

**PARENTING**

Arguing with Mom Helps Teens Fend Off Peer Pressure

Note to all control-freaky parents out there: sometimes being a good parent means giving in.

By **ANNE HARDING/HEALTH.COM** | December 22, 2011 | 7



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Parents of teens beware: It may not be a good thing if you always gain the upper hand in arguments with your son or daughter.

New research shows that adolescents who quickly backed down during an argument with their mother had a harder time resisting peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol than teens who were able to calmly, persuasively, and persistently argue their point with Mom.

Although the findings don't mean parents should let their kids win arguments, they do underscore that parent-child relationships are an important training ground for how children will handle peer relationships as they grow up, says Joanna Marie Chango, a study coauthor and a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville.

"They have to learn somewhere [how to] stand up for themselves, and what they learn at home we think they take largely into their interactions with peers," Chango says.

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It may seem easier to parents just to demand compliance from their kids, but doing so can create unintended consequences down the road, says Stephen Hayes, a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada, in Reno, who was not involved in the study. "There's a message inside 'do what I say' parenting," he says. "It's 'do what other people say.'"

The study, which was published in the journal *Child Development*, included an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of 157 adolescents. When the kids were 13, Chango and her colleagues observed them in two conversations with their mother. (The researchers focused on mothers because they tend to spend the most time with a child, but the findings would likely apply to fathers as well, Chango says.)

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In one conversation, mother and child talked about a contentious issue of the child's choice (such as grades or household rules), and the researchers noted how often the children backed down without appearing to have truly been won over. In the second conversation, the children asked their mother for advice with a problem and the researchers rated the mother's warmth, positivity, and support.

At ages 15 and 16, the teens were more likely to be influenced by the drug and alcohol use of their friends (whom the researchers surveyed independently) if they'd received less support from their mother and backed down more easily in the conversations. Teens who argued with their mothers less effectively also were found to be more susceptible to peer pressure in a series of hypothetical situations posed by the researchers.

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The key quality that appears to link household arguing and resisting peer pressure is a child's "ability to persuade and be assertive through calm reasoning," rather than resorting to whining or yelling, Chango says. "We found over and over again that the right kinds of arguments are linked to better outcomes for teens."

These interpersonal skills may be especially important today, Hayes says, since social networking and other technology has made peer pressure much more subtle and diffuse than the age-old scenario of, say, one teen urging another to try cigarettes.

"You almost don't know who your kids are touching, and who are their heroes and who are their networks now, because they're so extended now with internet messaging and all the rest," Hayes says. "You better teach kids who can have a strong spine and a sense of values and know that they're cared for."

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Dennis Embry, president of the PAXIS Institute, in Tucson, Ariz., which designs programs for preventing substance abuse and violence among young people, says a good way for parents to foster better communication with teens is to ask them open-ended questions that, for instance, encourage them to explain what they want to do and why.

"What you want is to shift the conversation away from control toward exploration about how they can become self-reliant human beings," Embry says.

Teaching self-reliance without losing control over a teen's behavior is a "balancing act for parents," Hayes says. Giving teens autonomy can be "uncomfortable," he says, "because it means you're losing a bit of that role, but of course that's the point: You're training yourself out of the job."

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