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PARENTS AND OTHER MYSTERIES OF LIFE

Some Concrete Help with Life Difficulties,
Your Friends, and Mom and Dad

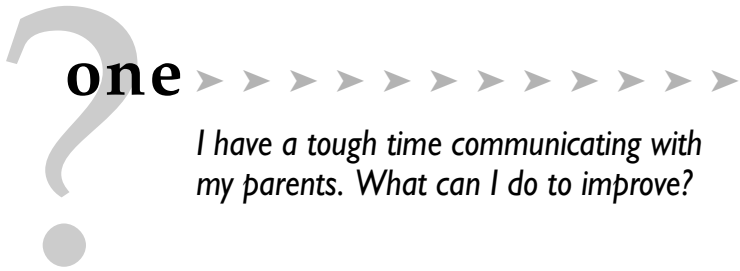
A highly regarded expert on parenting once gave a lecture called “Ten Commandments for Parents.” Then, he fell in love, married, and became a father and changed the title of the lecture to “Ten Hints for Parents.” Another child arrived, and he began speaking on “Some Suggestions for Parents.”

When the third child arrived, he stopped lecturing.

Parents quickly learn that children complicate any child-raising theories. You help your parents grow in wisdom and appreciation of the difficult task of growing up as they raise you in a complex, mostly anti-family society. Please be patient with them.

Patience is a good virtue for all relationships, including those with your peers. Good communication is also necessary for your relationships to survive and grow. Think of the times you’ve been hurt because you were misunderstood or someone misjudged you or talked behind your back. Without your commitment to be patient and communicate honestly, you simply would not have been able to salvage those relationships.

This chapter treats some thorny questions you might have in relating to your parents and your peers. Apply some of the questions and answers to your own life.



I have a tough time communicating with my parents. What can I do to improve?

A wise person said the toughest part of communication is being able to hear what is not being said. This is true of everyone we meet, but especially tough with parents who have authority over you. Surely, the age difference—also known as the “generation gap”—adds to problems in communication. You think you are right (and you may be). Parents think they are right (and they may be).

First, some general points: *Do* make an effort to communicate. Resist the tired excuses to shut down communication:

“They don’t take me seriously.”

“We’ll argue.”

“They’ve made up their minds.”

Believe one of these and you won’t even try to talk to your parents.

Second, play fair. Don’t take on any roles or moods that block honest communication. For example, have you been guilty of any of the following?

Non-talker: You clam up and don’t let them know your true thoughts and feelings.

Sulker: You let your anger seethe under the surface. Moping around the house is your way to get even.

Shouter: You think the loudest opinions are the right ones.

Sneaker: You let your folks think you will go along with their wishes, but then you do what you want anyhow.

Comparer: You play favorites with your parents by comparing them to one another or you belittle them by criticizing their ways with those of your friends’ folks who are “always better.”

These mind games and many like them destroy dialogue between teens and their parents. Effective communication is a two-way exchange that involves both *speaking* and *listening*. It should result in discussion, not argument. Discussions are healthy and build relationships; arguments seek to “win” someone over to one’s point of view, resulting in winners and losers. Here are some tips to use the next time you discuss (not argue) an important issue with your mom and dad.

When you speak . . .

1. *Make sure your folks know you love them.* It’s hard to get angry when you know the dialogue begins and ends in love.
2. *Always be honest and report both your ideas and feelings.* Don’t tell your folks what you think they want to hear simply to end the conversation. Tell the truth.
3. *Don’t blame. Suspend judgment.* Instead of saying, “You don’t care” or “You’re old-fashioned,” say “I’m not sure where you’re coming from. Help me to understand.”
4. *Stick to one topic.* Dragging out past hurts won’t help solve the current issue.
5. *Seek mutual understanding, not victory.* Look for areas of common ground and agreement. Remember the purpose of your conversation is to come to a peaceful resolution.
6. *Keep the noise level down.* Loud arguing sheds more heat than light. Civilized conversation requires calm exchanges.

When you listen . . .

1. *Listen with your heart as well as your ears.* Pay attention to the meanings of the words your parents are using. What are they feeling? Make eye contact. Notice non-verbal communication. All of these will help you pick up “unspoken messages” that are often at the heart of disagreements.

2. *Give them a chance to respond.* Try not to anticipate what they are going to say. Be patient and hear them out. Don't interrupt.
3. *Empathize with your parents.* Above all, realize they love you and are trying to do their best. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you say to you?
4. *Promise to give serious consideration to their ideas.* Repeat what they've said to make sure you understand.

The secret ingredient for successful communication in families is love. Taking the time to discuss without anger and bitterness is itself an act of love. Love itself thrives on communication. The effort is worth it. Don't give up. Ask Jesus to bless you and your parents as you engage in dialogue. He'll be with you to help you all grow into a closer family. Be sure to ask for his help.

