



# **The Dynamics of Process and Content in Parent-Teen Communication: A Coding System**

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**Parent:** How was your day?

**Teen:** Fine. How was yours?

**Parent:** Mine was good.

**Teen:** That's good.

**Parent:** Do you sometimes feel like you're doing too many things and need time to chill like I did today?

**Teen:** Yep... like now.

**Parent:** Yeah?

**Teen:** Yeah.

**Parent:** That must be hard.

**Teen:** (silent).

**Parent:** Can I do anything to help?

**Teen:** No.

**Parent:** School stuff, right?

**Teen:** Yeah, that and some other things.

**Parent:** If you can't handle things now in school, how will you be able to handle real life? You think the world should revolve around you.



**Teen:** I guess. Everything is due this week. I hate that teachers make everything due at the same time. Why can't they space things out?!

**Parent:** You need to learn to deal with this kind of thing. Life doesn't work the way you want it to. If you had listened to me and planned things better, you would not be in this mess now.

**Teen:** I take it one step at a time.

**Parent:** One step at a time.

**Teen:** Yeah. I think that--

**Parent:** That's not enough! You need to have more specific short-term goals to get you where you want to go. This is what I do when I have a lot going on at work. I first--

**Teen:** Blah blah blah.





Scientific research shows that the parent-child relationship, cultivated largely in communication dynamics, is predictive of a wide array of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive competences in the child's life, both proximally and distally.

According to "A Guide to Creating Teen-Adult Conversations in Your Community" (MetLife Foundation) and others, if the parent-child relationship becomes consistently snagged in distress, unresolved conflict, and poor communication, your child may be impacted negatively in numerous ways:

- will harbor bitterness and hatred, resulting in future unhealthy relationships
- will suffer from emotional burnt-out and possibly depression
- will develop a self-centered view of life, driven by self-interests in decision-making
- will become unproductively critical of others
- will degenerate into having a cynical spirit about life, people, family and society



The MetLife Foundation has developed 8 rules to guide parents in navigating conflictual dynamics in communications with adolescent children:

## RULE 1: NO PERSONAL ATTACK

When we disagree, avoid name-calling or blaming. Name-calling and blaming are destructive. Avoid 'harsh start-ups' or starting conversation by shouting and attacking the other person. For example, we shout when we see one of our kids come back late. "Why are you late again?" This is taken as a personal attack and the victim becomes naturally defensive. Instead, communicate civilly and describe behavior that you disapprove. Try this "You are late. I want you to know that we want you to have a good time. At the same time, we are very concerned about what you are doing outside ..."

## RULE 2: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Taking personal responsibility for what we say and how we say it is an important part of conflict responsibility. As parents, if we had offended our kids, apologize. We need to take responsibility for our mistakes and learn from them. Becoming defensive and making self-justification will only exacerbate a conflict. Sometimes, we blame and justify our reactions, i.e., "He shouted at me first. That's why I retaliated." This defensiveness will only make us spiral downwards when in conflict because we blame each other. Even if the person doesn't own up, making the first move in apology is important. Make the first move to apologize. You will be surprised how far it will go in minimizing the tension.

## RULE 3: LISTEN ACTIVELY

Listening is an art and most difficult to do in our fast-paced society. Active listening is a deliberate effort to understand the other person's perspective. I have coined the acronym CPF: clarifying, paraphrasing, and feedback. Clarifying means asking questions, and checking to ensure that we are hearing correctly. Simply, don't JTC (Jump To Conclusion). Paraphrasing is the art of restating tentatively in your own words what you have heard both the facts and feelings. For example, when your son complains, "I have so much to do at school. I am really fed up and frustrated." As a parent, you become supportive by paraphrasing, "Correct me if I am wrong, I sense that you are feeling frustrated because you have so much school work to do." This gives your child a sense of understanding, support and sympathy. Isn't it true that the most common complaint of children to parents is, "You don't understand me." Finally, inviting feedback is important. Communication is a two-way process. Being open to feedback shows your willingness to listen. How often have we invited our children to give us feedback about our parenting approach.



## RULE 4: FOCUS ON ISSUES

The most difficult aspect in conflict management is MNE - Managing Negative Emotions. They run wild and we lose control of our emotions during a conflict. We feel anger and frustration when our goals are blocked and expectations are not met. Sometimes, we need to deflect the negative emotions by a technique called 'Teflon'. In other words, don't take the negative words thrown at us personally. Often parents and teens don't mean what they say and they don't say what they mean. When someone throws wet mud, don't rub it in. It only smudges. Wait for it to dry, and then flick it away. Don't let it stick on you. Stay focused on the issue.

