

Is Your Teen Getting the Message?

✖ John stood at our door arrayed in all his black leather splendor. Safety pins ringed his ear lobes; jewelry pierced his nose and lips. Tattoos covered his arms. Both sides of his head were shaved, the hair on top spiked down the middle.

Our daughter had told me her date was coming, but I wasn't prepared for what greeted me when I opened the door.

My thoughts raced: Should I let this road warrior in? Is my daughter in danger? What will my congregation think if she brings this guy to church?

"Uh, you must be John," I managed to stutter.

"Yeah," he smirked. "Is Amy ready?"

"Not quite." I stalled and searched for an excuse to keep Amy home.

Amy breezed into the room. "We're off to get something to eat and go to the game. I'll be home at 11."

I wanted to tackle John and scream my objections. The counselor inside me said to stay cool and calm, but the parent in me wanted to panic.

Amy was a junior in high school. Her grades had started sliding, and her friends had changed. Warning clouds were gathering on the horizon.

Even though Amy came home on time that night, I still felt uneasy.

"Amy, we need to talk about your new friend," I started.

"You were shocked by his looks, weren't you?" Amy replied.

"You got it," I said. "I'm not sure you should be hanging with him or that kind of crowd."

I began my sermon, pouring out all my fears about her friends being into drugs, sex, booze and rebellion. Amy angrily defended her friends and her right to make her own decisions. But we failed to hear what each other was saying; the wall of miscommunication went up and stayed up for months.

We eventually tore the wall down, and today, a decade later, our relationship has never been stronger. But on that night years ago, I believed our daughter's destiny hung in the balance. A supernatural battle had commenced, and we needed every spiritual weapon we could muster.

Tearing down any wall between you and your teen-ager is critical—not only for your relationship but also for your teen's eternal destiny.

Satan does not want the next generation saved, armed and dangerous. He deceives teens into believing their parents don't love them and then tries to isolate them from their parents' protective spiritual covering so he can attack them when they become lost and

helpless sheep (see John 10:1-18).

It's your responsibility to take immediate steps to tear the bricks out of the wall of miscommunication and reach out to your teen. You may be tempted to deny the problem or to believe that time will make the wall go away. But time doesn't fix relationships; only God can do that.

Bricks in the Wall

What constitutes a brick in a relational wall? A brick is a word, action or attitude that causes hurt and divides people instead of drawing them together. We use bricks of negative words, hurtful actions or ugly attitudes to hurt, punish or judge another person. Here are some big ones to avoid:

Brick #1: Failing to listen. I was so concerned about telling Amy what I wanted her to know that I failed to listen to her. Even when we appear to be listening, we may be inattentive, thinking about what we are going to say next instead of listening to what our teen is saying.

Focus on your child, and pay attention to your body language and tone of voice. My body language was threatening, and my voice carried the tone of an angry preacher proclaiming fire and brimstone from the pulpit.

After I had delivered my sermon, I left our living room

and made myself unavailable. Drowning myself in work and believing that my word was final, I drove Amy further from me. She did what she wanted to anyway. When we are not available to our teens, we remove accountability from the relationship.

Brick #2: Missing the point. Because I had an agenda, I never allowed Amy to explain. I jumped to conclusions about her and John. In any conversation involving conflict, both people have some responsibility for the strained relationship.

The point isn't who is right or wrong; the point is the relationship. The only one who is 100 percent right all the time is God.

Speaking the truth in love means we must keep the friendship intact so we can communicate God's truth regarding a particular situation (see Eph. 4:15).

Brick #3: Misinterpreting the words. You may have the facts but misunderstand what they mean. Your teen needs to interpret for you. Never assume anything. It's better for your teen to think you are dense than for you to misinterpret what's being said.

Driving Amy away from me drove her into a relationship with John. I had misinterpreted their relationship. He was just a passing curiosity in Amy's life. But the things I didn't do for her, he did. I didn't listen; he did. I didn't understand her feelings; he did. I didn't let her explain herself; he did. I didn't make myself

available
to her; he did.