“When I was fourteen years old, I thought my father was an old ignoramus. When I became twenty-one, I was surprised at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

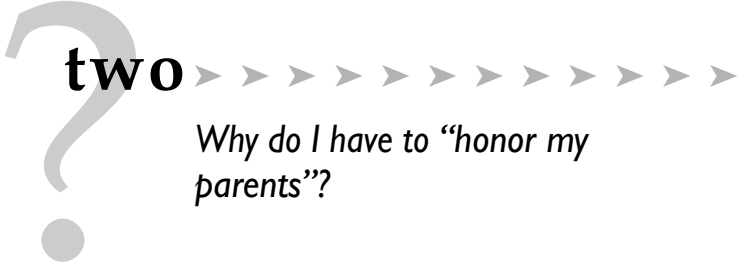
~ MARK TWAIN

Thorny Issues

You might wish to practice some of the tips for speaking and listening with your parents by discussing (not arguing) some of these “thorny” issues. Note which steps worked well for you, ways to improve, and what you learned about yourself and your folks through your discussions.

- Establishing a good curfew time and a fair punishment if a curfew is violated.
- What to do if your parents don't like one of your friends.
- Whether parents have the right to look through their teen's belongings.

- Should you go to Mass if your folks don't?
- Is there any music you should not be allowed to listen to?



two

Why do I have to “honor my parents”?

Teens sometimes ask this question because their parents often seem unreasonable. In fact, they agree with Samuel Butler who, tongue-in-cheek, once said, “Parents are the last people on earth who ought to have children.”

We must honor and obey our parents because the fourth commandment obliges us to do so. When they record this commandment, the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy use the word honor to encompass the virtue of obedience. The New Testament shows the link between these two words:

Children, obey your parents [in the Lord], for this is right. “Honor your father and mother.”

This is the first commandment with a promise “that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth” (Eph 6:1–3).

Note that God rewards those who honor their parents. God has willed that parents have authority over their children and that children should obey them.

What if your folks make “unreasonable” demands? As a teen, you do have the right to express your views. You can try to change their minds. Badgering and sulking, however, are counterproductive and signs of immaturity. And if they still insist on a particular course of action, you must obey.

What if your parents are hypocritical, for example, they tell you to go to Sunday Mass, but they find excuses not to go? This shows that your parents are weak and all-too-human. They are enforcing a good rule that you should obey, even though they don't have the common sense to follow it themselves. You should listen to them, but then pray for them. Perhaps your good example will lead them to do what in their hearts they know is the right thing to do.

When we honor someone, we are showing respect and recognizing the person's authority over us. By virtue of their God-given role, parents and other authority figures, like teachers and officers of the law, deserve our obedience and respect. In a special way, parents deserve gratitude for the gift of life they have shared with us.

Like everyone else, however, parents are imperfect and do err in their judgments. Also, they sometimes act on "hunches," thus they cannot always explain their reasons for requiring something of you. You still owe them honor, respect, and obedience. A good rule of thumb: As long as you live in your parents' house, you should obey their rules and commands. It is a sin to disobey.

The one exception to obeying your parents or other authority figures is if they order you to do something you know is immoral. Obedience to God's law overrides the responsibility to obey one's parents.

The ancient philosopher Aristotle insightfully wrote, "Wicked men obey from fear, good men, from love." Obedience is an act of love. The New Testament (Heb 5:8) tells us that Jesus himself—God's own Son—learned obedience through his sufferings that have won us eternal salvation. When we obey, we imitate Jesus, our Lord of love. This is what it means to be his disciple.

One final word, the fourth commandment applies to parents and other authority figures as well. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, parents must respect their children, provide for them, create a loving home, raise and educate them in the faith, and give them the freedom to choose their own

profession and state in life. Political and civil officials must see the purpose of their authority as one of serving others by respecting the fundamental human rights of persons and by promoting true freedom (CCC, 2221–2237).

[Jesus] went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man (Lk 2:51–52).

three

My parents give me grief over the music I listen to and the movies I go to see. Why can't they get with the times?

Music and movies are two of the greatest of all art forms. The ancient philosopher Plato said that music “gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, and life to everything.” The popular author of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, J.K. Rowling, wrote, “Ah, music. A magic beyond all we do here!” And Thomas Carlyle observed that music is the “speech of angels.”

And movies! They have the ability to involve us totally, affecting our minds, our imaginations, and our intellects. They can transport us to other times and places, divert us from everyday cares, make us laugh or bring tears to our eyes. Imagine life without film!

Both the music we listen to and the films we see can be good and make us better people. But like any good gift from God, music and movies can be perverted and misused by appealing to our worst instincts. This is true with all of God’s gifts. For example, the misuse of wine leads to alcoholism. Or a perversion of sex slips into harmful and debasing behavior. Similarly,