## RULE 5: CHOOSE YOUR FIGHT

Some parents love to fight and win all the time. They fight over what their kids should eat, what they should do during their holidays, how long they could play on their computer. We micro-manage and nit-pick. We fight over trivial matters. In my own experience, many times our fight over issues, in retrospect, are so trivial that they are not worth the pain they engender. Decide if the issue at hand is worth fighting over. Some issues are really not worth the effort. Sometimes, 'Avoidance' and 'Giving in' may be wiser. If we fight all the time, we will lose credibility when there is something really worth fighting over. Parents, do your kids a favor: Choose your fight.

## RULE 6: ONE ISSUE AT A TIME

One destructive fight style in conflict management is to do 'kitchensink' fighting. In other words, we throw everything into the fight like the kitchen sink: "You were late today. Last week, you didn't complete your homework. Two months ago, you left your clothes all over the room!" Our teen becomes confused and overwhelmed under such multiple relentless assaults. Prioritize the issues, and deal with one issue one at a time. If not, it is no wonder that our kids become defensive and argumentative when we 'kitchen-sink' fight. Remember, one issue at a time.

## RULE 7: TIME YOUR FIGHT

Timing is everything. When the timing is wrong, the resulting consequences are angry reactions. And then we spiral downwards. Be sensitive to the surrounding and the other person's moods. When the heat is up, don't make it worse by 'making snide sarcastic remarks' and/or 'pushing hot buttons'. Also, when emotions run wild, take a break. Taking time out and coming back at a later time is a wise thing to do. Come back again when things are less heated up.



## RULE 8: REALIGN TO SUPRA-ORDINATE GOALS

Sometimes, parents and teens need to call attention to the greater goal, the bigger picture, and the long-term objective of parenting. It is very easy to just focus on our self-interests. Parents need to raise the sight of our kids. There are times I have to ask myself and my kids, "Wait a minute. What are we fighting about? Why are we fighting? What does it mean to be part of this family? "Lifting one another to higher goals is important. An effective way to manage conflicts in the family is for parents and teens to help each other see the supra-ordinate goals. Expect conflict but transform conflict into opportunities for growth and learning.





## A RELATIONAL APPROACH FOR PARENTS

My main guidelines for effective listening and communication are summarized below in “A Relational Approach for Parents: Listening, Knowing, Influencing”

My approach toward parent guidance is a relational perspective derived from an integration of psychoanalytic interpersonal and relational thought, object relations theory, and self psychology. At the core of the relational perspective is the belief that the capacity for parents to influence their child occurs through a mode of listening that (1) seeks to reduce induction/role-responsiveness, and (2) encourages the teen’s tolerance of all of her feelings and perceptions via the parents’ tolerance of them; this is what will allow the teen to develop what has been called “subjectivity” in the analytic literature. At the core of my approach is the view that the adolescent’s psychological and emotional growth is possible only through the capacity for the teen to be known by her parents. The underlying assumption of this approach is that if the teen cannot have a relationship with her parents, she will seek it in her peer group and often in ways directed toward avoiding or denying her unique feelings and perceptions.

This approach also offers much in the way of resolving the most common dilemma I hear from parents: how do I maintain authority in order to discipline my child, while also being an emotional support to her? The relational approach I am proposing conceptualizes a mode of listening that, if done well, enables parents to “contain” and “metabolize” whatever the child is feeling, thereby soothing the child and gradually emerging in the child’s mind as the one who contains and soothes me. Consequently, parents’ capacity to discipline their child is strengthened and buttressed as a by-product of their capacity to listen to, and know, her. It is no coincidence that the listening perspective I am suggesting for parents (which I argue is simultaneously a process of influence and empowerment as well) is also a substantial component of the listening attitude with which many psychotherapists approach their patients in talk therapy. To the extent that we believe one’s effortful inquiry into, and acceptance of, another’s inner life can promote psychic structure and intimate relatedness, why shouldn’t parents also adopt a similar approach as part of their repertoire with their own children?



