

Problem-Solving With Your Child/ Teen

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In this space last month, we discussed how to assess whether interactive gaming has become too much a part of your teen's life. Perhaps you've decided you want some things to change but are wondering how to begin approaching this topic. You may be afraid that your child/teen will go into rebellious shock if the brakes are applied to their gaming activities where none or few have been applied in the past. A positive, constructive, skills building approach to address gaming is to address your concerns through a problem-solving process.

A family meeting can be a constructive forum for a problem-solving discussion.

Setting up the Meeting

1. Pick a slow time when everyone in the family can attend. Sunday nights are often a time when people are home and preparing for a new week.
2. Set an agenda to which all family members can contribute.
3. Meet in a comfortable place—the kitchen or a family room.
4. Set the length of the meeting. This can be renegotiated if needed.
5. Everyone needs to attend.
6. The meeting is the priority. Turn off phones, blackberries, televisions and other distractions.
7. Use a gavel or "talking stick" to identify who has the floor to speak. Be creative—a feather, a teddy bear, or a ball will work and be fun.
8. Assign roles which will

help the meeting to run smoothly—facilitator, note-taker and time keeper are some possible jobs. Let your children and teens fill these roles as they are developmentally able to.

9. Set ground rules to create a safe, open environment for family members to participate. Rules can include: only one person to speak at a time; others listen well enough to be able to summarize what the last person has just said; no yelling, name calling or belittling; or, anyone can call a "time out" for 15 minutes if the conversation is getting too hot. Ask family members if there are any other rules that will help them participate.

Problem-Solving Process

The following process is adapted from the materials of Faber & Mazlish (1995)—*How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. The idea is that when parents and children work through problems and solutions together, children are much more likely to make those solutions work.

1. Clearly identify the problem to be solved. For example, "The problem we want to solve today is the amount of time family members are playing interactive games on the computer and the Xbox."
2. Listen to your children's feelings and needs (children are often not willing to work on finding solutions until their perspectives have been acknowledged). Provide an opportunity for each person to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas about the identified problem.
3. Clarify, summarize and be sure you understand each person's point of view. For example, "Let me see if I understand what you are saying. You said _____. Did I get that right?" After clarifying what the person speaking has said you might also want to inquire whether they have anything else they would like to say. The idea is that each person is fully heard and understood.
4. Express your feelings

and needs using "I statements". For example, "When you _____, I felt angry, and what I want now is _____." Using "I statements" helps reduce defensiveness and increase hearing and understanding.

5. Invite the children/teens to brainstorm solutions with you. Let your kids take the lead. After your kids have listed all their ideas, suggest any additional ideas you might have.

6. Write down all ideas. Don't evaluate. This is a traditional brainstorming exercise. By not evaluating family members are free to think "outside the box" and to let their creativity flow and ideally have a little fun in the process. Just like the boardroom, it can be helpful to write these up in a way that all family members can see them.

7. Together decide which ideas you don't like, which you do and how you can plan to put them into action. Again let the kids/teens take the lead. This can be a time to clarify some of the ideas listed. For example, "The idea about _____. What were your ideas about how _____

would work?" The goal is to reach consensus. Consensus means communicating, problem-solving and negotiating until no family member has any major objections to the plan. Reaching consensus increases the likelihood that the plan will work.

8. Put the plan in writing and implement it for a week or two. Don't look for quick fixes. Look for reasonable effort. Strive for family involvement. Perhaps you have some minor concerns about the proposed plan. Ask yourself if you can live with some experimenting that will allow family members to learn by experience what works and what doesn't.

9. Have another family meeting to evaluate how the plan is working and make any necessary adjustments. Start off by acknowledging what has worked no matter how small the improvement may

be. Ask each family member to talk about how they think the plan is working and if there are any ways they think it needs changing. Hold your own ideas until the end. Perhaps your kids/teens will have the same ideas and then it will have come from them and not you. If there are problems with the current plan, go back to the beginning of the problem-solving process and work back through the steps.

Finishing the Meeting

- End the meeting on time or renegotiate the ending time.
- Schedule your next meeting.
- Finish with something fun—have a bowl of popcorn, play a game everyone enjoys...you get the idea.

Conclusion

When we invite our children and teens to join us in solving problems we send the message, "You are important; I believe in you; I believe you have the ability to think wisely and creatively; your contributions are important; and while I still have the responsibility of parenting you, I believe that we are equal in dignity."



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