

From the Desk of Jennifer Blomfield-Student Assistance/Support Counselor

How To Build Influence With Kids and Teens Through Emotional Connection

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Your strongest source of influence with your children is your emotional connection with them – strong limits, but with compromise, warmth and mutual respect. The goal here is for children to develop the capacity to make healthy decisions on their own. The demands and boundaries need to be clear, but they need to be guarded with warmth, nurturing and an openness to the child’s wants, needs and feelings. Here are some ways to build your emotional connection and use it as your power base to influence behavior.

1. **Discipline, not punishment.** Discipline is about teaching, not about punishment. When kids mess up, let the consequences be driven by the lessons you want them to learn. For example, your teen told you she was going to a study group, but she actually went to a party. The breach isn’t the party, it’s the dishonesty, so let the consequences be driven by that. The consequences then, might look like a grounding, rather than a loss of privileges.

‘I want to give you freedom, but it’s important that I can trust you to use that freedom in a safe way. I’ll give you freedom when you give me honesty. We need time to build the trust again. How do you think we can do that?’ If the ideas she comes up with don’t hit the mark, suggest that no going out for a couple of weeks – not to prove a point, but to have time together to build the trust between you both again.

2. **Sometimes this might mean no consequences.** If they’ve done the wrong thing but they come to you to talk about it, that in itself might be enough. If they show regret, insight and learning, is there any more that can be gained from further consequences? They’ve trusted you with the information, and that isn’t easy. It takes guts to own up when you’ve done something wrong. You can be disappointed and proud at the same time – let them know that.

3. **Acknowledge and validate** .Kids will all feel big feelings, and sometimes these feelings will drive behavior that isn't so adorable. This is a great thing – it means they're human. Acknowledge the feeling by naming what you see without trying to understand or change it. 'You seem angry with me. I get that. It's annoying when you want to keep playing but you have to pack up isn't it.' Research has shown that labelling an emotion can soothe the nervous system. It also gives space for them to slow down and explore the need that's driving the emotion. Anger for example, is usually a sign that something is blocking a goal. What's is it that they want? What's getting in their way? What's another way they can get what they need? If they are sad, something is missing. Help them to slow down and explore what it is. If they're scared, what do they need to feel safe? Is the fear real? Or is it something they're imagining? Children learn the most about emotions when they are emotional, but sometimes they need the space and support to help them find the lesson.
4. **Words of understanding before advice, requests or consequences.**
Understanding doesn't mean agreeing. It means you're open to what they have to say and to looking at things through their eyes. When they know that you 'get it', they will be more open to your advice and your requests, and they'll be more ready to take on any lessons they need to learn. 'I understand how important it is to you to spend time with your friends. I know you weren't wanting to do the wrong thing, but you have to let me know where you are. It's not okay to stay out later than I've asked, and then not pick up the phone when I call. If you want the freedom to spend time with your friends, I can give you that, but there are also things you need to do so that I know you're safe.'
5. **Let the limits be on behavior, not needs, wants, wishes or feelings.** Let all feelings be okay, because they are. What's not okay is the behavior those feelings drive. Kids won't stop getting angry because we tell them not to, or because we punish them for it. Ditto for jealousy, frustration, impatience or any other feeling that needles all of us from time to time. It's still up to us as parents to decide what behavior is okay and what isn't. When they learn they can trust you with what they're feeling, they will have the space to safely explore why they feel the way they do. They can experiment with better ways of being, with you as the lamplight gently guiding their way.
6. **Have strong limits, but let there be room for disagreement and objection.**
It's important that kids know their own mind and how to use it. This will become increasingly important as they get older. If we've never given them the opportunity to disagree or to say no to us, how do they find the words and the trust in their judgement when they are confronted with peer pressure, or risky choices. The things they do with us are practice for the real world. Let them know that as long as they are respectful, they can disagree with you and say no to you, but you are still the parent and the final decision is yours. The more open you are to what they have to say, even if it pushes against you, the more heard they will feel and the more they will be able to trust your judgement and guidance.
7. **And offer choices.** Kids and teens are stuck between wanting to be more grown-up, more independent, more capable, but also wanting to be looked after and protected by you. Let them see they can have both. Being close to you and having limits doesn't mean they have to surrender their power. Empower them by giving them choices within the

limits you've set. 'I understand you want to stay up later, but you need a decent sleep on school nights. How about you can go to bed when you want on Fridays, Saturdays and holidays, but you try to be in bed by 9:30 on a school night.' For younger ones it might look like, 'I know you don't want to wear shoes. I get that – shoes can be annoying sometimes – but it's important that you have something on your feet when we go to dinner. You choose which ones. Any ones you like.'

8. **If they're old enough, involve them in a discussion about the rules and consequences.** There will be some rules that aren't up for discussion, but there may be other things that can be reached through compromise and a calm, respectful swapping of ideas. The more you can do this on the smaller things (cleaning their room, what they spend their money on, the clothes they wear etc) the more influence you'll have on the bigger things. The more you teach them that you're open to what they think and what they need, the more they'll return the favor when it matters most.
9. **Don't take their mistakes personally.** We all have the right to make our own mistakes. It's how we learn and grow. It can be difficult not to take mistakes kids make personally sometimes, ('What have I missed?' 'What have I done wrong?' – sound familiar?) but we can't do their growing and learning for them. Getting too involved in their mistakes can steer our response and make us either, more angry and frustrated, or more tempted to 'fix' it for them – which makes it less likely that they'll open up next time.
10. **Listen and be available for the little things as much as the big things.** They need to know that if it's important to them, it's important to us. If we want them to come to us with the big things when they are older, we need to be available, attentive and responsive to the little things when they are younger. For them, it's always been big.

And finally ...

Children naturally want to do the right thing. Sometimes their idea of the right thing and our idea of the right thing will be worlds apart. This is how it's meant to be. We expand their world, they expand ours, which is why it's so important to set limits in a way that will widen the likelihood of them hearing what we say, and telling us what we need to know. Kids are naturally geared to seek security, love, and understanding. They will be curious, they will experiment, and they will explore. Along the way they will make mistakes. Some of them will be monumental. The challenge for us as the adults in their lives who love them, is to influence them away from behavior that could land them in trouble, without dulling their curiosity, their openness to us, and their wild, beautiful spirits.