My relational approach toward parent guidance consists of ten key concepts that serve as components for evaluating conflictual parent-teen dynamics and also as the underpinnings of therapeutic intervention:

**#1: “Process” vs. “Content.** The relational approach emphasizes how the dialogue is unfolding (tone, feelings, non-verbals, strains, impasses, etc.) between parent and child instead of simply what is being said. Parents are encouraged to directly comment on the “process” in dialogue with their teen and inquire about it, without judgment or blame. To focus on “process,” parents are encouraged to de-emphasize their agenda in discussions with their child. A process focus will gradually strengthen parents’ rapport with their child – and this should ultimately supplant all other agendas. Without rapport and the teen’s view that she can relate to her parents, the parents will lose credibility and will not be in a position of influence. Also, parents’ inquiry about process allows the teen to teach her parents about what she needs in order to talk with them (in this way, the teen becomes the parents’ supervisor or parent guidance coach).

**#2: Cues.** The relational approach capitalizes on opportunities for parents to learn more from their teen before responding and asserting a viewpoint or opinion. The premise is that learning in detail what the teen is thinking or feeling neutralizes the interaction and begins to establish the parents’ power/capacity to influence. Often parents dance around cues and, ultimately, avoid unpacking them with their child, a phenomenon I commonly see in my office. If this becomes a pattern, the teen will unconsciously or otherwise come to suspect (often rightly so) that her parents cannot tolerate or accept information hidden in cues. Left unexplored, the cues will inevitably serve to empower the teen over the parent.

**#3: Over-Identification.** The relational approach sensitizes parents to unconscious identifications with their child. Over-identification limits parents’ capacity to listen and not assume things about their child. I emphasize to parents that their teen wants to be known uniquely by them and, specifically, not through a filter constructed by them.

**#4: Judgment (“Good” vs. “Bad,” “Right” vs. “Not Right”)** of Inner Reality. The relational approach views parents’ acceptance and exploration of their child’s inner reality as the key mechanism for promoting her psychological growth. Parents’ good vs. bad/right vs. not right judgments of their child’s expression of feelings and views are often motivated by parents’ understandable fear, anxiety, sadness, and horror at the distress, pain, and upset expressed by their teen. At a basic level, however, parents’ negation of their child’s thoughts or feelings (e.g., “you shouldn’t feel that way,” or “it’s not good for you to feel that”) will often have the opposite effect intended by parents, i.e., the teen will remain further entrenched in and/or attached to her feelings, largely to use what she feels as a means of differentiating from her parents.



Moreover, an ongoing pattern of good vs. bad judgments of the child's feelings may result in her objectification of her own inner states/her own self (i.e., "if I feel x, that's good, but if I feel y, that's bad"); this, of course, is less preferable than a dialogue with parents that stimulates in the adolescent self-acceptance and a curiosity about her own feeling states. In my work with parents, I encourage them to remain mindful that their child is experiencing feeling states which are impermanent and do not define the child's identity.

**#5: Containment.** The relational approach stresses the importance of a mode of listening that moves beyond reflection of feeling; containment has to do with the parent's capacity to take what the teen is feeling, digest it psychologically, and transmit it back to the teen in a more manageable form so that she can continue to work with it. As parents listen to their teen without judgment or evaluation, they take in and "metabolize" her inner reality, thereby affirming and validating her experience of herself (this is distinct from commenting on the veracity of the child's self-views – that is, hearing one's child does not imply that the parent necessarily agrees with her). The parents' taking in of their child's inner reality immediately modifies it and feeds it back to her in a more digestible form. If the teen sees that her parent can tolerate all that she feels, and if the parents continuously feed back to her modified versions of her feelings, this will gradually enable the teen to (1) tolerate and attach to her feelings ("subjectivity"), and (2) modify affect on her own (i.e., approach the scope of her feelings as manageable, meaningful, and ultimately separate from her identity). It will also secure her view of her parent's strength and credibility.

**#6: Interruptions/Silences between Change-overs.** The relational approach seeks to limit interruptions and actively utilizes meaningful silences at "change-overs" (at the juncture between one person's articulation and another's imminent response). I suggest to parents that such well-placed meaningful silences provide a way to affirm boundaries between family members and create space for self-reflection. If the parent does not allow her daughter's verbal utterances to "float" within the context of dialogue, she will always be poised to rebut her parents' reactive commentary rather than afforded an opportunity to acknowledge and reflect upon what she is thinking and feeling.



