



DO YOU EVER CARE?  
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ME  
I'M NEVER GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU  
ARE YOU LISTENING?

## **WHY CAN'T WE GET ALONG?**

MANAGING  
PARENT-TEEN  
CONFLICT

BY DR JOHN NG  
*EMCC*



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WHY CAN'T WE**



Nobody likes to talk about conflicts, especially conflicts at home. It seems embarrassing. Parents and kids must learn how to manage conflicts because they are inevitable. We neglect this at our peril.

A father of three teenage children and a recognised trainer and family mediator, Dr John Ng shares his insight in **MANAGING PARENT-TEEN CONFLICT**.

# GET ALONG?

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## Understanding the Nature of Parent-Teen Conflicts

*In other words, conflicts are natural and inevitable. Simply put, we experience conflict with another person because we are different.*

There are four perspectives of conflict that are critical in affecting the way we manage conflicts.

### **CONFLICT IS NATURAL**

“Every individual has an instinct for conflicts. At least all healthy individuals.” Hilary Burrock said. All of us experience conflicts. In other words, conflicts are natural and inevitable. Simply put, we experience conflict with another person because we are different.

We have different opinions, different values, different personalities, and different needs. And to add to that, we have our egos to protect. In Asia, we call this 'saving face'.

Conflict is part and parcel of life. The only place that does not have conflict is the graveyard. As long as you are alive, you will face conflicts. So, it is important that we learn how to manage conflicts well. My point is this: having a conflict with a person will not break the relationship but how we manage it, will.

### **CONFLICT IS NEUTRAL**

Many of us are fearful of conflicts because we think of conflicts as being negative. We associate conflicts with negative words such as anger, fight, argument, frustration, war, bitterness and hatred.

But conflicts can be positive as well. Think of your own conflicts that have a positive impact on you and your relationships. Here are some positive outcomes of conflict:

*I believe healthy families must have conflicts but all members learn to manage them effectively.*

- Better understanding
- New ideas
- A healthier relationship
- Mutual respect
- A fresh perspective

### **ABSENCE OF CONFLICTS WITHIN A FAMILY IS NOT NECESSARILY A HEALTHY SIGN**

Some parents think that a family is healthy when there are no conflicts. Unfortunately, conflicts in these homes are swept under the carpet. Some parents create such a climate of fear within the family that any sign of conflict is instantly snuffed out.

They rule the home with an iron-fist. When a teen disagrees, s/he is immediately put down, stamp out and dismissed as rude or disobedient.

I believe healthy families must have conflicts but all members learn to manage them effectively.

### **MOST PARENT-TEEN CONFLICTS ARE UNRESOLVABLE**

Most conflicts are unresolvable. Surprise? But it's true. Think of the fights we have had with our children. They usually revolve around homework, room tidiness, time on cyber games, going out with friends.

So, don't fret if you find yourself dealing with the same issues again and again. Learn to manage the conflicts and recover from them!





## Why do we have Parent-Teen Fights?

*The continuous clash between teens and their parents over values result in each being a perennial “thorn” in the other’s flesh*

Reasons why parent and teen are in conflict are multi-faceted. There are many factors which lead to conflicts between them.

### **CONTRASTING AND CONFLICTING VALUES**

Teens embrace values that are different from their parents. Teens value freedom, friendship, and fun. On the other hand, most parents value hard work, honesty and honor.

Teens enjoy humor and sarcasm but parents see that as being disrespectful. It is not a surprise that teens brand their parents as too traditional and old-fashioned.

The continuous clash between teens and their parents over values result in each being a perennial ‘thorn’ in the other’s flesh.

### **IRRITATING AND EXASPERATING HABITS**

We are creatures of habits. Once a mother came to me complaining, “My son is so disorganized! His room is such a mess. He doesn’t file his homework! He forgets his test dates! I’m just so exasperated!”

Teens tend to feel that their parents are too controlling, too organized, too critical. The complaint is that they ‘nit-pick’.

What irritating habits we have to make family life so difficult to bear!

## HIDDEN AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

One of the causes of family conflicts between parents and teens is mismatched expectations.

- **Parents have unrealistic expectations**  
Sometimes, parents' expectations are simply too unrealistic. Their children never seem to be good enough for them: grades are not good enough, the bedroom is not clean enough, and time with friends is always too long.
- **People have hidden expectations**  
Some parents expect their teen to work and behave in a certain way but they don't communicate this expectation to them. Teens also have expectations of their parents (eg. they want their father to spend more time with them because he is traveling too much) but again, there is no communication between them.

