

A large, irregular red shape resembling a speech bubble, pointing downwards towards the teal shape below it.

WHAT TO SAY

A solid black horizontal rectangle.

AND HOW TO SAY IT

A large, irregular teal shape resembling a speech bubble, pointing upwards towards the red shape above it.

TO YOUR TEEN

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO **30**
TRICKY CONVERSATIONS

TIM SHOEMAKER
MARK SHOEMAKER

WHAT TO SAY
AND HOW TO SAY IT
TO YOUR TEEN

Books by Tim Shoemaker

The Very Best, Hands-On, Kinda Dangerous
Family Devotions, vols. 1–3

WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT TO YOUR TEEN

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO **30**
TRICKY CONVERSATIONS

TIM SHOEMAKER
AND MARK SHOEMAKER



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To our better halves, Cheryl and Sarah.
Parenting—and ministry—is a partnership.
Without the insights, patience, encouragement,
and godly input from our wives,
this book probably wouldn't have happened.

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PREFACE

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me **what to say and how to say it**.

John 12:49 NIV1984

Jesus didn't just say whatever popped into his head. He deliberately made sure the things he said were in tune with God the Father, so he'd know *what to say* and *how to say it*. If Jesus was that careful, it makes sense that we follow his lead.

In *What to Say and How to Say It to Your Teen*, Mark and I (Tim) share insights on how parents can more effectively handle different scenarios that come up with teens—or conversations that *need* to happen. We'll give some input based on our own experiences, sure. But more importantly, we'll be looking to Scripture, because what parents say and how we say it to our teens matters to God.

Are you ready? Let's do this!

—Tim and Mark

INTRODUCTION

The Conversation That Changed My Life

I (Tim) had messed up. Bad. It was the worst thing I'd done in my teenage life up until that point. It wasn't just that I'd made an honest mistake. I'd deliberately sinned. I'd thought I could get away with it—but I hadn't figured on how strong conviction can be.

In a late-night confession, I finally admitted to my mom what I'd done. We agreed we'd talk again the following night when Dad was there.

All that next day, I dreaded the coming conversation. The three of us sat around the kitchen table, and at first everyone was dead quiet. My siblings had been exiled to the basement.

Honestly, I don't remember one thing I said. But I do know how my dad opened the conversation. His face was an emotional mix of pain and frustration. Mostly pain.

"I don't know what to do with you, Tim. I don't know if I should hit you or what."

Hit me. Hit me, I silently begged him. I deserved it. Maybe if he hit me hard enough, I could get my mind off what I'd done.

Dad didn't hit me; he didn't yell. He didn't threaten me. He didn't put me down or treat me like I was stupid. Just the opposite,

in fact. He affirmed how smart I was. How responsible. How proud he was of the decisions I usually made. Which is why my sin shocked him so much, I think. He knew that wasn't who I wanted to be. Maybe he also knew how deep my regret had cut into my soul. I get choked up just remembering that night.

My parents didn't ground me. They didn't punish me—although I wouldn't have blamed them if they did. But clearly, I'd broken trust with them and grieved them. And that was far worse than any punishment I could imagine.

They forgave me. And it wasn't just empty words. They backed it up with action. There were things that had to be done as a result of my sin. Things to take care of. My dad did those things *with* me. He had to drive me someplace to get part of it done. He never mentioned my sin while we were in the car. Never rubbed my nose in it. My parents never told the rest of the family how I'd messed up. And they didn't hold it over my head by bringing it up again. Not once. Not ever. I'm still in awe of that.

Dad and Mom's reaction to me didn't give me any reason to rebel against them. In fact, the way they talked to me in that moment of my confession—and in the days that followed—was one of a handful of life-changing events for me. Clearly, they allowed God to work through them, which absolutely paved the way for God to do a deeper work in me. I never wanted to grieve or disappoint my parents like that again. I worked at that. And I worked hard to build back their trust.



Our teenagers are going to mess up. They're going to break trust. They're going to hurt us. And how we react at those times is critical. Do it well, and we nudge them toward true repentance. Do it not so well, and we push them deeper into rebellion.