**#7: Induction and Role-Responsiveness.** The relational approach assumes that true intimacy (relatedness) is always being resisted by family members for any number of reasons. Consequently, each family member is gradually indoctrinated into roles which are taken up and enacted in a repetitive fashion. These roles form the overall quality/texture/style of relating in the family and, to maintain such roles, inductive coercive processes are constantly enacted. These interpersonal processes tend to polarize parents and teens, keeping each figure organized in a “persona” that is inevitably restrictive but somehow necessary in the family system. A hallmark of inductive processes and the roles/personas they engender is the “here we go again” feeling so common in conflictual family systems. The entry of the teen in treatment usually reflects an unconscious wish in the family for the induced roles to be deconstructed and revised. The most challenging element of my work with parents and teens is to help them acknowledge the induced roles they consistently co-create and enact with each other; once this has occurred, the next challenge is to aid in their disembedding themselves from such processes. If progress is made on these two fronts, interpersonal boundaries within the family are promoted and coercive relational dynamics are gradually diminished.

**#8: Triangulation.** The relational approach sensitizes parents to “triad” arrangements that may occur in family dynamics for any number of reasons, often to avoid/deny relatedness between specific family members. Triangulation is a form of induction in the family system in which roles/scripts are triggered in an effort to defend against certain feelings, truths, or ways of relating that are unconsciously feared.

**#9: Constriction vs. Expansion.** The relational approach views the optimal dialogue between family members as moving from communications of shorter duration to longer duration. The parents’ capacity to evoke elaboration in their teen’s communications reflects the overall quality of the relationship. This does not mean, however, that the teen’s “silence” is necessarily negative; silence evolving from the teen’s mulling over her feelings and thoughts (or attempting to tolerate them on her own as she weans herself from the need for her parents to metabolize them) is much more hopeful than silence used as an act of rebellion, disagreement, or withdrawal (“stonewalling”).

**#10: Identity Diffusion/Narcissistic Attachment.** The relational approach acknowledges that some parents may have unresolved narcissistic issues which challenge their capacity to view their child as a separate and distinct being (this is known as “identity diffusion”). In some families and for a variety of reasons, narcissistic attachment patterns may prevail and are expressed in various ways, including the parent’s consistent communication, directly or otherwise, that his/her life is less important than that of the child’s and/or that the parent’s unresolved issues will be remedied by the teen’s obtaining or achieving what the parent wishes.



These narcissistic tensions typically place a significant psychological burden on the teen and/or encourage her often dramatic attempts to differentiate herself from her parent's wish. Frequently, differentiation is attempted through the teen's displays of under-achievement which directly challenge the parent's narcissistic wish by way of the teen's self-sabotage.

Conversely, another common form of reaction to parental narcissistic issues (particularly in cases in which the parent's narcissistic attachment to the child is very powerful and unconsciously sensed by the child early on in development) is the teen's giving up of any attempt to differentiate from her parent. In this scenario, the teen opts for identifying with her parent. That is, she may unconsciously begin to become what her parent once was or now is (which is, of course, the narcissistic parent's worst fear). This is highly anxiety-provoking for the parent and typically results in the parent responding in a way which further emphasizes his/her narcissistic attachment to the child – further encouraging the teen's continued identification with her parent in an ongoing attempt to refute the narcissistic wish.

A final possible reaction to parental narcissistic issues is the teen's gradual unconscious identification with her parent's narcissistic wish for her (often expressed through the teen's displays of over-achievement). While it may be tempting to view this third scenario as the preferred outcome for the teen, it unfortunately is not because the teen's identity will be constructed around others' wishes for her and not directly tethered to an authentic self-view and self-generated motives (thus, a "false self" character structure may be organized). Sensitizing parents as to how potential unresolved narcissistic issues may be fused with particular parenting attitudes, and how certain actions by their teen may reflect an overly determined reaction to such issues, is another important component of my relational approach to parent guidance.





**1. Validating/Affirming/Empathizing ...** Attempt to validate (does not imply agreement) your child's point of view. Empathizing means that, as a parent, you are able to put yourself in your teen's shoes. To empathize, you must ignore your own adult perception of the situation for the moment and accept your child's feelings, thoughts, and ideas of the situation. Empathizing means you do not dismiss what your child says as ridiculous or silly. Your acceptance of your child's thoughts, ideas, and feelings increases the chance that your child will talk to you about the problems and issues he or she is facing.

- That makes sense; I hear what you're saying about going to the party.
- I could see how you would feel that way.
- Really; he said that?!
- Wow, that sucks.





