

Parent Update on
Adolescent Psychology: The Parent Version

The recent PTO/B-PEN parent presentation by Joani Geltman discussed adolescent development and navigating tricky conversations with teenagers. With humor and compassion, she offered insight into what is happening in your child's brain during moments of heightened emotion and disproportionate reactions that can cross boundaries and push parents' buttons. She also offered strategies for how to communicate in ways both compassionate and effective. [Here is a link](#) to her talk (for best sound quality, we recommend listening with headphones) and below is a summary.

Key Takeaways

** During the teen years, the **developing brain's amygdala (emotional center) is at its highest activation**, like a volcano just waiting for something to cause it to explode. Adolescents are experiencing **overload** – new feelings, new thoughts, new worries – complicated by today's world, which is a scary place, and they feel unsafe, feel anxiety, agitation, loss of control.

** Their **overreactions** to things can seem personal, and shifts in your relationship can feel like a loss, but don't feed into heightened emotion – stay **calm and objective**.

** Behavior can contradict what teens are actually feeling – **vulnerability is hard** for them. Anger is an easier emotion than sadness/introspection/fear. But rather than responding emotionally, de-escalate in calm voice (“you seem upset today”) and **validate** that they may be having a reaction they can't control. **It's not what you say, it's how you say it.**

** In opening conversations, think about what your goal is when asking questions (get information, gauge emotion, etc.) **Lead with curiosity/interest**, not lecturing or interrogating, and encourage self-reflection, problem solving.

** They are thinking about relationships in ways they haven't before. They are trying on different personalities as part of identity development – it's a **time for separation and individuation**, finding their own path.

** **Arguing more is developmentally appropriate** as they analyze and process information.

- “Gotcha” argument
 - Kids notice parents aren't perfect and that gives them power, may start being sarcastic
 - Take away that power of hurting your feelings – hug them, make it into a joke
- “No” argument
 - Before you say no to pushing limits, make sure it's not a knee jerk reaction
 - If you always say no, they'll find a way to do it anyway/won't ask you anymore
 - “I get it...” and give reason in one sentence. Continue conversation by expressing understanding and respect for their request, feelings.
 - Shrug can effectively end the conversation – don't re-engage.

- “Pushing buttons”
 - When you’ve lost it and you’re both overly emotional, consider saying, “We’re both out of control right now, let’s take a break” and back away. If child follows you into your room, delay – “I’m just about to take a shower”
 - You’re teaching them de-escalation, conflict resolution skills
 - When you go back to it, let them speak first - “Tell me what you’re thinking.”
- “Crossing the line” argument
 - For verbal escalation, swearing, outright disrespect, calmly say “I’m really surprised that you would say that” and walk away, completely disengage. You do not need to lecture them; they know they were disrespectful
 - Next time they come to you for something, say “I would love to but yesterday you said ‘xyz,’ so it’s not going to happen today.” Relationships are reciprocal, so it shows actions have consequences.

** The teen brain leads to **impulsive behavior** – teens experiment, act more on emotions in the moment and with all their distractions are not good at sequential thinking – “if this happens...then...” So reinforce thinking ahead of time – “What’s your safety plan for tonight.” Walk through situations and possible game plans and discuss expectations/consequences.

** For behavior that is not safe/acceptable, **start conversations with understanding** – “I get how this might have happened” but still impose consequences. May want to have a “no questions asked at the moment” policy for calls when in trouble, maybe a code word to still save face. Give kids an option to be honest.

** **Conformity/peer pressure are powerful motivators**, regarding sex, substance use, social networking, etc. Teens are self-conscious and self-involved, like there is an “imaginary audience,” and they feel pressured into adopting roles (the funny one, the stylish one, etc.) – they are posers, especially on social media. Ask them what that’s like for them, what’s motivating them.

** Ask if there is anything you could be doing differently as a parent and **how you can be more supportive**, and be open to criticism.

** **Keep your house safe** for your kids – careful with meds, alcohol, marijuana. Talk about expectations when parents aren’t home, and educate them about what to do if a friend is in trouble with substances.

** Recommends **parental controls** on phones (www.childsafemedia.com offers good info), time limits (help them set own limits), restrictions on which apps they can download without parental permission. Watch out for downloaded VPNs and chronic use in bedrooms, which becomes isolating.

** **Find activities to do together**. Even if it’s out of your comfort zone, be receptive to places of connection – you doing things they like to do. There is still a little child inside teens that likes to be with their parents.

To contact Joani Geltman and for more information, go to <http://www.ioanigeltman.com/>