

## CHAPTER 10

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### REBOOTING YOUR APPROACH WITH ADULTS:

*Interacting with authority figures in ways  
that earn their respect*

As a teen you might find it tricky to interact with authority figures, especially as you begin striving for independence and control over your own situations and problems. You might feel authority figures are picking on you or being unfair. But in most cases they're only looking out for your best interests. Although you may have moments during which you don't agree with your parents or feel like a teacher or coach is treating you unfairly, you can find ways to earn their respect and address them maturely.

The best way to earn an authority figure's respect is to be respectful of them. Of course, this can be difficult when they're telling you that you can't do something or they make

you feel insignificant. But once you've established a rapport with them, they will be much less intimidating to approach or to communicate and interact with. Follow these suggestions and you'll be an authority on addressing authority figures:

- **Make eye contact.** By looking authority figures in the eyes, you show that you're not intimidated by them and that you have confidence.
- **Be respectful.** Listen to their reasoning without interrupting. Speak to them in a soft tone. Avoid whining, using slang and giving off an attitude. The more you respect them, the more they'll respect you.
- **Explain yourself and what you're hoping to accomplish.** If you want a different grade on a test, craft a well thought out explanation of why you deserve it. If you want a pay raise at your job, outline what your responsibilities are and what you're willing to do for more money. Invest the time in crafting your argument rather than simply reacting negatively. The better you can articulate your position, the more likely the authority figure is to consider your point of view.
- **Be assertive.** If your teacher wrongfully accuses you of cheating or your boss incorrectly accuses you of stealing, stand up to them in a respectful and genuine manner. Try: "With all due respect, I didn't cheat on the test, and I would never do something like that. I studied really hard, and I'd appreciate you recognizing my hard work."

### Exercise:

Draw up a list of the primary authority figures in your life: parents, teachers, employers, coaches and anyone else with whom you may have frequent contact. Then make a note about your relationship with each of them.

For those with whom you don't always see eye to eye:

1. Consider why you perceive a discord in the relationship. Are you afraid of not living up to their expectations? Do you think they don't understand you? Do you think they're negatively judging you?
  2. Think about how you may be able to connect with them and get them to understand you and respect you.
  3. Recognize that in some limited cases, an adult may not be a person whose respect is worth attaining.
- **Accept blame when appropriate.** If you made a mistake or did something wrong, own up to it. If, for example, you were assigned to clean your frat house kitchen as one of your chores and you ended up hanging at a friend's apartment instead, your fraternity brothers will be much more understanding if you own up to it. Try: "I ended up going to Adam's place to study and didn't take the time to tackle the kitchen. I know I let you down, and will go clean it right now."
  - **Never lie.** Lying will only get you into further trouble, so it's best to be up front and honest. If an authority figure catches you in a lie, that person is much more

likely to doubt your credibility from that point on. As a result, he or she will be much more difficult to communicate with in the future.

- **Don't reject discipline.** Many teens fear authority figures because they have the power to discipline them; a teacher can put them in detention, a boss can fire them, a parent can ground them. Remember that most authority figures are trying to teach you life lessons and provide you with guidance. If you feel like the time doesn't match the crime, say, "I understand where you're coming from, and I agree there should be a consequence, but this seems a bit extreme and I think a more appropriate outcome would be X."
- **Appeal to their emotions.** All adults were once teens themselves and can identify with certain situations and emotions that teens go through. If, say, you want to get an extension on turning in a paper, try talking to your teacher on a personal level, for example: "Mr. Johnson, I was wondering if you'd consider giving me a week's extension on this term paper. I worked hard this week to prepare for the concert performance and didn't have enough time to give this paper all the attention it deserves. This was a really important concert for me, but now it's over and I'd really appreciate your understanding."
- **Have a "practice" conversation.** Prior to having an important or potentially intimidating talk with an

authority figure, have a "practice" conversation. Write out some bullet points and read them out loud in the mirror or rehearse with a friend. Think about what might could happen in the conversation and even afterwards. This way, you'll be prepared for different scenarios.

Imagine, for instance, having to tell your soccer coach that you want more playing time. His response could be a variety of things, such as: "You're not ready." Or: "If you practice an extra hour a week, you might be ready." Or: "Maybe we'll try it in this weekend's game and see how it goes." It would be to your advantage to have a response prepared for any of these situations so you can achieve your goal. The more you've rehearsed what you want to say in your head, the more confident you'll be saying it out loud. You'll then be prepared to offer a response, such as: "What will it take to prove to you that I'm ready?" Or: "Is it all right with you if I touch base on this before the game on Saturday?"

In the following example, Shannon puts many of these tips to work as she approaches her boss, Destiny, at the local ice cream shop about getting more hours. Shannon knows that Destiny will be resistant to the idea because of a recent conflict Shannon had with a coworker, but because another employee recently left for college, she knows this is the best time to ask for extra shifts.

*Shannon: "Hi, Destiny. Do you have a minute to talk to me about my schedule?"*

*Destiny: "Sure, I have a few minutes."*

*Shannon: "Well, I'm trying to save up for my school trip to Costa Rica, and it would really help me out if I could get an extra two shifts each week. Now that Stacey has left, could you give me some of her shifts?"*

*Destiny: "Shannon, I understand why you need the extra hours, but I'm concerned about your communication with coworkers—it isn't always as productive as I'd like. I was thinking about giving the shifts to someone who gets along better with everyone."*

*Shannon: "I understand, but ever since I had that argument with Paul I've gone out of my way to be respectful towards everyone here. I'm even reading a book about face-to-face communication. If I'm able to prove to you during work this week that I can get along with everyone, will you consider giving me the shifts?"*

*Destiny: "That sounds reasonable. I do need coverage for Stacey's shifts by next week."*

*Shannon: "Then can I talk to you about this again on Saturday, before you do the schedule?"*

*Destiny: "Yes, absolutely. We'll talk more then."*

Shannon was both respectful and assertive in this situation, and she took the blame and made an emotional appeal along with laying out a plan for action. Because of her reasoned, mature approach Destiny heard her out and will give her a chance despite initial objections.