**2. Paraphrasing/Re-stating/Summarizing** ... Often known as “reflective listening,” offer summarizing (non-critical) comments that mirror your child’s verbal content. For example, your son says, “I hate math and the teacher because she never lets us do anything cool!” You might say, “It sounds like you’re having a hard time with math and that makes you feel frustrated and bored.”

- So the teacher gave no further direction on the assignment.
- Your sponsor was distracted – that didn’t help you.
- So you’re saying that you see me as an unfair parent.
- That was all she said ...left you hanging.

**3. Inquiring/Clarifying** ... Clarify meanings and attempt to learn more facts and details; encourage your child’s elaboration; avoid assuming you know what your child means; use open-ended questions with a focus on your child’s needs or feelings; promote the possibility of the child’s discovering something new or expanding his/her thinking.

- What happened before this fight took place?
- Tell me more about your ideas for the project.
- What happened next?
- What did you mean when you said I have been ‘unfair to you’?”
- You said she’s ‘crazy’—what do you mean by crazy? What does she do that is crazy?
- Was there something else you needed to sa?
- How did that make you feel?
- What do you feel your options are at this point?
- What do you imagine would happen if you didn’t go?



**4. Promoting a “Rally”** ... using a tennis analogy, your goal in communicating with your child is not to win a point but to engage in a long, fun rally in which you both collaborate to keep it going; respond to your child’s communication with anything that will expand the dialogue and not curtail or inhibit it; use simple assents.

- OK.
- Um-hmm.
- Yeah.
- And then ....
- Ah huh ... after that you ...
- I see.
- Go on.

**5. Avoiding induction** ... if your child says something that typically pushes your button or restricts your capacity to stay in the dialogue and rally, avoid it and move on.

- The child’s cursing, loaded nonverbals, being overtly combative, etc.
- You must be feeling something
- Ah, OK.

**6. Allowing brief silences/Not interrupting** ... avoid interrupting your child; focus on listening, not on merely preparing yourself for firing something back; allow the words of your child to linger in the air between you.

**7. Being process-based** ... if the dialogue is aggressive or otherwise not going anywhere productive (e.g., there is considerable stone-walling), give up your intended content (what you want to say to your child) and address the “process” emerging between the two of you.

- This isn’t going well.
- Perhaps we can press pause, rewind, and start again.
- Is there something I am doing or saying that’s annoying you?
- I wish this could go better between us.



**8. Collaborating/aligning** ... if the opportunity emerges, opt for empathizing with your child's position first (even if you think your child is "in the wrong") and indicate that you have your child's back.

- You've had trouble with that coach since the beginning.
- Maybe we can figure something out about how you might want to proceed.
- It sounds complicated – but I can certainly see your side of things.
- How might I help you resolve this?

**9. Recognizing/Complimenting** ... whenever possible, seek to let your child know that you recognize his/her individuality and acknowledge his/her abilities, talents, and skills.

- I like the way you handled that.
- I know that's hard for you, to just let your anger go.
- I've noticed you are most alive and happy when you're with your friends.
- I get the sense that when Dad and I fight, it impacts you even though you don't really show it.

## Negative Content Themes

**1. Judging/Criticizing** ... offer clear and direct disapproval or critical feedback.

- You never do your homework on time.
- It's not good you feel that way.
- I wish just one time I wouldn't have to remind you about walking the dog.
- That is a stupid looking haircut.
- Just look at those terrible grades.

**2. Assuming/Evidencing a negative attribution of your child** ... suggest that you know, anticipate, or predict what your child has done or will do; allude to a model or perception you hold of your child that is negative and rigid.

- I assumed you wouldn't talk to your teacher about that.
- When you're lazy and arrogant, of course you will lose your friends.
- Your approach the world with a lack of common sense.
- You will turn into Jack if you keep this up.



**3. Identifying with your child** ... offer comments in which you draw a comparison between you and your child or suggest your child should see you as a model; fail to distinguish/differentiate yourself from your child.

- When I was your age, I would have never ...
- You are just like me – you have a temper and ....
- When my parents said “No” to us, we accepted that, no questions asked.

**4. Lecturing/Moralizing/Giving advice** ... pontificate, advise and/or speak in a direct/aggressive tone of voice; use “should” statements in a moralistic, disapproving fashion.

- Your responsibilities come first, then you can have your leisure time.
- You should really be more conscientious.
- I can’t tell you how many times you are selfish and don’t take into account others’ feelings.
- You continue to shrug off responsibility.