## INEFFECTUAL AND NEGATIVE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Strong words and aggressive actions can infuriate both parents and teens. Unable to control their emotions, some parents end up humiliating their children in public. Imagine their embarrassment if this is done in front of their friends! When teens speak rudely to their parents, the communication between them become a shouting match.

## WHEN DRIVEN BY SELF INTEREST

The truth is that all of us are selfish to a certain degree. Sometimes parents are also driven by self-interest. Parents care about how they look to other parents. They feel embarrassed when their children go to the normal stream.

We want our children to perform well because we want to look good among our relatives.

*The truth is that all of us are selfish to a certain degree. Sometimes parents are also driven by self-interest.*

Teens too, can also be self-centered. They are less concerned about long-term goals and the consequences of their action on their future or their impact on the family. They indulge themselves, sometimes engaging in premarital sex and other harmful pastimes.

Because we are blind to our own selfishness and/or not willing to admit to being selfish, this aspect of conflict between parent and teen is hard to resolve.

*In other words, when we are wrong, we blame the situation. When others are wrong, we blame their character and negative intentions.*

### **DIFFERING AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

One constant source of conflict between parents and teens is diverse interests. For example, the type of music is a consistent source of conflict. Teens love punk, rock, and reggae while parents think they are evil and sources of bad influence.

Clubbing and parties are a rage with teens. However, parents fear that their teens would be subject to bad influences and sexual temptations in these places.

Computer games and virtual fights are fun and exciting for the kids. Parents have nightmares over their involvement!

### **PREJUDICES WHICH LEAD TO CRITICISM**

Regardless of whether we are parents or teens, we all have biases. It is important to be aware of what are our biases. In the field of communication, there are three basic types of biases.

- **Fundamental Attribution Bias**

This is the tendency for us to attribute another person's behavior to internal dispositions but their own behavior to external factors.

In other words, when we are wrong, we blame the situation. When others are wrong, we blame their character and negative intentions.

When we are late, we blame the traffic. But when our children are late, we accuse them of being lazy and irresponsible. This is a fundamental bias that all of us have.



*When we notice and focus all the time on the other person's uncooperative behaviors, the danger of self fulfilling prophecy is real and the person becomes what we fear.*

- **False Consensus Bias**

*False Consensus Bias* refers to the assumption that our lifestyle, behaviors and attitudes are the yardsticks of normality. In other words, we assume people are like us. If we are systematic and organized, we expect our children to be like us, even though they are different and we cannot accept they are different. The worse is that we feel we are the normal and perfect ones. Anyone who does not follow us is abnormal or subnormal. Parents want children to be like them.

- **Negative Impression Bias**

*Negative Impression Bias* is another common perceptual bias. People have a tendency to overemphasize negative information about other individuals. Negative information is perceived to carry greater weight than positive information.

Simply, we tend to focus on a person's negative characteristic and use that perception to judge subsequent behaviors.

If I were to ask you about your teen, our most natural response is to focus on our children's negative habit or characteristic, even though there are many positive traits. We point out "My daughter only uses the phone all the time" and seldom see how hardworking she has been, doing her homework for the past few hours.

Similarly, teens complain that their parents are "naggy, complaining, not understanding" but seldom say that their parents "care for me and work hard to keep me in school".

It is our tendency to focus on the negative and seldom the positive aspects.

When we notice and focus all the time on the other person's uncooperative behaviors, the danger of self fulfilling prophecy is real and the person becomes what we fear.

*Some teens have little control over their emotions. They become unduly sensitive, irascible, petulant, and angry especially during their time of puberty, in and the transition from childhood to adulthood.*

## **EMOTIONAL HANG-UPS AND “HOT BUTTONS”**

Some teens have little control over their emotions. They become unduly sensitive, irascible, petulant, and angry especially during their time of puberty, in and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Small things upset them. They give in to sudden outbursts when lightly provoked. They scowl and bear a grudge when others disagree with them.

This lack of emotional self-control makes them difficult to manage. They have to be pacified constantly.

Similarly, parents too have their emotional angst and ‘hot buttons’. We become irritated and get into emotional outbursts when our children challenge our authority.

