

For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens

A Special Segment:

1 WHAT GOOD IS ARGUING WITH YOUR TEEN?

This issue of The Practical Parent focuses on one of the most ubiquitous aspects of parenting teens—arguing. Michael describes some of the developmental reasons for why teens are primed for conflict and argument and why the healthy development of the whole family is rooted in parents' abilities to understand the reasons for and not shy away from conflict. Hang in there...we think you'll find this issue of Practical Parent useful!

3 ASK MICHAEL...

I have a teen boy and girl. I just heard about that new study on "sexting" that basically says its not a problem. But if you believe what you see in the media, it's a different story. Do you think its no big deal...and should I just stop worrying about it?



FEATURE ARTICLE

What Good is Arguing?

One of the most frequent calls I get in my practice goes something like this: *"My son (or daughter) is a really good kid and doing very well in school; lots of friends and no really significant problems at all. The problem is I don't like him very much these days; all his friends' parents think he's great but we argue all the time. Can you help?"*

Well, usually I *can* help. And I do it by talking to parents about several important developmental reasons for why arguing can be "good."

Raging hormones? Kind of. Hormonal changes demonstrate that development is unfolding. There is a strong truth to the contribution that hormones make in increasing conflict in the home. Androgens such as DHEA are used by the body to help manufacture other steroids. Gonadotrophin-releasing hormone (GnRH) tells the pituitary to secrete hormones, which effect development of eggs and sperm, as well as the hormones estrogen and testosterone. These two reproductive hormones are deeply related to the experience of emotionality and persistence of mood of

all kinds. In boys, over 50 times the amount of testosterone is available after puberty begins, then before it starts. Recent studies at SUNY demonstrated that THP, a hormone usually produced in response to stress—and one that usually works to decrease anxiety and calm children—actually reverses its effect at puberty. Scientists hypothesize THP production plays a significant increase in anxiety and mood swings among young teens.

Stress and conflict are different things for teens and adults. Adriana Galvan at UCLA is doing some of the country's most important research on teens, stress and risk. Among many fascinating results, the team's work has helped to illustrate: different *sources* of stress and conflict experienced by teens and their parents; the difference in *when* teens and parents experience the most stress and; significant variations in what happens to adult versus teen brains under stress and conflict. What have Galvan and others found?

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What Good is Arguing? *(continued from page 1)*



“I DON’T HAVE TO REALLY TELL YOU WHAT KIDS ARE ARGUING ABOUT. They argue about everything. They argue about what to do or not do (the rules...about what’s okay), about what’s true (about perceptions of reality) and about what matters (about what is salient).”

Data suggest that the greatest sources of stress for teens are parents, while for adults stress tends to come from work or schoolwork. There are also differences based on the time of day: adults find morning time most difficult, while teens “lose it” more in the early evening. And when teens are under stress, they most often revert to “all or nothing” or emotional reasoning (“I *feel* bad, so everything *is* bad.”) rooted in the structures of the central cortex like the amygdalae. Underdeveloped amygdalae result in the poor modulation of emotions, the misinterpretation of emotions and intentions of self and others; and the over-interpretation of adults’ non-angry facial expressions as reflecting signs of anger. They experience more distortions in their thinking under generally stressful situations and temporarily lose the ability to think well, in more nuanced ways. While there are complicated reasons for this “loss of reasoning capacity,” it is somewhat adaptive from an evolutionary standpoint and has a strong basis in biology and the effects of the stress hormone *cortisol* on the brain. Under identical stress conditions, teens show much greater cortisol release than adults.

Adolescence seems to biologically prime kids for stress and conflict. I don’t have to really tell you what kids are arguing about. They argue about everything. They argue about *what to do or not do* (the rules...about what’s okay), about what’s *true* (about perceptions of reality) and about what *matters* (about what is salient). They argue and fight with parents, and often lie, a fact cited by most parents as guaranteed to push their buttons. In fact, about 98 percent of teens lie to their parents. Why?

A groundbreaking study at Penn State showed that teens are 3 more times as likely to lie than attempt a *protest* (against the rules, against parental perceptions or around differences in what “should” be important). Because teens mostly tell the truth in hopes their parents will “give in” or let them do something they want to do (not necessarily the behavior in question), usually negotiating involves *arguing*. So, one way of thinking about it is that teens will either lie or they’ll argue. And if the argument results in a new freedom, it’s worth telling the truth about. While certain types of arguing stresses out parents, teens take it as a sign of being taken seriously and a way of learning about their parents’ values. Adults take certain types of arguing as a sign of disrespect, but fail to make a distinction: teens feel good about the relationship and disclose more when they can fight over the rules; this doesn’t mean they are fighting over the *authority* of the parent. And research shows that moderate family conflict is associated with significantly better parent/child adjustment than is frequent or no conflict.