**5. Interrupting** ... speak when your child has not yet finished talking or has not yet completed a thought.

**6. Discouraging** ... offer comments that indicate disinterest in or doubt about your child’s ideas or feelings.

- That doesn’t make any sense.
- How is that gonna work? Are you nuts?
- Yeah, and then the sea will part and you .....

**7. Guilt inducing** ... attempt to coerce or manipulate your child with guilt, a sense of your own martyrdom and/or criticism.

- I work all day and Daddy and I come home and there you are, sitting on the couch on your phone.
- We spend all this money on your sister and you, and this is what we get.



**8. Catastrophizing/Over-reacting** ... respond to your child with overly dramatic, exaggerated sentiment in which you anticipate negative outcomes and circumstances.

- You have got to be kidding – what are you going to do now?!
- So here it is: the beginning of the end ... you think you'll be competitive for college now?
- All trust has been destroyed!
- Why should we even try anymore? You're a pothead, and I guess that's what you want for yourself.

**9. Being overprotective/Enmeshed** ... react to your child with abrupt plans for resolution to problems and/or solutions to issues that directly or indirectly take the burden off of your child.

- I will call your teacher.
- If you have to go to soccer, I will just pick up Lori earlier.
- Since you didn't do it then, I will work with you this weekend on it.

### Comments on Coding Content Themes

1. A particular utterance could qualify for more than one content code.
2. If the content does not match any particular code, simply code it as "No Code."



### Global Ratings of Constructive and Unconstructive Interacting (0 to 10 scale) (from Aiken, 2010)

#### Characteristics of the “Unconstructive” Interactant

- Tends to be inflexible; is closed to change and/or unwilling to bend.
- Refuses to explain him/herself as needed and/or tends to explain self in a negative (complaining, defensive, and/or argumentative) manner.
- Makes little effort to understand the other’s point of view.
- May allow the other to speak, but does not seem to listen.
- Does not encourage other’s expression, e.g., cuts other off, doesn’t ask questions, or asks questions, but follows with an immediate defense.
- Refuses to consider proposed solutions and/or tends to propose negative solutions.
- Actively denies responsibility, shifts responsibility to other(s), and/or avoids responsibility by obviously changing the subject.
- Tries to derail the discussion and/or is clearly uninterested in using the discussion for progress, e.g., keeps asking when the discussion will end, behaves in a distracting manner.

#### Characteristics of the “Constructive” Interactant

- Tends to be flexible; is open to change and/or willing to bend.
- Explains him/herself as needed.
- Usually does so in a neutral manner (not complaining, defensive or argumentative).
- Makes an effort to understand the other’s point of view; encourages other’s expression.
- Asks neutral and/or positive questions, listens to response.
- Generates viable solutions (as appropriate to discussion), considers proposed solutions.
- Actively accepts responsibility.
- Tries to keep the discussion on track and/or is clearly interested in using the discussion for progress, e.g., brings up a new topic once the first has “run out,” makes comments revealing a clear positive investment in the discussion task







#### Parent-Teen Dialogue #1

**Parent:** How was your day? <sup>1</sup>

**Teen:** Fine. <sup>2</sup> How was yours? <sup>3</sup>

**Parent:** Mine was good. <sup>4</sup>

**Teen:** That's good. <sup>5</sup>

**Parent:** Do you sometimes feel like you're doing too many things and need time to chill <sup>6</sup>  
like I did today? <sup>7</sup>

**Teen:** Yep... like now. <sup>8</sup>

**Parent:** Yeah? <sup>9</sup>

**Teen:** Yeah. <sup>10</sup>

**Parent:** That must be hard. <sup>11</sup>

**Teen:** (silent). <sup>12</sup>

**Parent:** Can I do anything to help? <sup>13</sup>

**Teen:** No. <sup>14</sup>

**Parent:** School stuff, right? <sup>15</sup>

**Teen:** Yeah, that and some other things. <sup>16</sup>



**Parent:** If you can't handle things now in school, how will you be able to handle real life? <sup>17</sup>  
You think the world should revolve around you. <sup>18</sup>

**Teen:** I guess. <sup>19</sup> Everything is due this week. <sup>20</sup> I hate that teachers make everything due at the same time. <sup>21</sup> Why can't they space things out?! <sup>22</sup>

**Parent:** You need to learn to deal with this kind of thing. <sup>23</sup> Life doesn't work the way you want it to. <sup>24</sup> If you had listened to me and planned things better, you would not be in this mess now. <sup>25</sup>