## **LIVING UNDER STRESSFUL, OVER-DEMANDING PRESSURES**

The pressure on parents and teens to succeed is so great today. Parents already face intense pressures at their work place and when they return home, they are expected to be good and understanding parents.

Teens today are also under tremendous pressures. Parents make incredible demands on them in their academic performance. Teachers also want them to behave well in school and to excel in their CCA. Their friends also expect them to be accommodating.

With all these pressure, it is no wonder that we tend to react rather than respond. We lose control and become easily irritated when we are at home.

## **COMPETENCE**

Many of us learn parenting by trial and error. Sometimes we don't do very well even in our relationship with our spouses. Some of us are not even very good in our work.

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Teens don't know how to be good teens, either. They may not be competent in their studies, and have difficulty relating to their parents and peer. Recent studies on the brain have also shown that some teens are unable to plan, find it difficult to prioritize, have little impulse control, and are unable to think of consequences.

Imagine the tremendous stress we place on ourselves as spouses, parents and teens.



## How do we Manage Parent-Teen Conflicts? Three Perspectives

*Children have to be respected for who they are. They are unique and every child is more different than we think.*

### **VALUE EACH OTHER**

Parents and children must value each other. We need to have mutual respect. Children have to be respected for who they are. They are unique and every child is more different than we think. They are not just extensions of our public relation image. Neither are they like us. We tend to forget that.

### **BUILD POSITIVE MOMENTS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

A parent-teen relationship that is fraught with negative moments of emotional berating, constant criticism, relentless blaming, self-justifying defensiveness, and cold war will not build a healthy home. We will simply push our teens away from us.

It is important that parent-teen make time for caring, fun, celebrations, mutual help and support.

There should at least be a 5:1 ratio: 5 positive moments versus 1 negative moment. Monitor this constantly. Accentuate the positive and manage the negative.

### **LEARN THROUGH CONFLICTS AND RECOVER FROM CONFLICTS**

Don't fear conflicts. Use them as opportunities for learning. This is where we can recover and learn from why and how conflicts arise. As parents, we need to allow our kids to fail and make mistakes. We will have conflicts but we need to learn from them.

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*Make conflict recovery a part of your family communication pattern.*

If we don't recover from conflict, we will

- harbour bitterness and hatred, resulting in future unhealthy relationships
- suffer from personal emotional burnt-out and possibly, depression
- develop a self-centered view of life, driven by self-interests in decision-making
- become unproductively critical of each other (be they good intentions or behaviours); finally
- degenerate into having a cynical spirit about life, people, family and society

Make conflict recovery a part of your family communication pattern.



## Eight Golden Rules in Managing Parent-Teen Conflict

*Taking personal responsibility for what we say and how we say it is an important part of conflict responsibility.*

### **RULE 1: NO PERSONAL ATTACK**

When we disagree, avoid name-calling or blaming. Name-calling and blaming are destructive.

Avoid 'harsh start-ups' or starting conversation by shouting and attacking the other person. For example, we shout when we see one of our kids come back late. "Why are you late again?" This is taken as a personal attack and the victim becomes naturally defensive.

Watch your tone. Instead, communicate civilly and describe behavior that you disapprove. We find it difficult to control our emotions when we are frustrated or angry. Remember, fix the problem and not fix blame.

Try this "You are late. I want you to know that we want you to have a good time. At the same time, we are very concerned about what you are doing outside ..."

### **RULE 2: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY**

Taking personal responsibility for what we say and how we say it is an important part of conflict responsibility. As parents, if we had offended our kids, apologize. We need to take responsibility for our mistakes and learn from them.



*Being open to  
feedback shows your  
willingness to listen.*

Becoming defensive and making self-justification will only exacerbate a conflict. I have to take responsibility for both my action and reaction. Sometimes, we blame and justify our reactions. "He shouted at me first. That's why I retaliated."

This defensiveness will only make us spiral downwards when in conflict because we blame each other. Even if the person doesn't own up, making the first move in apology is important. Make the first move to apologize. You will be surprised how far it will go in minimizing the tension.

Remember, nobody makes you angry. I make myself angry.

**RULE 3:  
LISTEN ACTIVELY**

Listening is an art and most difficult to do in our fast-paced society. Active listening is a deliberate effort to understand the other person's perspective. I have coined the acronym *CPF*: **clarifying, paraphrasing, and feedback**.

**Clarifying** means asking questions, and checking to ensure that we are hearing correctly. Simply, don't *JTC (Jump To Conclusion)*.

