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## Why kids and teens overreact to your questions

By Michael Ungar

Useful parenting tips to help you communicate better with your children.

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### What children hear

Benignly, we adults approach children, inviting them to talk to us about their lives. All too often they resist our invitations. So many parents tell me that even when they approach their children with forthright questions and an earnest desire to listen, it still feels like their children close down. Many a parent has come to me for advice, as if somehow I had a magic wand that could make their children speak.

If only it were so!

Instead I have to rely on some simple rules of engagement. Here are some examples of what parents and other caregivers say, and what child who is already angry might hear. A child who has a better relationship with these adults is likely to be less critical, more forgiving.

### What we say

I want the best for you. I want you to be happy.

### What the child hears

I want you to conform, to be just like me. Being happy is living like I do. What's wrong with that? Let me show you how to do things my way.

### What we say

I will try to give you whatever you want. Just tell me what you need.

### What the child hears

You need me. You can't get what you need on your own. You are still dependent on me.

### What we say

I'd like to get to know your friends better. Please bring them around sometime.

### What the child hears

I want to see what you and your friends are doing that takes you away from our home. Come home more so I can feel useful, a part of your life, and give you advice about your choice of friends.

**What we say**

School is important. So is going to college or university. You have to pay attention to your studies. Don't you see that?

**What the child hears**

You have to grow up and work just like me. You have to have an education or else you won't amount to anything.

**What we say**

Your body is your own body. You need to respect it and not let anyone tell you what to do with it that makes you feel uncomfortable.

**What the child hears**

You have no sexuality. You couldn't possibly handle an intimate relationship. You should wait until you are an adult like me to express yourself sexually. Your body must be yours, but I still want control over what you do with it.

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Excerpted from [\*Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive\*](#) by Michael Ungar, Ph.D. Copyright 2007 by Michael Ungar. Excerpted with permission from McClelland & Stewart. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced except with permission in writing from the publisher.

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**Guest** 10 months ago

I agree with Bored2death. I am not a teen any longer, but the two ways of communicating and/or their interpretations seem pretty polarized. Not all teens are anti-parent and rebellious and misinterpret well-intentioned advice, and not every teen is going to respond to the Dr. Phil-ish over-intellectualized revision of them. Actions and words and the level of a person's maturity, not to mention the ACTUAL intention behind the words, is going to affect the interpretation. Sincerity goes a long way, not just memorized lines that some article tells you will work.

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**Aidah** 10 months ago

Michael Ungar, everything you wrote was hypothetical and where is the advice. I am a mother and, although, I only was blessed with one child, he grew up to be a responsible, reliable, thoughtful and a caring man. We had an OPEN COMMUNICATION. That was the key to the success of our relationship. He thanked me for it after his college graduation.

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**Bored2death96** 10 months ago

honestly as a teen, i don not believe an of this is true, each are extreme exagerations

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