Guard your friendship with your teen. No matter how right you may be, without friendship you won't be able to share truth with your teen.

Brick #4: Missing the heart. When we miscommunicate, we miss the heart of our teen. My focus was on how Amy and John looked and how that would make me look.

Church members thought I was a great youth minister and wise counselor, but what good were their opinions if I couldn't help my own child? In miscommunicating with Amy, I missed her heart concerning John—and me, for that matter. I also missed her heart for God because I focused on outward appearances.

Brick #5: Misusing words. When we abuse words, we communicate death, especially when we use:

- Degrading words such as “stupid,” “dumb” and “ugly.”
- Words that inflict pain: “You’ll never amount to anything. Everything you do is a disaster.”
- Vengeful words said in reaction to others when they hurt us: “You’re driving me crazy. You’d like to see me dead.”
- Deceitful words that disguise our feelings when we’re angry or upset: “Oh, nothing’s the matter. I’m just fine. Leave me alone.”
- Words that deny reality: “I can’t talk about that now.

Let's get something to eat and forget about it."

Brick #6: Misreading the issue. Parents often start to view every issue as a crisis and every disagreement as rebellion.

They misread the importance of events in their teens' lives.

Teens live roller-coaster lives; today's low is quickly replaced by tomorrow's ecstasy. Parents need not ride the roller

coaster; they can create a place of stability in a teen's tumultuous

world by reacting calmly to daily—even hourly—crises.

Brick #7: Missing out on closure. Too often, we leave issues hanging. Nothing gets resolved, and we end up with garbage

bags full of dumped emotions. In psychological terms, a responsible

ventilation of feelings is called catharsis—a helpful tool when the

person ventilating takes responsibility for his feelings and has

permission from the other person to ventilate.

But once catharsis is exercised, change dumping into sharing. Instead of just letting things hang, bring closure to your

conversation.

Demolishing the Wall

So how do we demolish a wall of miscommunication once it's up? Here's a four-step plan of attack.

1. Identify the problem. Return to the place where the train of your relationship derailed. Take action instead of waiting

to see how things turn out. Do something immediately about the

breakdown
in communication.

Make the first move toward your teen-ager regardless of who is at fault or whether you think your teen will respond positively.

God sent His Son without waiting on an invitation from humanity; He loved us even when we responded to His love with a cross.

2. Replay the miscommunication. Ask your teen to help you replay the conversation, this time saying the right words and listening in the right places. Replaying what happened helps you see where the train wreck occurred and how to avoid the same mistake next time. Allow your teen to critique your words and actions.

Remember that you are listening, not trying to defend yourself. Being defensive always adds bricks to the wall instead of tearing it down.

3. Get it right the second time. God is the God of the second chance. We need to give our teens second chances. How many? Jesus says that we are to forgive 70 times seven, which indicates an infinite number of times (see Matt. 18:21-35).

You have the opportunity to record over the first tape. Explore different ways you could respond to the same crisis. Work on the conversation until you're both satisfied with it.

4. Create warning flags. The next time either of you senses that a wall is going up, stop the conversation. Try one of

the following stoppers:

Time out. Call a “time out” to allow your emotions to settle down—but for no more than 30 minutes.

Affirm me, please. Ask for a one-minute affirmation—for one minute, each of you has to say affirming things to the other.

Let’s pray. Ask for prayer. If you are unable to pray without intense emotions invading the prayer, then say the Lord’s Prayer together (see Matt. 6:9-13).

Write it down. Write down what you want to communicate, read each other’s notes and then respond by writing again or talking—whichever is less threatening.

Pray Without Ceasing

Finally, be proactive by praying—on your own, with your spouse or with your teen. Praying Psalm 51:1-10 is a good place to start. Here’s another prayer to help keep you focused:

Almighty God, help me as I work with my teen to tear down the wall of miscommunication. Guide me to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. Give me spiritual eyes to discern my teen’s heart.

Make me aware of my words so that I guard my tongue. And Lord, help me bring closure to our talks so that nothing hurtful is left hanging. Holy Spirit, empower me to keep the wall of miscommunication down. Amen.

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