That's why this book was written, and why a team of people contributed to it behind the scenes in their unique ways. This

book is about giving parents some tools to help keep our teenagers on—or get them *back* on—the right paths. Don’t skip the next six chapters: “Prepping for Your Talk with Your Teen,” “Good Timing,” “What Not to Say,” “You’ll Need More Than Two Ears When Listening to Your Teen,” “Handling Their Objections,” and “Five Things You Need to Know About the Next Part of This Book.” These chapters provide important tips to give you an edge—and reminders you’ll need over and over. And you’ll find a gold mine in appendix A, “Strategies to Make It Easier for Teens to Accept What You’re Saying.”

I want to encourage you to have the conversations in this book with your teen. The forces of darkness strategize to mess up our sons and daughters. We need to help protect our kids from the clutches of a very evil and brilliant enemy. Often that means we must reset our priorities, putting our needs aside to help our kids through this time. Let’s do that. We don’t have much time. Just a few short years. Maybe less. And with God’s help, we *can* do it. By God’s grace, my wife and I have three sons who didn’t rebel against us or God in their teen years. It can be done . . . one conversation at a time.

After my parents talked with me that night, I’m pretty sure my dad went to bed feeling exhausted—and like a failure. But he’d won a major victory. He just didn’t know it. With God’s help, he’d spoken right to my heart, and I was changed as a result.

As parents we often feel like failures. But take heart, my friend. God has a way of turning those moments into major victories.

PART 1

**SETTING
OURSELVES UP
for GOOD
CONVERSATIONS
with OUR TEENS**

PREPPING FOR THE TALK WITH YOUR TEEN

I (Tim) scuba dive, and every time I do, I have a goal. Explore a reef. A wreck. See the marine life. Recover something that had been lost. Find one of those massive prehistoric shark teeth. It varies with each dive. But my goal, whatever it is, is always *secondary* to my primary objective. And that primary objective never changes. It's the same for each dive . . . every single one:

RETURN SAFELY, BOTH ME AND MY DIVE BUDDY.

If I push my secondary goal into the primary spot, the chances of disaster happening increase. I may compromise. I may stretch my time on the bottom a bit too long. Go deeper into a wreck than I can safely go. I may not stay as close to my buddy as I should.

It's the same during conversations with our teens. Sure, we'd love to bring them around to our way of thinking or see them have a change of heart. But those are *secondary* goals.

My primary objective for every talk with our son or daughter: *Return safely, both me and my teen.* If we as parents let our secondary goal overshadow the primary, the likelihood of our conversation with our teens going bad skyrockets. We'll push too hard. Too long. We'll be more desperate and less patient. But returning safely means that at the end of the conversation, we aren't further from our teens than when we started talking. Ideally, we're closer to them and our understanding of each other is a little bit better.

How do we return safely? We prep for the talk.

Here are four ways to prep. Likely there are more that will work best for you—and you can add them. But this needs to be easy to remember, so let's go with an acronym: PRAY.

1. **Pray.** Pray that you'll say the right things. That your teen will hear you. That you'll hear your teen. That God will give you the words and the insight. That this conversation would draw you and your teen closer, not push you further apart.
2. **Reinforcements.** Enlist the help of another prayer warrior when you can. Your spouse. Maybe Grandma or Grandpa. A mentor. One or two is enough.
3. **Atmosphere.** Where will you have this talk? How can the place you choose help keep the conversation from going south? (We'll get back to this in a minute.)
4. **Your objectives.** What are the primary and secondary objectives you want to accomplish with this talk? (We'll circle back to this point as well.)

Atmosphere Is Important

We should always pick a place where interruptions are limited, so, obviously, we'll put away our phones while we're talking—and our teens will too. But sometimes there's more we can do. Our teens want to be seen as adults, right? And we want our

teens to act like adults. See the common denominator here? You and your teenager both want this to be an adult thing. Where do adults have adult conversations? Often they meet at a restaurant. If we're planning a big, important conversation, sometimes taking our teens to a restaurant is really smart. We'll be showing our teens respect and giving their concerns or well-being our full attention.

At a restaurant, the conversation is also a bit more likely to go better. There's a whole lot less chance of our teens shouting or pouting. They probably won't stomp away from the table—like they may at home. That opens the door for a more productive conversation. And when the talk is over, your teen can't disappear to their room. You'll still have time together to help reinforce your love for them over dessert, or on the drive home.

Restaurants aren't always the answer, though. A face-to-face conversation—for more than a couple of minutes—can be hard for teens. It's uncomfortable. They're less likely to open up when they feel we're looking at them the whole time. They'll feel like they're under the microscope. They'll look down a lot. They'll avoid eye contact. And if we tell them to look at us, that would be a mistake. We're putting them in a straitjacket, and they'll likely give us dead or very resentful eyes.

