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# Using Positive Reinforcement to Increase Connectedness

## Part 1

### About “Knee-Jerk” Reactions

Time Required: 3 minutes

Relationships between parents and teens are full of emotions like laughter, joy, fear, anger, worry and pride. Often, parents and teens act from the emotions they’re feeling. While it’s normal to act on your emotions, it’s also important to recognize that emotional reactions can come out abruptly and without thinking about them.

Emotional reactions that happen abruptly can be called ***knee-jerk reactions***. This name comes from the fact that these reactions are *reflexive*, meaning automatic. They are like the muscle reflex that makes your leg move when a doctor taps your knee with a rubber hammer.

It is important to have relationships with parents and teens where it is okay to express emotions. Feeling your raw emotional reactions is normal and healthy. However, expressing them without thinking about how they might affect the other person doesn’t always produce the best results in relationships.

There will be times when we have knee-jerk reactions. We can’t always help it –that’s why it’s called a “reflex!” Recognize this fact and **don’t expect yourself to be perfect!** Knee-jerk reactions are not the end of the world. Relationships between parents and teens are strong enough to handle a few knee-jerk reactions without too much damage. Usually any damage done to connectedness by knee-jerk reactions can be fixed.

## Part 2

### Criticism: A Common Knee-Jerk Reaction

Time Required: 15 minutes

Parents and teenagers usually have complaints about each other. It’s a normal part of any relationship. To stay close to each other despite your complaints, it’s good to be able to talk about things that are bothering you. It helps you understand each other better and fix the cause of the complaint, if possible.

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The best way to talk about what's bothering you is to state a concern. Here's what we mean by stating a concern:

**Concerns:** Are specific -- **limited to one situation**. They describe **how you feel**.

*Example:* "I am upset because you didn't take out the garbage **tonight**."

What usually happens when someone has a knee-jerk reaction is that instead of stating a concern, they *criticize* the other person. Criticism is different from stating a concern:

**Criticism:** Is **very general** or "global" and **blames** the other person. You'll often find the word "always" or "never" in a criticism. Criticisms get worse if you start name-calling.

*Example:* "I can **never** depend on you. You **never** take out the trash. You're lazy."

Stating a concern is a skill you can learn and practice. Remember, it takes time to change the way you communicate. Teach yourself this skill one step at a time using these three steps:

### Learning to State Concerns Instead of Criticisms

1. **Recognize** when you have criticized or complained instead of stating a concern.
2. **Set a goal** to state what you're feeling as a concern in the next similar situation.
3. **Think ahead** about how you will state a concern **and practice** how you will say it. Write it down or practice saying it in front of a mirror to help you get it right.

To help practice this skill, complete the worksheet titled "Concern or Criticism?" on the following pages.



## Concern or Criticism?

Below are some statements that a parent might hear from a teenager or a teenager might hear from their parent. Decide which statements are worded as concerns and which are worded as criticisms. Write **"CON"** in the space next to the statements that you think are concerns, and write **"CRIT"** in the space next to the statements that you think are criticisms.

**CON or CRIT?**

1. Dad, you're always getting on my back over stupid stuff. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Katrina, you're lazy and irresponsible. I get tired of having to tell you a million times to clean up after yourself. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Mom, I didn't like it when you came home and went right to bed. We didn't do anything fun last night. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Juan, when I asked you what happened in school today and you said "nothing," I felt sad because we weren't talking. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Girl, have you lost your mind? You look like a slut going out of the house in those outfits you wear. \_\_\_\_\_
6. When you ignored my question a minute ago, I felt like you didn't care about me. \_\_\_\_\_
7. It bothered me when you just said "I know what you're going through because I was a teenager once." I wish you'd notice how things have changed since you were growing up. \_\_\_\_\_
8. You never listen to me and you're always talking over me! I can't wait to get out of this house! \_\_\_\_\_

**Continue by answering the questions on the following page.**

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# Concern or Criticism? *Continued*

Which of the statements on the sheet would make you feel upset or defensive?

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Which of the statements seem reasonable?

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Try re-writing several of the criticisms to turn them into concerns.

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If you thought statements 3, 4, 6 and 7 were stated as concerns, you were right. These statements are **specific, limited to one situation**, and they are based on **how the person feels**.

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## Part 3

### Recovering from Knee-Jerk Reactions

Time Required: 10 minutes

Criticism is one common type of knee-jerk reaction. Knee-jerk reactions come from strong emotion. The over-generalizing and blaming that is at the heart of criticism come from all those strong emotions.

Other signs of a knee jerk reaction are:

- Emotion you can see in facial expressions or body language (for example, tears or an angry, red-faced look).
- The reaction interrupts someone else who is already speaking.
- A short, sharp way of talking.

As we said before, ***you are not going to stop all your knee-jerk reactions.*** So, what can you do to recover from a knee-jerk reaction and repair the negative effect it has had on your closeness with your parent or teen?

Follow the three steps listed in the box below:

**Recovering From a Knee-Jerk Reaction**

1. **Notice** the reaction & **forgive yourself** for having it.
2. **Apologize** to the other person.
3. **Find something positive** as a way to move forward.