**Paraphrasing** is the art of restating tentatively in your own words what you have heard both the facts and feelings. For example, when your son complains, "I have so much to do at school. I am really fed up and frustrated." As a parent, you become supportive by paraphrasing, "Correct me if I am wrong, I sense that you are feeling frustrated because you have so much school work to do."

This gives your child a sense of understanding, support and sympathy. Isn't it true that the most common complaint of children to parents is, "You don't understand me."

Finally, inviting **feedback** is important. Communication is a two-way process. Being open to feedback shows your willingness to listen. How often have we invited our children to give us feedback about our parenting approach.

*Often parents and teens don't mean what they say and they don't say what they mean.*

My family meets up monthly to invite feedback from one another. We start off by giving feedback on the positive aspects in the family and then how we can improve on the negative. This has been one of the most enriching rituals in my family.

**RULE 4:  
FOCUS ON ISSUES**

The most difficult aspect in conflict management is **MNE - Managing Negative Emotions**. They run wild and we lose control of our emotions during a conflict. We feel anger and frustration when our goals are blocked and expectations are not met.

Sometimes, we need to deflect the negative emotions by a technique, call 'Teflon'. In other words, don't take the negative words thrown at us personally. Often parents and teens don't mean what they say and they don't say what they mean.

When someone throws wet mud, don't rub it in. It only smudges. Wait for it to dry, and then flick it away. Don't let it stick on you. Stay focussed on the issue. Unfortunately, most Asians find this to be most difficult. Every criticism or disagreement is taken personally. Getting emotional only makes it worse.

**RULE 5:  
CHOOSE YOUR FIGHT**

Some parents love to fight and win all the time. They fight over what their kids should eat, what they should do during their holidays, how long they could play on their computer.

We micro-manage and nit-pick. We fight over trivial matters. In my own experience, many times our fight over issues, in retrospect, are so trivial that they are not worth the pain they engender.

Decide if the issue at hand is worth fighting over. Some issues are really not worth the effort. Sometimes, 'Avoidance' and 'Giving in' may be wiser. If we fight all the time, we will lose credibility when there is something really worth fighting over.

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Parents, do your kids a favour: Choose your fight.

**RULE 6:  
ONE ISSUE AT A TIME**

One destructive fight style in conflict management is to do 'kitchen-sink' fighting. In other words, we throw everything into the fight like the kitchen sink: "You were late today. Last week, you didn't complete your homework. Two months ago, you left your clothes all over the room!"

Our teen becomes confused and overwhelmed under such multiple relentless assaults.

Prioritize the issues, and deal with one issue one at a time. If not, it is no wonder that our kids become defensive and argumentative when we 'kitchen-sink' fight. Remember, one issue at a time.

**RULE 7:  
TIME YOUR FIGHT**

Timing is everything. Imagine coming into the home, asking your mother for extra money when she just had a quarrel with your dad about some financial issues. What will happen? You can be sure, you will not get it. You might even have your allowance reduced!

When the timing is wrong, the resulting consequences are angry reactions. And then we spiral downwards.

Be sensitive to the surrounding and the other person's moods. When the heat is up, don't make it worse by 'making snide sarcastic remarks' and/or 'pushing hot buttons'.

Also, when emotions run wild, take a break. Taking time out and coming back at a later time is a wise thing to do. Come back again when things are less heated up. Watch your heartbeat. Research has shown that we become irrational when our heartbeat goes beyond a hundred. Remember 100.

*Also, when emotions run wild, take a break. Taking time out and coming back at a later time is a wise thing to do.*

*Lifting one another to higher goals is important. An effective way to manage conflicts in the family is for parents and teens to help each other see the supra-ordinate goals.*

**RULE 8:  
REALIGN TO SUPRA-ORDINATE GOALS**

Sometimes, parents and teens need to call attention to the greater goal, the bigger picture, and the long-term objective of parenting.

It is very easy to just focus on our self-interests. Parents need to raise the sight of our kids. There are times I have to ask myself and my kids, "Wait a minute. What are we fighting about? Why are we fighting? What does it mean to be part of this family?"

Lifting one another to higher goals is important. An effective way to manage conflicts in the family is for parents and teens to help each other see the supra-ordinate goals.

Expect conflict but transform conflict into opportunities for growth and learning. You can recover from conflict and be the stronger for it! It's not that bad after all!

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