

# HOW TO SPEAK TO TWEEN GIRLS WHEN THINGS GET ROUGH

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Tween girls tend to be more tuned into their feelings than tween boys. Their emerging gender identity seems to be more closely related to their growing awareness of subtle emotional currents and how this plays into their relationships. They value the ability to express themselves creatively with personalizing clothes or accessories. When they were little girls, the dress-up clothes, handbags and jewelry were a part of *playing* a role. Now, as tweens, they are slowly *becoming* the role.



Girls at this age partly define themselves through the relationships they have with family and friends. Here is an example of this...

I remember once sitting nearby a playground game of Four Square. It's a pretty intense hand-tennis type of game played by four players on an 8 by 8 foot square with four equal sections. The players who are not on court wait in a line watching, waiting their turn. There was a boys' game and a nearby girls' game going on. All the kids were around eleven years old. It's not unusual for boys and girls, at times, to play separately at this age. On this day, a dispute blew up in each game. The difference in the boys' and girls' problem solving and the outcome was clear and made me smile.

With the boys' dispute, they stopped the game. The dominant boy, who was central in the disagreement, put the ball under his arm, like he was a cave man with a bone. The boys argued intensely. Their argument was almost entirely based on the "liner rules" and whether the ball had landed "in" or "out". After no more than a minute, when it became clear that no agreement was likely, the dominant boy stepped in saying loudly, "OK, this is getting boring, let's do a do-over, but after this, if any part of the ball touches the line, it's out!" All the boys agreed and the game continued with fervor.

The girls' dispute was handled in a very different way. First, the issue arose, not about a rule, but about one of the girl's *attitudes*. Apparently the girl in question and her best friend were always snickering in line when a mistake was made. This particularly upset one of the players, who took offense at being laughed at and "whispered about." The accused

snicker-ers fought back with, "Do you always have to be so totally sensitive? How do you know we are even talking about you?" The other girl countered with, "Just because I am not completely obsessed with fashion and how I look!" There was a murmur of recognition amongst some of the other young female onlookers that something important had been said. A couple of other girls valiantly stepped in to try and broker some peace, but it was too late. The disputing girls walked away, each taking their supporters, with a "Fine!" and a "Whatever!" spoken with some pointedness. The game dissolved, and the ball rolled away down the hill into a bush. The peacemaking girls shrugged, sat down on the court and began to play an intricate hand clapping game.

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Girls and boys both seek a feeling of competency and mastery. While boys generally take a direct and practical route to exploring the person they are becoming, girls tend to do this via a more circuitous and winding route. Of course, girls also need to figure out who they are within their emerging sense of self. "Who can I trust?" "What is the truth here?" "How do I appear?" These are just some of the questions tween girls carry.

So here are some things to keep in mind when you need to speak to your daughter, particularly if there is a situation that calls for discipline and guidance. Having her unregulated and raw emotions trigger your emotions is, as every parent knows, spectacularly unhelpful. She needs help to form an emotional 'container' to hold her newly emerging feelings so that they don't spill over in all sorts of inappropriate ways. Below are some practical ideas that will help her feel she is more in control of her emerging emotions. You are more likely to be able to model self control if you have some simple strategies to use so that you are not left wondering, "What I am supposed to do with all this craziness?" Also, using some of these tools may well build a stronger bond with your daughter just at a time when she needs you most.

**1. Empathize.** Let her know you understand that it is not easy. A great opening statement to problem solving is something like, "I know this is hard and that you might not be feeling good about this, and I think there is a way we can work this out. Maybe..."

**2. Tease out the layers and choose one issue that is solvable.** Tween girls are in the process of becoming aware of the subtleties of relationships. Their stories can be pretty complex and seemingly mixed up, but what they are often doing is following the intertwining relationship "lines", without very much objectivity. Everything is 'personal' at this age and it is hard for her to step back and see the big picture. It is helpful for you to know that all this can all seem a bit overwhelming to your daughter. What can calm her down and send her into her day or off to bed in good emotional shape is to choose just *one* of the issues she is aware of and strategize around that. It's important to select the one that is most solvable.

*Helpful...* "Good for you that you can see things from so many sides. What about we figure out a way for you to speak with Sara that does not make it seem to her like you are a loser hanging around?"

**3. Summarize the patterns you see.**

Often a lot of information will come out. It gives a girl such a good feeling that she is being heard if a parent can recognize what she is saying, but at the same time see the bigger picture.

*Helpful...* Something like, "Okay, I see what you mean. It's hard to be asked to do chores when you feel so pressured about the homework you are getting and that seems to be a point where things often go wrong. We need to figure out a way to handle this."

**4. Restate the issue.** Sometimes the issue you need to work through can get lost amongst the complexity of emotions and feelings that a tween girl needs to express. By quietly restating the issue you give a point of orientation to the conversation.

