is, if the teen was behaving as an adult and a parent talks to them like a child, the teen flips back to being a child to respond. Once the teen is behaving like a child, the parent continues to speak to them like a child and ends up keeping them "stuck" there. To illustrate, imagine the following exchange between a parent and a child and watch how the parent gets the teen "stuck" in the child mode:

TEEN: I want to get(adult) a car(adult).

PARENT: You're too young(child) to get a car.

TEEN: Awww, mom(child) I get good grades(adult) and I come home on time(adult), you have to let me(child) have a car!

PARENT: When you learn to keep your room clean(adult) maybe I'll(child) think about it.

TEEN: You are so unfair(child)! You never let me(child) have anything(child) I want!

PARENT: Watch your tone(child)!

TEEN: Okay(adult), if I keep my room clean(adult) will you let me(child) get(adult) a car?

PARENT: We'll see(child).

TEEN: How long do I have to wait(child)?

PARENT: Keep your room clean first(adult) and then we'll see(child).

TEEN: You are just ridiculous(child)! This is no fair(child)!

PARENT: Listen(child), I already warned you about that tone(child).

TEEN: This sucks(child)!

PARENT: Don't use that kind of language around here(child)!

TEEN: I'll use any kind of language I want(child)!

PARENT: You go to your room(child) no phone for you tonight(child)!
TEEN: Forget You(child)!
PARENT: Oh, you are SO grounded(child)!
TEEN: (storms off, crying)(child)

Reason Number Eight for arguments.

Those are the main reasons that we've seen for parent/teen arguments. We have experience working so successfully to reduce arguments that numerous parents AND teens have commented that their homes are "kinda weird" without the continual arguing!

About the Author

Dr. Marlo Archer is a licensed psychologist treating kids, teens and families in Tempe, Arizona. www.DrMarlo.com. A certified psychodramatist, Dr. Archer co-founded the Arizona Psychodrama Institute which unites creative individuals from across Arizona under the common mission of teaching Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy to organizations, professionals, and students whose practices would be enhanced by using action methods. www.AzPsychodrama.com. She was also the 2013 winner of the Zerka T. Moreno award from the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama.