

Why A Teen Who Talks Back May Have A Bright Future

by [Patti Neighmond](#)

Good arguments can provide lessons that last a lifetime.

If you're the parent of a teenager, you likely find yourself routinely embroiled in disputes with your child. Those disputes are the symbol of teen developmental separation from parents. It's a vital part of growing up, but it can be extraordinarily wearing on parents. Now researchers suggest that those spats can be tamed and, in the process, provide a lifelong benefit to children.

Researchers from the University of Virginia recently published their [findings](#) in the journal *Child Development*. Psychologist [Joseph P. Allen](#) headed the study. Allen says almost all parents and teenagers argue. But it's the quality of the arguments that makes all the difference. "We tell parents to think of those arguments not as nuisance but as a critical training ground," he says. Such arguments, he says, are actually mini life lessons in how to disagree — a necessary skill later on in life with partners, friends and colleagues on the job.

Teens should be rewarded when arguing calmly and persuasively and not when they indulge in yelling, whining, threats or insults, he says. In Allen's study, 157 13-year-olds were videotaped describing their biggest disagreement with their parents. The most common arguments were over grades, chores, money and friends. The tape was then played for both parent and teen. "Parents reacted in a whole variety of ways. Some of them laughed uncomfortably; some rolled their eyes; and a number of them dove right in and said, 'OK, let's talk about this,'" he says.

It was the parents who said wanted to talk who were on the right track, says Allen. "We found that what a teen learned in handling these kinds of disagreements with their parents was exactly what they took into their peer world," with all its pressures to conform to risky behavior like [drugs](#) and [alcohol](#).

Allen interviewed the teens again at ages 15 and 16. "The teens who learned to be calm and confident and persuasive with their parents acted the same way when they were with their peers," he says. They were able to confidently disagree, saying 'no' when offered alcohol or drugs. In fact, they were 40 percent more likely to say 'no' than kids who didn't argue with their parents.

For other kids, it was an entirely different story. "They would back down right away," says Allen, saying they felt it pointless to argue with their parents. This kind of passivity was taken directly into peer groups, where these teens were more likely to acquiesce when offered drugs or alcohol. "These were the teens we worried about," he says.

Bottom line: Effective arguing acted as something of an inoculation against negative [peer pressure](#). Kids who felt confident to express themselves to their parents also felt confident being

honest with their friends. So, ironically the best thing parents can do is help their teenager argue more effectively. For this, Allen offers one word: listen.

In the study, when parents listened to their kids, their kids listened back. They didn't necessarily always agree, he says. But if one or the other made a good point, they would acknowledge that point. "They weren't just trying to fight each other at every step and wear each other down. They were really trying to persuade the other person."

Acceptable argument might go something like this: 'How about if my curfew's a half hour later but I agree that I'll text you or I'll agree that I'll stay in certain places and you'll know where I'll be; or how about I prove to you I can handle it for three weeks before we make a final decision about it.' Again, parents won't necessarily agree. But "they'll get across the message that they take their kids point of view seriously and honestly consider what they have to say," Allen says.

Child psychologist [Richard Weissbourd](#) says the findings bolster earlier research that finds that "parents who really respect their kids' thinking and their kids' input are much more likely to have kids who end up being independent thinkers and who are able to resist peer groups." Weissbourd points to [one dramatic study](#) that analyzed parental relationships of Dutch citizens who ended up protecting Jews during World War II. They were parents who encouraged independent thinking, even if it differed from their own.

So the next time your teenager huffs and puffs and starts to argue, you might just step back for a minute, take a breath yourself, and try to listen. It may be one of the best lessons you teach your child.