*Helpful...* Something like, "Right, but how do you see that the amount of freedom your brother gets relates to you tidying your room?"

**5. Be careful about your tone of voice and body language.**

Girls at this age take in a lot more than they appear to. It's super important to remember that your daughter at this age is experiencing a kind of second-degree emotional sunburn. Do you remember how sensitive you are to touch when you have gotten sunburned? That is how sensitive your daughter is to your tone and body language. As much as possible, stay as neutral as you can, knowing that she will inwardly amplify any gesture you make and anything you say.

**6. Pay attention to timing.** Wait for the emotional storm to pass to find a quiet moment. Shouting into a storm is a bit of a clichéd metaphor for futility, but it sure applies to giving advice when your daughter is very upset.

**7. Know that she *knows* she is being "weird."** She can't help it, and a part of her is aware of how out of control things are inside her. Sometimes the chaos gets away from her and is directed at you. Forgive her, but still quietly insist that you need to work things through when she is not so upset.

**8. Know that her showing of difficult emotions is a vote of trust in you.** For example, girls will only develop crushes on people they feel they can trust to not reciprocate. In the same way, they will mainly "cut loose" emotionally and seem like they are unhinged, only around people they can trust not to reciprocate - and that is you. Knowing this is so vital in helping you keep things in perspective.

**9. She is practicing and testing her power.** Have you ever noticed how quickly your daughter can pivot from her whirlwind of emotions and be the reasonable person you know her to be? If she finds that you can

stand firm and be warm while she flails, it soothes and orients her. You can become the safe harbor in her very stormy and churning emotional sea.

**10. Use humor.** It's hard to give an example here because every child has different things they find funny. I remember a time once when my mother having a hard time with my sister. She looked across the diner table and said in an exasperated tone to my father, "Please speak to the girl!" My father looked around the table at my siblings and grandparents, paused, and with a real twinkle in his eyes said, "Mmm, yes indeed, who would like to choose the topic?" Everyone, including my mother, laughed out loud and the tension was broken. He wasn't being a clown or belittling my mother, he was just quietly humorous. He did later speak to my sister at bedtime about not speaking so unkindly to her mother.

**11. Ricochet Comments.** When you have the hunch that your daughter's feelings are too raw, but you need to speak about something that has gone wrong, try speaking to another person within her hearing. For example, you might say to a sibling or partner within the hearing of your daughter who has not yet spoken to you about a difficult situation at a party, "I heard from a few other moms that the 7<sup>th</sup> grade party last night got a bit rowdy and that some of the girls left the house and went down to the park because they thought the boys were being gross. I sure remember how difficult situations like this can be but knowing the girls would leave the party and hang out at the park alone worried a few of the parents."

**12. Dads need more time.** Many Dads have commented to the effect that they can become a little bewildered at how many emotive phrases can be fit into one minute of their tween daughter's verbal barrage. Up until this phase of their daughter's life, Dads have been able to keep up and maybe understand the needs of their daughter, but this can change in the tween years. It's a good idea for a Dad (and a Mom if need be) to "hit the pause button" and not feel the need to respond right in the moment to the daughter's complex demands.

*Helpful...* "Okay, give me a few minutes and I will let you know..."

**13. You don't need to hammer home the point.** It's understandable that we can often feel the need to somewhat forcefully emphasize the point we are trying to make. Our message can seem to get deflected when we are faced with our daughter's whirlwind of emotion or a sullen withdrawal from the conversation. An alternative is to say to her, "Okay, I have talked enough. I think what may be the problem for you is that you don't see why your bed time on a Sunday night can't be the same as on Saturday because Sunday should still count as the weekend?" "I want you to try and put into your own words how you think I see it." If you get a shoulder shrug and little response... "Yep, we can all sometimes need time to answer a question like this. I'll ask you again later, but you know that I am not going to forget, right?"

**14. See your daughter's beauty and intelligence.** Girls this age are probably more sensitive to criticism than they are during most other

phases in their lives. They can so quickly go to the place of, "I'm so ugly and stupid!" Powerful stuff. Take real care when you comment on their appearance *and* on their thinking as both are delicate buds in the process of unfolding and they are easily damaged.

**PAUSE POINT:**

There are many ideas given here for how to discipline and give guidance to tween girls. As you read through these suggestions, which ones "float to the top" in terms of something that could improve in your communication with your daughter? Maybe a memory will come back to you of a situation with your daughter where you wish you had been able to do much better. Perhaps one of the points listed goes right to the heart of a pattern you have found yourself in when you are triggered?

Rather than feel despondent or even shame, try to use this recognition as a springboard for developing a plan of how you might shift this unwanted reaction. Trust your instinct and focus on these one or two points that stood out for you above the others. Talk to your partner or friend about how you might go about building up your capacity to improve your focus area. Remember, be kind to yourself – yet try to balance this with carrying the conviction that shifting your unwanted response really matters. Good luck!