**Teen:** I take it one step at a time. <sup>26</sup>

**Parent:** One step at a time. <sup>27</sup>

**Teen:** Yeah. I think that-- <sup>28</sup>

**Parent:** That's not enough! <sup>29</sup> You need to have more specific short-term goals to get you where you want to go. <sup>30</sup> This is what I do when I have a lot going on at work. I first-- <sup>31</sup>

**Teen:** Blah blah blah. <sup>32</sup>



## POSITIVE

Coding Form												
	Content Code	1 (11)	2 (12)	3 (13)	4 (14)	5 (15)	6 (16)	7 (17)	8 (18)	9 (19)	10 (20)	Total
POSITIVE												
1.Validating/affirming/empathizing												
2.Paraphrasing/re-stating/summarizing												
3.Inquiring/clarifying												
4.Promoting a “rally”												
5.Avoiding induction												
6.Allowing brief silences/not interrupting												
7.Being process-based												
8.Collaborating/alligning												
9.Recognizing/complimenting												
Total Positives												
NEGATIVE												
1.Judging/criticizing												
2.Assuming/evidencing a negative attribution of your child												
3.Identifying with your child												
4.Lecturing/moralizing/giving advice												
5.Interrupting												
6.Discouraging												
7.Guilt inducing												
8.Catastrophizing/over-reacting												
9.Being overprotective/enmeshed												
Total Negatives												
No Code												
Global Rating of Degree of Consructiveness												
Teen (    )												
Parent (    )												
Global Rating of Degree of Unconstructiveness												
Teen (    )												
Parent (    )												

## Parent-Teen Dialogue #2

**Parent:** What are you doing before dinner? Homework? <sup>1</sup>

**Teen:** Sure, ok (as she walks off to his room). <sup>2</sup>

**Parent:** Who are you texting? <sup>3</sup>

**Teen:** No one (as she continues to look down and type). <sup>4</sup>

**Parent:** No one, huh? <sup>5</sup> Are you just gonna lie to me <sup>6</sup> – I am standing right here and see that you are texting. <sup>7</sup>

**Teen:** Whatever. <sup>8</sup> I don't lie <sup>9</sup>. . . . don't project onto me. <sup>10</sup>

**Parent:** Why is it always like this between us? <sup>11</sup>

**Teen:** Like what, Mom? <sup>12</sup>

**Parent:** Like I have to pull teeth to find out what you are doing. <sup>13</sup>

**Teen:** You know what I am doing. <sup>14</sup>

**Parent:** Do I? <sup>15</sup> You didn't tell me what you were doing last weekend; <sup>16</sup> and we found out, didn't we?!-- . <sup>17</sup>

**Teen:** You found out nothing-- <sup>18</sup>

**Parent:** What?! <sup>19</sup>

**Teen:** You heard me. <sup>20</sup>

**Parent:** What are you texting your friends about – Friday night? <sup>21</sup> You know we are not allowing you to go out when we're in Santa Barbara. <sup>22</sup>

**Teen:** I'm not going out. <sup>23</sup>

**Parent:** And you're not allowed to have people over, either. <sup>24</sup>

**Teen:** Yep. <sup>25</sup>



### Parent-Teen Dialogue #3

**Dad:** “Dawn, I’d like for you to come home by midnight from the party tomorrow night.”<sup>1</sup>

**Dawn:** “Dad, there is just no way. Why do you always do this to me?”<sup>2</sup>

**Dad:** “Do what?!”<sup>3</sup>

**Dawn:** “I don’t know ... interfere.<sup>4</sup> You have it in for me.<sup>5</sup> Dillon can stay out as long as he wants to.”<sup>6</sup>

**Dad:** “So you think I’m harder on you than on Dillon.”<sup>7</sup>

**Dawn:** “Obviously.”<sup>8</sup>

**Dad:** “Don’t be sarcastic with me.<sup>9</sup> I don’t take that like your mother does.”<sup>10</sup>

**Dawn:** “The party is until 2 a.m. and I have to be there until the end.”<sup>11</sup>

**Dad:** “You have to, huh?!<sup>12</sup> Have to?<sup>13</sup> It sounds like this party is a big deal for you.”<sup>14</sup>

**Dawn:** “Yeah! Jason will be there ... and there’s going to be a live band ... and all my friends will be there!<sup>15</sup> Please, Dad, you just have to let me stay until 2.”<sup>16</sup>