We'll often have better conversations with our teens if they're someplace where they don't have to look us in the eye—and they know we aren't staring at them. That's why good conversations are easier when we take them for a drive. We're looking out the windshield, with only occasional glances their way. They're looking out the windows themselves.

Another good option? Take a walk. Our teens won't feel like we're staring at them, so they'll open up easier. Shooting hoops works too. They're able to be active, which helps with nervous energy, and they don't have to look us in the eyes.

One of the best places to have a talk with a teen is in a darkened room, such as their bedroom—or ours—at night. They can't

see our faces, and they know we can't see theirs. Perfect. Often a mom will sit on the side of the bed. If it would be natural for her to rub her teen's back or stroke their arm as they talk, Mom will gain another advantage. She'll feel her teen tense at points in the conversation, and she'll probably be able to read them as if they were talking in daylight.

Personally, I'll choose a dark room or a drive almost every time—at least when it comes to my own kids. I may not see their face, but I can hear their tone. Their pauses or hesitations. They all mean something. We'll have the Holy Spirit helping us discern what's really going on too, right?

Another thought: If we're having this conversation at home, on a drive, or during a walk, it's often smart to pick up some kind of snack, treat, or something to drink. Eating or drinking gives our teens something to do with their hands, which is helpful during talks they find uncomfortable. In the Bible, what was Peter feeling after he'd denied Christ? Massive discouragement and guilt, for sure. Enough to make him quit the ministry and go back to fishing. Jesus met him on that beach . . . and gave him something to eat. Immediately after that, Jesus got Peter to express some of his deepest feelings. We need every advantage we can get when talking with our teens. To me, that's a good enough reason to pick up something for my son or daughter to eat while we talk.

Objectives

Whatever we're hoping to accomplish with the talk is secondary. Remember the scuba diving analogy—and how that must influence our conversation. The primary objective for every conversation never changes: *Return safely, both me and my teen.*

Sticking to that can be tough to do in the moment. Especially if a teen is rebelling or has made a mess in some way. To help ensure the conversation hits this primary objective, here are some reminders to review before a big conversation:

- *Remember how much you love your teen.* Sure, they can be hard to live with at times. So, before that conversation, think about them the way they used to be. When they were younger. When seeing you made them beam. That child is still in there. How will you show them you love them—even if you're disappointed in them or upset with them? How will you show them you care? Because you really do. You love your teen, so don't let your worries about the conversation cloud your face. Smile.
- *Remind yourself you're not going to argue.* No matter what. Consider Philippians 2:14–15:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”

- *Remind yourself to be kind in tone and in what you actually say. Show love in those ways.* Set your intensity dial at the right level. Is this issue as big of a deal as you're making it? How might you feel about this issue or conversation five years from now? How do you want your teen to look back on the conversation someday? Be a thermostat. Set the temperature for the tone of the talk. This is a good time to remember 1 Corinthians 16:13–14:

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.

This is so critical. And remember, according to 1 Corinthians 13:1, if you aren't speaking in love, all your teen will hear is irritating noise. You won't get through to them.

- *Don't exasperate your teen. Don't push their buttons. Don't insult them.* Resolve not to drop into the cheap

tactics we'll cover in chapter 3, "What Not to Say." Review that list before every big talk with your teen, and remember Ephesians 6:4:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Sometimes you'll want to use alternate strategies to get through to your teen more effectively. There are times when trying something a bit more creative works better than simply sitting down and having a conversation with your teen. Every scenario in this book includes a referral to appendix A, "Strategies to Make It Easier for Teens to Accept What You're Saying," to give you at least one other alternate idea of how to approach the topic.

Using a strategic object lesson is one alternate strategy to potentially make some conversations easier. The object lessons we'll suggest are found in the three-volume set *The Very Best, Hands-On, Kinda Dangerous Family Devotions*. These books will prove to be a great tool. Buy the set now so you have it on hand when you need it (see appendix A for more information). If an alternate approach outlined in those books makes just one conversation easier or more effective, they're totally worth it. Jesus taught us the power of using visuals, object lessons, and stories to teach. Sometimes the best way to make a point with your teen is through a demonstration or activity. These books also work great as a way to teach your teen important life lessons on a regular basis.

