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How to Handle Your Child or Teen's Mean or Critical Comments

Handling your child or teen's mean or critical comments can be quite challenging. We love our kids and sacrifice so much for them, that comments like these cut to the core. Following are some ideas on how to handle your child or teen's mean or critical comments. The great thing about this topic is that you can apply it to anyone's hurtful comments.

I'm focusing on children's or teen's comments because those take a little more understanding. Often children and adults alike will feel hurt and frustrations, and hold these feelings in until there is so much built up that they come spewing out. When this happens the intensity of the comments as well as the strength of the words will be excessive. This applies to us parents as well...we all can say forceful words when angry, frustrated, or afraid.

Realize it is normal for you to feel hurt, shocked, angry and confused when receiving a mean comment. So, if you have this reaction you are very, very normal. As a parent and an adult, it is up to us to stay the grown up and not respond back in pain in a similar manner.

One caveat to the tips I'm sharing is that you do not need to listen to abusive talk toward you. For instance...it is OK but hard to hear your child say they are mad at you, frustrated with you, irritated by you, etc. You do not have to listen if your child or teen curses at you, calls you names, or is trashing you. If this occurs, I would say, "I can tell you are in a lot of pain, and you have a lot to say. I will not allow myself to be sworn at or called names. How about if we both calm down and try again in an hour. I'd like to hear specifically what you

are upset about and how you are feeling. I'm going out for a walk. I'll be back in an hour, and we can try again." Likewise, if you find yourself yelling or name calling, or making sweeping statements such as "you always" or "you never", you need to take a break until you've calmed down.

Following are a few tips to help you turn negative comments from a painful experience to one that actually deepens and strengthens your relationship with your child or teen. The goal is to understand your child or teen better, increase the emotional safety in your relationship by being a safe person while he/she shares feelings, and repair whatever real or perceived hurt has occurred. You can actually come out closer than when you started.

1. **Listen** – Listen to what they are saying – Try to listen all the way through. As normal as it is to interrupt, interject and respond back immediately, it will short circuit the interaction, and you won't be able to make headway with your child or teen
2. **Open your heart and mind** – Try not to be defensive...this isn't about defending yourself...this is about hearing your child /teen, letting them know you take their pain seriously, and will work with them to come up with a solution.
3. **What is he/she trying to say?** – As you listen, ask yourself...what is her main complaint? What feelings is he/she having? If you had to boil down his/her thoughts and feelings into one or two sentences, what would it be?
4. **What is the pain he/she is trying to express?** Is she feeling ignored, not considered, that something is unfair, that he's been harmed in some way, that he/she isn't getting enough attention or listening time, etc? Try to boil it down so that you can understand it better.
5. **What is he/she saying is missing?** This is always a good thing to listen for...is it time, love, affection, fairness, being understood, appropriate freedom, hanging out time, encouragement?

6. **What does she need?** A good question to ask is *“If I could wave a magic wand and fix what you are dealing with, what would happen?”* The answers may surprise you. Kids and teens do not just know these answers...they figure them out as you ask them good questions. Sometimes it is that something needs to happen, or that something distressing needs to stop.
7. **What do you need?** What do you need in this situation? Is it affirmation from another adult that there is hope, that you are doing a good job, or that you need a break or practical help with parenting? Check in with yourself. If your needs are not meant to a minimal amount, you won't be able to be their for your child or teen. Our emotional needs should not be filled by our kids. They need to be who they are, going through what they are going through. It is not up to them to make us feel OK, adequate, or good enough. These are normal needs that every parent has...they just need to be met by other adults...not by your kids.
8. **Work with yourself on what they've shared.** Ask yourself...is there a kernel of truth in what my child or teen has shared? What could I do to help my child in this situation? Please know that just by listening in an empathetic and validating way you are already doing a lot!
9. **What can you say to yourself that's an encouragement?** Maybe things like... *“I am a good parent even if I'm not perfect. I can give myself the gift of listening to my child/teen and build the relationship. I can repair the relationship, if needed. All the love and effort I've given my child/teen will pay off...it is deep inside them, and none of it goes to waste”*. Add your own statements to this list.
10. **What is one concrete thing you could do to consider and respond to your child's complaint?** Write out possibilities, even if small. Even though it may seem like one more thing that you now have to do you don't have time for...it will be worth the effort. Remember a happy child/teen is much easier to deal with than one who is tied up inside with pain and frustration.

11. Is there anything you need to apologize for? Remember that most of the things kids feel hurt or frustrated by are unintentional, and sometimes are distortions on their part. Even if this is true the emotional hurt needs to be repaired.

Remember you don't need to figure out all this in the spur of the moment. That would be almost impossible to do. It's fine to summarize to your teen what you've heard him/her share (thoughts/feelings/main complaint), and then say...*I really want to think about how to respond to this...because what you have shared is really important to me. I'll think some more about it, and I'd like you to as well. Let's talk more about it tomorrow.* This will then give you time to think it all through, pray about it, and get support from a friend. Make sure you bring it up with your child/teen the next day...otherwise this will really hurt.

Remember to thank them for taking the risk to share their tender thoughts and feelings with you...it is a huge gift to you to have them open up and show you their hurts and feelings. Even though it is hard to hear...the alternative of them handling these feelings and frustrations on their own, then acting them out with disturbing behavior is a pretty bad option...for you and for them!

I sure hope this helped. You are amazing to want to learn how to help your children and teens when they are hurt and frustrated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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