**Dad:** “You’re excited about the party – I can see that.”<sup>17</sup> And I know you’re trying rekindle things with Jason;<sup>18</sup> you’ve always liked him.<sup>19</sup>

**Dawn:** “Yeah!”<sup>20</sup>

**Dad:** “But you’re still on restriction from the thing last weekend.”<sup>21</sup> Look at the position you put me in.<sup>22</sup>

**Dawn:** “But Dad.”<sup>23</sup>

**Dad:** “I get that this party means a lot to you,<sup>24</sup> and I am concerned about your safety.<sup>25</sup> Let’s get more details about the party—and your ride there and back<sup>26</sup>—and see if we can work something out we’re both comfortable with.”<sup>27</sup>





### (1) List of Common Conflict Sources between Teens and Parents

Below is a list of common sources of conflict between parents and their teenage children. For each area in the list below, rate the degree to which you and your child/parent usually reach a mutually-satisfying resolution when the issue comes up – use ratings between 0 and 10 (0 = always resolved, 10 = never resolved):

- curfew \_\_\_\_\_
- cell phone use \_\_\_\_\_
- noise \_\_\_\_\_
- boyfriend/girlfriend \_\_\_\_\_
- sex/displays of affection \_\_\_\_\_
- friends/choice of friends \_\_\_\_\_
- going to therapy/ AA or NA meetings \_\_\_\_\_
- music \_\_\_\_\_
- church/religion \_\_\_\_\_
- grades \_\_\_\_\_
- chores \_\_\_\_\_
- messy room \_\_\_\_\_





disrespectful behavior \_\_\_\_\_  
drug use/cigarette smoking \_\_\_\_\_  
dishonesty \_\_\_\_\_  
allowance \_\_\_\_\_  
fairness \_\_\_\_\_  
clothes \_\_\_\_\_  
body piercings, tattoos, hairstyle \_\_\_\_\_  
diet \_\_\_\_\_  
how to spend money \_\_\_\_\_  
getting rides to places \_\_\_\_\_

(2) Share your ratings with each other and select a conflict source that you both rate highly (i.e., rarely reaching a resolution).

(3) Record a 12-minute discussion in which you and your child/parent attempt to make “forward progress” on the conflict source.



**Step 1:** Contact a transcription service (e.g., [www.rev.com](http://www.rev.com); [www.verbalink.com](http://www.verbalink.com)) and direct them to transcribe the 12-minute dialogue you had with your child. You will need to get directions from the service you hire re: how to transfer the recording to them. Direct the service to break up the dialogue into “coding segments” (either full sentences or phrases or time segments – each of these would be fine).

**Step 2:** When you receive the written transcription back from the service, you will begin coding. There will be three components of the coding:

**Component A:** Using the Coding Form, select a content code for each utterance. Then, sum up the positive and negative totals. Observe what content codes were used most and least commonly by both you and your child, and consider how these choices impacted the dialogue.

**Component B:** Using the Global Ratings of Constructive and Unconstructive Interacting, rate on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (very) scale the degree to which you and your child were constructive and unconstructive in the dialogue.

**Component C:** Rate the degree to which you think you and your child made “significant forward progress” on the issue you discussed. The possible ratings are “none” (0), “some” (1), or “a lot” (2) of progress. This rating should be based on the entire interaction. Forward progress is defined as “progress towards mutual understanding and/or a mutually satisfying solution.” A “mutually satisfying solution” is defined as “one that each party can live with,” not necessarily the ideal for both parties, but “at least acceptable to both.”

**Step 3:** Bring your audiotape, written transcript, and coding forms (components A, B, and C) to the next IOP meeting with Dr. Tobin for review and discussion.





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Dr. Tobin maintains a private practice in Newport Beach and Laguna Hills, CA in which he specializes in psychotherapy for adolescents, adults and couples. His areas of clinical interest include dating concerns and romantic relationships, men's issues, adolescent development, parent-child conflict and family systems dynamics, sexual compulsivity, and Buddhist psychology. He also serves as Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at The American School of Professional Psychology where he teaches courses in psychoanalytic theory and technique, adult psychopathology, couple/family therapy, and group therapy. He is a former advanced candidate in psychoanalysis at the Psychoanalytic Institute of New England, East (PINE) and former staff psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Clinical Instructor, Harvard Medical School. He received an A.B. magna cum laude in Psychology and Social Relations from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