Mom, Dad, we want to encourage you. Put in the effort to prep for these talks with your teen. Sometimes that extra time makes all the difference. Remember, there's an enemy who wants to derail our kids. We want to do everything we can to keep that from happening.

GOOD TIMING

Timing is everything. Well, maybe not *everything*, but when we're having a conversation with our teens, timing is massively important.

Sure, there are times when the timing stinks but delaying isn't an option. In those cases, we pray for the best and simply start the conversation. But we must make sure that we're not just impulsively jumping into the talk because *we* want to deal with it right now.

We all know the story of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (Mark 11:15–17)

But jump back four verses earlier.

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. (v. 11)

When Jesus overturned the tables, he didn't lose his temper and go on a rampage. Jesus was completely in control. The night before, he'd seen there was a problem that absolutely needed to be addressed. But the timing wasn't good. It was late. Jesus delayed the confrontation until the following day. We're wise to take this to heart. Jesus demonstrated the importance of timing. Sometimes we need to be patient. We must focus on getting the best results, not getting something off our chest. And often that means we need to take time to pray, think through the situation, and prep before we speak. We're wise to also consider a teen's schedule when it comes to the timing of the conversation. Check out Proverbs 27:14: "If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse."

Blessing your neighbor by complimenting them or building them up in some way is a good thing. But doing it so early in the morning that we rob them of desperately needed sleep? *Not* good. We can have great intentions, and may even say good things to our teens, but if our timing is bad, it'll blow up in our face.

Telling our teens that we love them to the moon and back? Great. But choosing bad timing—like telling them in front of their school friends? Ugh. Or worse yet, writing that message on poster-board and holding it up in the stands while they're playing with their team? They'll want to send *you* to the moon.

When we talk to our teens, let's pick the timing carefully. If we decide to have a serious talk with them while their friends are waiting outside, we can't expect great results. If we turn off the movie they're watching or the game they're playing to have our

little heart-to-heart, we're off to a bad start. Our teens will interpret that as us having no consideration for them.

Choose a time that won't compete with something they already have planned or are busy doing. Sometimes the best time might be after they're in bed. We're not taking them from something they really want to do. Other times we might want to invite them to hop in the car. We can take them to a favorite fast-food place, buy them a shake and fries, and have our talk.

Be creative. Give the issue of timing some thought. Conversations with our teens can be hard enough without throwing bad timing into the mix. Let's be wise and choose our timing carefully.

What if there's no time to prepare? Sometimes a tough conversation gets set in motion without warning—or time for prep. Even if we feel we have no choice but to have the conversation at that time, there's always one thing we can do. *Must* do. And there are a few quick things we must remember.

One Thing We Must Do

The one thing we must do is shoot up a quick prayer. We can learn from Nehemiah, an Israelite living as an exile in a foreign land after the nation of Judah had been defeated. He served as a cupbearer to the conquering pagan king. Nehemiah had heard a report of how Jerusalem was in ruins, and the news grieved him. He prayed God would do something. King Artaxerxes noticed the change in Nehemiah and asked what was troubling him. Nehemiah did something that serves as an example of what to do when any of us are cornered into a conversation without a chance to fully prepare.

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king.
(Neh. 2:1–5)

Nehemiah was afraid, but he breathed a silent prayer on the fly. Likely he asked God to guide his words—and the king’s reaction. There wasn’t time to ask for more. That’s exactly what we do when we’re thrust into a serious or potentially scary conversation without adequate time to prep. We pray. It’s something quick.

A Few Things to Remember

If we feel this is a really bad time for the conversation, and we can tactfully delay it just a bit to allow for some prep time (or so that our spouse can join us), we should go for it. *But we can’t stall indefinitely.* Preferably we’ll handle it that same day, or the next. Let’s set the time. Lock it in.

Here are three examples of things we might say to delay that conversation without offending our teens.

- “I’m glad you brought that up. We really do need to talk about this. How about we do this: Let’s set this up for (give a time). I don’t want to jump into this too quickly. There’s a couple of things I need to think through before we talk. Will that work for you?”
- “I’m glad you brought that up. We really do need to talk about this. How about we do this: Let’s set this up for (give a time) so Dad/Mom can join the conversation too. Will that work?”
- “I’m glad you brought that up. We really do need to talk about this. How about we do it where/when we can talk

with less interruptions? I want to give you my full attention. Let's do it at (give a time) when your little brother is in bed. Does that work for you?"

