- Parenting

Keep calm and PARENT ON

How to keep your cool when tensions rise with your teen

Take5 · 6 Nov 2025 · 12

If you're the parent of a teenager, welcome to a landscape that feels very different to the primary school years. There are some mixed blessings: the highs are higher, and the lows are definitely a challenge.



Sitting down to talk with parents, a word that often comes up is volatility. Why is it that teenagers blow up so quickly, and why don't they listen to us? Things can get out of hand quickly on some occasions – family violence by teens is, unfortunately, becoming more common.

In my experience as a clinical psychologist, conflict with teens can leave a parent feeling isolated and as if somehow, they've handled the situation wrongly. Some of the traps parents fall into when conflict breaks out include:

- Feeling disempowered and doing nothing Following the child and trying to get into their room
- Issuing threats of withdrawals, etc, to a room that quickly becomes empty
- Arguing back, yelling and getting angry
- Becoming scathing or using personal slights

WHAT CAN I DO?

Try not to use the wellworn grounding, banning and taking devices away. Teens are wearily ready for this, and it just doesn't feel as if it works well. Your main resources are fairness, restraint, and using the principles of an honest relationship.

Suppose your teenager has been asked several times to empty the dishwasher as you are cooking dinner and they

point-blank refuse, leaving the room with a nasty slew of words and some insults in your direction. They bang the door and retreat to their room. Perhaps try to resist the temptation to shout after them, or follow and raise your voice through the door.

In Scenario A, your child may come sidling back into the kitchen, asking what's for dinner – or if they can have money to go to the shops (which is

astonishingly common).

Very quietly and without any malice, you might look them nicely in the eye and explain that they were very rude just now, they refused to help despite being asked, and the insults did hurt your feelings.

You are very sorry, but you don't provide dinner/ money for someone who does that. Tell them to have a think and try again tomorrow – and by the way, they are welcome to help

themselves to a toasted sandwich.

In Scenario B, the child doesn't venture back and you may not even see them until the next day. No matter, this gives you more time to feel clear on what you want to say. Use a similar approach to the above but make sure that you are not using any anger, that you mean what you say, and that it feels true.

Limit the consequence to a small target. Whatever teens have not yet learned, they are good at sensing unfairness, opportunism, or vindictiveness. So don't use them!

Teenagers certainly come up with some unexpected behaviours that press our buttons and can be worrying and stressful. But with simple tools such as these you can feel more in control and de-escalate many common scenarios – to the benefit of you both.

Chances are you've encountered a magnet or a bumper sticker emblazoned with the phrase "positive vibes only". Although it may seem harmless – and even positive – the reality is that a "positive vibes only" mentality can be toxic.

GOOD VIBES GONE BAD

Toxic positivity is the belief that no matter how bad things may be, people should always maintain a positive mindset. This idealistic view may sound well-meaning, but in reality it denies people from feeling any sort of emotion associated with negativity, such as anger, sadness and fear. It can also make the person on the receiving end of a "positive vibes only" message feel like they're being dismissed.

THE MASK OF OPTIMISM

If you've ever been told something like, "Look on the bright side," or "It could be worse," you've been subjected to toxic positivity. Chances are this seemingly innocuous comment left you feeling minimised and like your feelings were invalid. Consequently, you may have started trying to

act happy around others and lying about how you genuinely felt. Toxic positivity forces people to suppress their true feelings, which can delay their healing if going through something difficult. It can also create a sense of shame around feelings which are seen as negative, but are healthy, normal emotions.

IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY

If you're on the receiving end of toxic positivity, it's important that you still acknowledge your genuine feelings, even if others don't. Set boundaries with others by telling them, "I know you're trying to be helpful, but this is how I'm feeling, and I need to sit with that for a while." Finally, seek out people who you know will be supportive, whether it's a trusted friend or a therapist.

KEEP IT REAL

Offering someone a dismissive response like, "Stop being so negative," invalidates their feelings and experiences. This may cause them to shut down, preventing genuine connections from forming. Toxic positivity prevents people from expressing themselves authentically, which also prevents them from getting any support they may need.

If you're someone who's guilty of dishing out toxic positivity, it's important you don't ignore the other person's pain. They've confided in you because they trust you and need your support. If you're unsure about what to say, simply acknowledge their feelings and let them know they can rely on you. Try a simple, "That sounds really hard. I'm here for you."

They don't need you to fix things for them, they just want to feel heard.