Let's look at another situation. Eleventh-grader Daniel feels his teacher has graded him unfairly on a recent presentation because his presentation partner was sick and unable to provide much help. He wants to see if he can get a better grade, so he

has practiced going over what he will say to Ms. Chaffin, and now feels ready. He approaches his teacher in this way:

*Daniel: "Hi, Ms. Chaffin. I'd like to talk to you about my grade on the PowerPoint presentation."*

*Ms. Chaffin: "Hello, Daniel. I made it clear when I handed out the assignment that I would grade presentations using the rubric. According to that, you received a B, which is not a bad grade."*

*Daniel: "I hear you. However, the others worked in pairs and had a better shot at meeting all of the rubric's requirements. I didn't have much help from my partner because he was out sick all week. I created the entire PowerPoint myself and delivered the presentation alone. I don't want my partner to be punished, but couldn't I get extra points for the extra effort I put in?"*

*Ms. Chaffin: "I can't just go doling out extra points every time a student goes above and beyond. I'm glad you put in the effort in a difficult situation, but unless you can find something in the rubric that would allow you extra points, then you're stuck with the B."*

*Daniel: "I did look through the rubric and noted the part about 'being prepared and practiced before the presentation.' I got all but two of those points. Could I have those two points?"*

*Ms. Chaffin: "I suppose you were prepared and practiced, especially considering you had to do it yourself. Yes, Daniel, I'll give you those two points. That would bring you to a B+."*

*Daniel: "Thank you, Ms. Chaffin. I appreciate you working with me on this."*

Daniel persisted in his argument and, because he had practiced beforehand, he was prepared to defend himself with the



grading rubric. He was polite, assertive and patient with his reasoning. Though such conversations might not always turn out the way you plan, you'll never know unless you try.

While interacting with authority figures and superiors can be uncomfortable, following these tips will increase your chances for successful encounters—and you may even learn valuable lessons from the adults you would have alienated, lessons you can apply throughout your life.

**Have Patience with the Parentals** *"You just don't understand!" "You're being unreasonable!" "You're ruining my life!"*

Ah, famous phrases said by most teens to their parents at one time or another. At some point such adolescent angst has consumed pretty much anyone who has ever been sixteen. Technology might have dramatically changed, but the fundamentals of parent-adolescent relationships remain the same as they were twenty, thirty, forty years ago. When you're the sixteen-year-old, it feels like no one can relate to your troubles. In reality, though, most parents sympathize with young adults who want freedom and privileges.

Differences are going to arise. But there are a few ways to keep tension to a minimum. Here are some suggestions:

### **1) Be vocal.**

Tell your parents what's going on in your life. If they feel like you're truthful and open, chances are they will trust you much more than if they believe you're being secretive and hiding your feelings. In that case, they will be more likely to question

you and feel suspicious about your social life. You may not want to tell them every detail, but keeping them in the loop about your activities, dreams, struggles and friends will go a long way toward soothing their worries.

### **2) Be up front about why something is important to you.**

If there is something you want to do and you get the annoyingly rigid "no!" tell your parents why the activity means so much to you. If, for example, you're hoping to attend a party on the other side of town so you can see the girl you like, try, "Mom, I'd like to go to this party so I can make a connection with Adrienne. I really like her, and I'd like to invite her to the dance. I will be home by eleven, promise." (If you get the go ahead, just be sure to be home by eleven!)

Rashid, who is 17, understands the importance of explaining his motives to his mother. In fact, he finds it works almost every time.

*Rashid: "Mom, I'd really like to go on a fishing trip with Mike and Jake this weekend. I've moved my schedule around so it won't conflict with anything, and I'll only be gone Friday night."*

*Mom: "I don't know. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you being out in the woods without any adults."*

*Rashid: "We'll have a GPS, and the sheriff's office says there is cell phone service at the lake. Mike is very experienced and knows his way around that area. And anyway, I just feel like I should know how to camp and fish. I'm kind of embarrassed that I don't know anything about it . . . especially*

*when my new friends talk about it all the time. This is a good chance for me to learn."*

*Mom: "All right. I suppose you should learn how to use a fishing rod. Give me a map of where you're going, and check in when you get there."*

By laying out his motives and plans, Rashid appealed to his mother's emotions and calmed her worries so she felt comfortable supporting his choice.

Parents are just trying to do their job most of the time. They want to keep you safe. But sometimes they go too far, and it's up to you to communicate and explain yourself. Be patient with them, and they'll do the same with you.

**POKE** → Avoid alienating authority figures and you're likely to thrive in your interactions...and in life.

## CHAPTER II

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### BUILDING FIREWALLS:

*How to say "no" to peer pressure*

Saying "no" to a peer can be one of the most difficult things to do, especially when you're trying to be likeable and popular. But caving in to peer pressure and being a doormat in order to have people like you isn't going to elevate your social status or make you happy. Don't let yourself get trapped in difficult situations because you're a pushover.

I remember being a shy teenager and avoiding saying "no" at all costs because it seemed like the best way to avoid confrontations. So I said "yes" to everything from taking on the extra responsibility in a group project to collecting all the balls after soccer practice to spending time with guys in whom I had no interest. But as I matured, I realized that this behavior would only lead people to take advantage of me. It's actually better to learn