How the argument is resolved is what makes the difference. Since problem solving often utilizes negotiating, engaging in “arguments” with teens is a way of telling them that you want to find a solution *that works for both of you*. This is an inherent position of respect because it means you’re searching for understanding, not necessarily agreeing. Even if the parent ends up saying “no” or “I just can’t do that now,” and the teen can be angry or frustrated, they all report feeling heard and respected. This is rarely the case with punishment. So, is arguing “good”? Yes, as long as its happening in moderation and includes a lot of listening. It helps grow argumentative teens into respectful and confident young adults. ✦



Parents and Teens Ask Michael...

Dear Michael,

I have a teen boy (14) and teen girl (16) and just heard about this study that says sexting is no big deal and that hardly any kids are doing it. If you believe the news reports or know about what happened with those kids in Washington who had their lives ruined from sexting, then there is a serious problem. Do you think that new research is right...and should we stop worrying about it?

Signed,
Wondering Mom

Dear Wondering Mom,

I think you must be referring to the article in the *New York Times* about Elizabeth Colon and John Reid (available online at <http://nyti.ms/oT5rVU>). Yes, that was a very scary incident. But let's not be too hasty here (about anything)...so let's start with the research. It's true that earlier research done by the Pew Charitable Trusts' *Internet and American Life Project* showed that rates of sexting among teens was significantly higher. But it's often true that even good research is often misinterpreted, too preliminary and often found to be flawed. As a psychotherapist and speaker on issues facing teens, I follow research on adolescents for a living and continually see "results" publicized too soon, too incompletely or without much investigation because the headlines sound good and sell publications, i.e., "Sexting not an Issue!" I don't want the percentage of teens "sexting" to be higher than it is, and the media does often accentuate stories of teens sexting, but if you actually read the study, you'll see a few troubling things.

First, the sample of 1500 in the study was comprised of randomly dialed landline phone numbers. Researchers spoke to parents for about 10 minutes or less and asked them if they could ask their teens about sexual

issues. Those that agreed to do so (about 2/3rds of those dialed) put their kids on the phone to answer very private questions about their behavior. While the phone survey was conducted by promising anonymity to the participants, I'm concerned about the self-selected population of families with landlines whose parents and kids were willing to answer specific questions involving sexual behavior. Researchers asked questions that could very easily get the kids into conflict with their parents. It seems obvious that parents would have asked their kids about the phone call after it ended. How much could the teens' answers about (potentially illegal or sexually explicit behavior) be trusted in this setting?

In addition, if you read the article you'll see when "sexting" is defined as the sending or receipt of nude or nearly nude images of others, the percent of youth who answered they had done this is 7.1% Of those who had created and sent images of themselves and sent them to others, about one-third were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time. In most cases, the teens sending or receiving images knew each other.

I encourage parents, educators and teens to read the actual article in *Pediatrics*, available online at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/>. Read the piece carefully and try to use it as a jumping-off point for discussion. In my clinical practice, I hear from teens more about this behavior than indicated in the study. While I don't believe it's an epidemic, I believe it occurs more in larger, more liberal cities on the coasts and is not coterminous with simple Internet use, but I would argue, more prevalent where the issues and pressures of status are more intense for teens.

Being sexual isn't a problem in and of itself. But if you're a parent and you read the headlines, you might think, "oh, sexting is made up by the media." And if you're a teen, you might read the headlines and say, "see, sexting is overblown by the media, it's no big deal." Parents still need to know what's at stake around "sexting" behavior and what it involves; and teens still need to know the ramifications of this kind of behavior, whether it be simple exploration, a "joke" among friends, an act of bullying or a supposedly private act between teens or like or even love each other. ✖



We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for "Ask Michael" should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com



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Selected Resources on Parenting

Children: The Challenge. Rudolf Dreikurs, Plume Publishing, 1991.

Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students. Denise Clark Pope, Yale University Press, 2003.

Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture. Ariel Levy, Free Press, 2006.

Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project. M. Ito et al., The MIT Press, 2009.

Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. T. DeZengotita, Bloomsbury, 2005.

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. Carol Dweck, Random House, 2006.

About Our Organization...

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

Positive Discipline for Teenagers. Jane Nelsen and Lynne Lott, Three Rivers Press, 2000.

Staying Connected to Your Teenager: How to Keep Them Talking to You and How to Hear What They're Really Saying. Mike Riera, De Capo Press, 2003.

The Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures. Stephen Hinshaw (with Rachel Kranz), Ballantine Books, 2009.

"Zero to Six: Electronic media in the lives of infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers." *Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation*, Fall, 2003.

Uncommon Sense for Parents of Teenagers. Mike Riera. Celestial Arts, 2004 (Orig. pub. 1995). ☒

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles and web resources; and program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ☒

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