

TWEEN BOYS & GIRLS: DIFFERENCES AND DISCIPLINE

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So much has been written about the differing needs of boys and girls as they come into this age. We will keep our focus on discipline because there are some differences to keep in mind when you have to speak to your son or daughter when things get rough. Of course, the danger in addressing gender differences at any age is that it can get very stereotypical very quickly. This is an even more delicate subject when exploring the differences of boys and girls at this age because so much of their development is in a tender and emergent phase. It may seem counter



intuitive, but because of this delicacy of sexual identity at this age, it is even more important to be aware of the changes our son or daughter is going through, and to be conscious and sensitive in the way we take into account their gender when it comes to discipline and communication.

HOW TO SPEAK TO TWEEN BOYS WHEN THINGS GET ROUGH:

Tween boys tend to be more practical and their emerging gender identity seems to be more closely related to their actions. This can take the form of physical strength and capacities to make and fix “stuff”. In a similar way to girls, the desire to succeed or master also motivates boys. But boys have differing motivations that are more rooted in their “psychological need for power, conquests of good versus evil, and bravery.” (Del Vecchio, 1997)

When speaking with a boy about something that is not going well, a parent does not want to be cast in the ‘evil villain’ or the ‘threatening monster’ archetypal role, as this can trigger a tween boy to fight back hard. While the boy may feel he is being courageous and brave, the parent may be reading it as disrespectful and just plain rude. So here are ten keys to keep in mind...

1. **Keep it short.**

3-5 minutes is usually about the limit.

2. **Break it down.**

Boys need time to process. If there is something you need to put right, think about breaking it down into two or three short discussions over a day or two.

3. **Establish an end time.**

Let them know when you need to have things clear and agreed upon.

Something like, “We are going to need to have this worked out by tomorrow, so think about what I just said and let me know at bed time tonight what your ideas are.” “If we can do this, no more needs to be said.” Boys really like this clarity and containment.

4. **Pay attention to timing.**

Avoid breaking into a time when he is focused and engaged on a project or practicing some sports skills. Boys take time to wind down and refocus, and what can read as disrespectful is often that they are still “on a roll” with the previous activity you broke into. A good time to “talk” is when he is doing a chore. Most boys will not feel so bad about spending less time raking the lawn.

5. **Stick to the specifics.**

Avoid meandering, long-winded and subtle explanations.

Helpful... “We need to work out a time today for you to clean up your room. If that’s too hard for you, it’s okay, but then I will set the time.”

6. **Stay in the now.**

Not helpful... “You always ignore our agreements and sneak your brother’s stuff. This is the third or fourth time.”

Helpful... “We agreed that you and your brother would ask permission before using each other’s sports equipment. I did not see that happening just now. You might have forgotten, but how do we put this right?”

7. **Primary focus is on actions.**

Not helpful... “Do you realize how thoughtless you were in not being on time?”

“How do you think it makes your sister feel to have missed her important dental appointment?” It’s not that boys can’t understand feelings but their doorway into this world is often via actions. After practically pointing out what he *did*, emotions and feelings are more likely to be understood.

Helpful... “When you turned up so late after practice and I had to wait so long, it meant that your sister missed her dental appointment. She was going to find out about her braces and now she has to wait six weeks for another

appointment. You might not have meant it, but that's hard for her."

8. **Affirm action.**

Helpful... "I really liked it that you helped out by clearing out some space in the garage without even being asked to. Your bike fits in way better now. What was not okay was leaving all those boxes in the driveway as I can't get the car out."

9. **Involve him in problem solving.**

Helpful... "I need your help in figuring out what to do with all those boxes you cleared out of the garage. Do we know anyone with a pickup? Maybe you have a better idea?" It's so important not to "go at" them but to look for a solution. Boys like solutions.

10. **Own it.**

Boys of this age want to feel skillful and yet their mastery of practical and life skills is still emerging and delicate. Speaking to a boy about how his actions affected you helps prevent him from feeling accused and incompetent. This way of speaking avoids him needing to defend himself and push back against you.

Helpful... "It bothered me that you did not put my power drill back on my work bench. It got rained on and if I had used it I would likely have gotten an electric shock."