## Part 4

### Using Positive Reinforcement

Time Required: 5 minutes

Remember the three steps for recovering from a knee-jerk reaction? The third step, saying something positive, makes the other person feel a lot better about him- or herself, and about you and about your relationship. **Saying something positive about someone or something they are doing is called *positive reinforcement*.** The word “reinforcement” in the phrase “positive reinforcement” means that the person receiving the positive statement is likely to do even *more* positive things because they like being complimented or rewarded for doing the right thing.

For example, if parents let their teen stay up a little later because they are getting good grades, that teen will typically try to continue getting good grades so they can stay up later in the future. So, if you want your teenager, or your parent, to do certain things:

- **Compliment them when they behave the way you want, and/or**
- **Give them something they like.**

These are two basic types of using positive reinforcement.

***DON'T wait until you need to fix a knee-jerk reaction*** to say positive things about your parent or your teen!

Learning to use positive reinforcement is easy. The three steps of positive reinforcement are almost exactly the same as the three steps in recovering from a knee-jerk reaction:

#### Positive Reinforcement

1. **Notice** or call attention to the behavior.
2. **Praise** the behavior.
3. **Show your appreciation** – say thank you.

1. As with recovering from a knee-jerk reaction, you are *noticing a behavior*. This time, though, it is the *other person's behavior*, and not your own emotional reaction you have to recognize.
2. Since the behavior you're recognizing is *positive*, instead of apologizing for your behavior, *you are praising* the other person's behavior and saying what's good about it.
3. Finally, thank the person and/or give them something to show that you really appreciate the behavior.

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## Part 5

### Examples of Positive Reinforcement

Time Required: 10 minutes

In a different parent-child connectedness activity, we presented a story about Keisha and her mother. **Find the handout titled “Keisha’s Story”** with a short version of that story. The story gives an example of recovering from a knee-jerk reaction. **Read the shortened version of the story.**

Imagine that Keisha’s mom makes it to her next basketball game on time. Keisha wants to use **positive reinforcement** in the hopes that it will help her mother make it to another game on time. So Keisha says something like:

*Mom, you made it to the game on time!* (Keisha recognizes the behavior)

*I know it’s hard for you to leave work early -- it’s great that you made it!*  
(She praises her mother’s behavior)

*Thanks, Mom. It means a lot to me.* (She showed her appreciation)

When you’re using positive reinforcement, it’s important to be:

- **Sincere** – Only say it if you mean it.
- **Specific** – Tell the person exactly what s/he did that you liked.
- **Immediate** – Use positive reinforcement as soon as possible after you see the behavior

Here’s another example:

Juan’s father was happy to see Juan come outside and join him as he was working on his car. They worked side by side and before long Juan was telling his dad about a girl that he liked. His dad gave him some advice about how to treat girls. It was cool. Later they went to the store and got some sodas. On the way home, Juan’s father said:

*Juan, it was great having your help on the car today.* (Juan’s father recognized the behavior immediately. He was sincere and specific.)

*You’re a fast learner and you handled the tools well. I’m proud of you.*  
(He praised the behavior.)

*Thank you for helping me, son. I enjoyed having you with me today and hope we can do it more.* (He showed his appreciation.)

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## Keisha's Story

Keisha and her mom have always been pretty close. Sometimes after dinner, Keisha's mom will ask her to come watch TV with her in her bedroom. A lot of times they'll talk and Keisha will tell her mom about things happening in her life. They also go out to eat every Friday night -it's become a regular thing they both enjoy and look forward to. When Keisha leaves for school they hug and say "I love you" to each other.

Keisha was playing in her first basketball game of the season. Her mother promised that she would make it to the game. At half time her mother still hadn't arrived. Keisha spent half time feeling really angry and disappointed at her Mom.

As the game was ending, Keisha saw her mother coming into the gym. At the end of the game, Keisha's mom ran up to her and apologized for being late. She went to give Keisha a hug saying "Honey, I'm so proud of you - you were great!" But Keisha was still angry at her mom for missing most of the game. She shrugged off the hug and said "How would you know, you weren't even here to see me play!" The two of them drove home in silence.

After they got home Keisha sat in her room and thought about the game and the way she treated her mom. She regretted having said harsh things to her mom and realized that she was happy that her mom had made it to even a little bit of the game.

She went and knocked on her Mom's door. "Mom," Keisha said, "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I know you work hard at your job and I'm glad you got to see me play even if it was just a little bit." They hugged, said "I love you" to each other and lay down on the bed to watch TV together.

**THE END**

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## Part 6 Wrap-Up

Time required: 2 minutes

Now you know how to use positive reinforcement. Think about your relationship with your parent or your teenager. What are some behaviors that you like and that you want to see more of? **List them here:**

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The next time you see any of these behaviors, use positive reinforcement as soon as possible. Think in advance about how you might recognize the behavior, praise the behavior, and show your appreciation. Be sincere and specific.

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