

FREE GUIDE

5 Things Your Teen's Behavior Is Trying to Tell You

A quick guide to reading the signals behind the struggle

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Hey, friend.

If you're reading this, you're probably in the thick of it. Maybe your teen slammed a door this morning. Maybe they looked through you like you weren't there. Maybe they just said something that took your breath away — and not in a good way.

You're not failing. But you might be missing a few signals.

Behavior is never just behavior. It's always communication — especially from a teenager who doesn't yet have the tools to say what's really happening inside.

These five things? They're not excuses. They're a decoder ring.

Let's go.

"I'm Overwhelmed and I Don't Have Words for It"

You ask a simple question. You get a death glare.

You try again, gently. They explode.

You weren't expecting that. Neither, honestly, were they.

When your teen loses it over something small, the small thing usually isn't the thing.

Here's what's happening in their brain: stress floods the nervous system. When that happens, the prefrontal cortex — the part responsible for language, logic, and making sense of emotions — goes offline. Literally. Your teen isn't choosing not to explain themselves. They can't. The words aren't there.

What presents as attitude is often overwhelm with nowhere to go.

"Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." — James 1:19

That verse isn't just for parents. It's a description of what a regulated nervous system looks like. And we can't expect it from a teenager when their brain is already in the red.

Lower the temperature before you look for the lesson.

WHAT TO DO

Don't press during the flood. Say something like: "I can see you're really upset right now. I'm not going anywhere. When you're ready, I'm here." Then give them space. The conversation you need will happen — just not at the peak of the storm. The goal in the moment is co-regulation, not correction.

"I Need to Know You're Still Safe to Come To"

Your teen has been pushing every button you have lately.

More backtalk. More eye rolls. More picking fights about things that don't even make sense.

And you're wondering: What happened? Did I do something? Are we losing them?

Maybe. Or maybe — and I want you to sit with this one — they're running a test.

When a teenager starts pushing harder, they're often asking: "Will you still be here if I'm not easy?"

This is attachment behavior. It happens at every developmental stage — toddlers do it too, just with tantrums instead of sarcasm. The message underneath the provocation is: I need to know I can bring my worst to you and you won't leave.

"Perfect love drives out fear." — 1 John 4:18

Fear of abandonment — even relational abandonment — is powerful in the teenage years. The behavior is loud because the question underneath it feels enormous.

Passing the test doesn't mean tolerating everything. It means staying regulated when they aren't.

WHAT TO DO

Don't take the bait. When they push, don't escalate. Hold your ground without anger. Say: "I hear you. I'm not going anywhere. We can talk about this when we've both settled down." That response is the answer to the question they were actually asking — even if they never say so out loud.

"I'm Embarrassed — and I'm Hiding It as Anger"

Your teen made a mistake. You found out. You (calmly, reasonably) brought it up.

And they went from zero to furious in under three seconds.

You're standing there thinking: Why are they acting like I'M the problem?

Because in their body, you kind of are. Not because you did anything wrong — but because shame needs a target, and you're the closest person.

Anger is fast. Shame is slow. Teens reach for anger because shame in front of a parent is almost unbearable.

Secondary emotions exist to protect primary ones. Anger is loud and pushes people away. Shame is quiet and feels like dissolving. When a teenager has done something wrong and they know it, the shame can be so overwhelming that they flip into anger just to survive the moment.

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." — Proverbs 15:1

Notice what this verse doesn't say. It doesn't say a gentle answer fixes the problem immediately. It just turns away the escalation. That's the first job.

Name the feeling underneath, not the behavior on top.

WHAT TO DO

Instead of responding to the anger, try naming what you see underneath it. "It seems like you might be embarrassed about this." Not accusing. Not diagnosing. Just offering a softer word for what their body is already feeling. That pivot — from shame to "seen" — is what cracks the door open. The repair can come after that.

"I'm Scared About Something I Can't Control"

Your teen has been refusing to go somewhere. Dragging their feet on something they used to love. Getting snappy every time a certain topic comes up.

Or maybe they've just gone quiet in a way that worries you.

This is what anxiety looks like in teenagers — and it almost never announces itself as "I'm anxious."

Anxiety in teens shows up as defiance, avoidance, or shutdown — not as "I'm scared."

The avoidance makes perfect sense when you understand what's underneath it. The brain's threat-detection system is firing, and it's telling the body: don't get near that thing. Your teen may not even be able to name what they're afraid of. They just know it feels terrible when they get close to it.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." — Philippians 4:6–7

Notice what this passage promises: peace that transcends understanding. Sometimes we don't fully understand what we're afraid of. And yet peace is still possible. That's good news for parents AND teenagers.

You don't need to fix the fear. You need to witness it.

WHAT TO DO

Resist the urge to problem-solve immediately. Instead, say: "I hear you. That sounds really hard." Full stop. Stay in it with them for a minute. When a teen feels genuinely witnessed — not rushed to resolution — the nervous system starts to settle. And a settled nervous system is a lot more capable of problem-solving than a flooded one.

"I Need You to Trust Me — Even a Little"

Every conversation turns into a negotiation.

They push back on everything. They don't want your opinion. They want to do it their way, even when their way is clearly not the best way.

You feel like you're losing grip on the wheel — and honestly, you kind of are. On purpose.

The teenage brain is literally wiring for independence. What looks like defiance is often development.

The prefrontal cortex spends the entire teenage decade rewiring itself for autonomous decision-making. The brain is practicing independence. It needs real experiences of choice — real stakes, real say, real trust — in order to build the muscle. If every decision gets overridden, the brain doesn't get to practice. And the teenager doesn't get to grow.

"Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." — Proverbs 22:6

The word train in this passage implies practice. Repetition. Real reps. You can't train someone to make decisions by never letting them make decisions.

Find one low-stakes place to give them real choice — and then actually let them choose.

WHAT TO DO

Look for one area this week where you can genuinely hand over the wheel. It doesn't have to be big. How they organize their room. What to make for dinner on Thursday. How they want to approach a school project. Make it real — then, whatever they choose, let it stand. That single act communicates more than a hundred lectures: I see you becoming someone. I trust you.

Before You Go

If you found this helpful, there's more where this came from.

The truth is, every one of these five things goes deeper — and so does your situation. One guide can give you a lens. A framework gives you the whole picture.

Here are a few places to go next:

Not sure where to start?

Head to Start Here — it's a short, personalized guide that helps you figure out what your family actually needs right now.

thebehaviorcollective-academy.madethis.app/start-here

Browse all resources

Practical tools, guides, and frameworks for real parents in real situations.

thebehaviorcollective-academy.madethis.app/products

You're not behind. You're not too late. You picked this up because you're paying attention — and that matters more than you know.

You're doing better than you think.

— Megan