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Question:

My teenager and I seem to fight all the time. Is this normal, or is something wrong?

Answer:

I have so many friends, as parents, talk to me about their children as they've gone from children to adolescents, and where this perfect child before rarely had problems now all of a sudden hit the teenage years, and now we have all this conflict.

I remember one mom actually asking me, "Are we normal? Is there something wrong? Am I doing something wrong? Is there something now wrong with my child? What is going on?"

Well, let me tell you this: conflict for a teenager is extremely helpful. There's actually something that goes on in the midst of conflict that teenagers need. If they're not doing this, then it's going to set them up for some trouble later on in life.

But, again, we usually view conflict as bad, and "we should avoid it, and how do we not have it"—but actually, my hope is that you can begin to understand that as you go through with conflict with your teenager, you are actually helping them do something very important.

Of course, I wish my dad would have understood this better, as I was a teenager. I remember one time—talk about getting into conflict with my parents as a teenager—we were driving one time, my parents had an RV, and they used to love camping, and my dad was a speaker, so we'd be driving all over the place, and we'd go along in this camper.

And so, it was my dad and I sitting in the front seat, and for whatever reason, he sort of brought up some issues that had been going on—I was probably about fifteen years old—and we started to talk about some of these things. He was trying to give me some advice or encourage me or challenge me to not do this, and it just hit my buttons, and I'm reacting to him, saying things, getting angry, and that hit his buttons, and he starts getting angry with me, and all of a sudden we're just in this massive argument.

I tell you what, it escalated totally out of control. We were somewhere in New Mexico, and we were screaming at each other. And he had to pull the camper over, because he was so upset, and there was something he wanted to say to me—he probably wanted to ring my neck—but he's saying, "I want to say something—and you listen." And I was so mad at him that I wanted to teach him a lesson that that's not okay, that he's not allowed to talk to me that way.

So, he pulled the camper over, and what did I do? I grabbed the lock, unlocked it, and I opened the door, and I ran out of the camper. I figured, "I'm just going to run away. I'm going to really teach him." I had no idea where I was going. I ran up over a little hill, jumped a fence, went down this valley area, probably a couple hundred yards now, by this time, away. I can hear him screaming at me in the background.

I'm thinking, "This is going to work. This is going to get his attention. He's going to know he can't do this to me"—when all of a sudden, I started to hear a snorting sound.

And I'm thinking, "That didn't sound very familiar," and I kind of slowly turned around. Behind me, standing, was a herd of buffalo. They were grazing. I don't know why I didn't even hear them before, but as I came up and over, I was kind of looking back at him. I walked right into, staring at this humongous male buffalo. He starts to snort,

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stomp his foot. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm just assuming he's going to trample me any second.

That's about the time that my dad came right up from behind, and of course scared me, and he said, "Don't move." And so, he kindly talked me through how to back away, and for whatever reason, the buffalo never actually charged.

But I'll never forget that moment of staring, thinking, "Okay, which animal do I want to face? The buffalo or my dad?" And of course I was glad to see my dad at that point.

We were able to go back to the camper. We were able to sit there and really talk through what was going on in a way that felt really good to both of us.

But here's the thing that I really didn't understand back then that I really understand now—and this is what I really try to help parents understand—is that conflict serves a key thing, a key role, in the adolescents.

Adolescents, teenagers, they need to learn to separate, eventually, in an individual way from the family. What that means is they need to learn who they are. As they are developing as a young adult, they need to begin to work out their beliefs and their values and who they are going to be about.

Now, the only way to do that is that something has to begin to propel them away from mom and dad, so they can begin to work some of these core issues out—and the best way to do that is through conflict. It's not that we want conflict and look for conflict, it's that conflict with teenagers can help them begin to separate, move away from Mom and Dad.



Now, if you see conflict for what it is with your teens, as a way to help them begin to move away from the family, then it becomes, “Well, then how do we manage this in such a way”—don’t shy away from conflict with your teen, but how can you do that in a way that feels good to both of you.

That’s when I would encourage you to sit down with your teenager. Say, “I know that you and I are going to get into issues, and that’s okay, I know you need to do this as you start to move away from our family and figure out what you’re about, your beliefs, your values. How can we do that, though, in a way that feels good to you and to me?”

Talk about some important rules. You know, maybe there’s a way in which you refuse to yell and scream at each other. You’re not going to do it that way—you’re going to honor one another through your words and in your actions.

Whatever kinds of things you talk about that would be important, again, ask, “What can I do, Honey, with you, as you get upset and we deal with issues? What’s a way I could do that so feels good to you? How can we work through this issue and manage this issue?”

I tell you, the beauty of it is that, again, conflict is not easy. You’re going to go through it. See it, though, first and foremost as an opportunity for your child to move away and away and away into who really they were created to be, their unique values and issues.

But then do that in a way that feels good to both of you.