If our teens are agreeable to the delay, we must be sure we have a time locked in. Next, we get busy with our prep. Remember the acronym from chapter 1: PRAY.



3

WHAT NOT TO SAY

Having conversations with our teenagers about important issues can be really, really tough. It's easy for our teens to misunderstand us and often hard for them to see the big picture behind our intentions. Next thing we know, the conversation takes a bad turn. Our teens get defensive—or go silent and sullen. So, we want to be smart. We want to do everything we can to keep the conversation good and effective. We know our teens. Their weak areas. Their vulnerable points. We know where their buttons are, and it would be easy to push them. But that would be a form of exasperating our kids, which violates a clear command God gives parents in Ephesians 6:4:

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

What does exasperating our kids look like?

- Belittling our teens in any way, including talking down to them.
- Using sarcasm when talking to them.

- Accusing them—especially if we claim to know their motives when only God does.
- Interrupting them without asking for permission first.
- Acting annoyed or impatient with them as they talk.
- Arguing or debating them as they try to explain themselves.
- Laughing at them. This is especially lethal.
- Making fun of them, mocking them, or embarrassing them in any way.
- Using classic manipulating or controlling tactics, like guilt-ing them into doing what we want them to do.
- Finishing their statements rather than giving them the time to collect their thoughts.
- Failing to hear them out, even though we’re absolutely sure we know where they’re going with their conversation. Pressing ahead without letting them finish, even if they’re repeating themselves, will sabotage the conversation. As Proverbs 18:13 says, “To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.”
- Intimidating. Threatening. Using fear instead of love to get them in line.

These are bully tactics—every single one. If we exasperate our kids, we’re following the enemy, not the Lord. We’re playing into the enemy’s hand, and he uses *us* as a weapon against our kids. That’s messed up. Let’s not make our enemy’s job easy. We should speak the truth, but only in love.

Conversation Killers

Here are some specific “conversation killers,” things we want to avoid saying when talking with our kids—no matter how much we may feel like it.

“When I was your age . . .”

Here’s the sad truth: For the most part, they don’t care about our life as a teenager. Chances are our teens already think they’re sooo different from us. And they see the world of our teenage years as being completely different from their world. A comparison of our teenage years to theirs only widens the chasm between us. Someday they may be interested in our childhood. But let’s give them ten or twenty years on that.

“Someday, when you have your own home, you can live any way you want. But while you live under my roof, you’ll do it my way.”

Okay, it is very tempting to say this—and our enemy hopes we do. We might as well pour gasoline onto the bridge connecting us to our teens and toss a match. We’re the adults, and we’ve got to be more together than to use an inflammatory, belittling statement like this one.

“I don’t care what you want/think.”

But we absolutely *do* care what our teens think, right? We’d do anything to rewind the clock somehow, to go back to when they adored us. A comment like this will absolutely push them further away.

Also, this comment is a lie. We don’t want our teens lying to us, so we shouldn’t lie to them. Usually, we say something like this when we’re emotionally frustrated. If we use a lame-o line like this, we’re only reinforcing what our teens honestly believe deep down: that we don’t care. They’re convinced we’re coming down on them because we’re only concerned about what’s best for us—not what’s best for them. Think about that. We’ve got to show them a different side of us.

“You always . . .” or “You never . . .”

That’s not completely true, is it? When we don’t acknowledge that our teens do get it right *sometimes*, that gives them less incentive to get it right *ever*.

“I don’t care what your friend’s parents let them do.”

We’d *better* care. These are the friends who may have more influence on our teenagers than we do. What kind of freedoms do their parents give them? We’ll want to know; it will help us better prepare for how we’ll handle issues with our teens.

“The Bible says . . . !”

Now, of course we want to use the Word. It’s the source of truth. It’s also a massively powerful tool. We’re careful with power tools, aren’t we? They come with safety guards, switches, and sensors so we don’t hurt ourselves—or anyone else. We need that same perspective with the Word. We don’t want to use Bible verses as a club to beat our teens down or into line. They’ll rebel against that eventually. We must be very careful of our tone when we bring Scripture into the discussion. We want to win their heart, not simply the argument. Of course we’ll want to use Scripture. But we’ll want to use it to show God’s love for us—and how he knows and wants what’s best for us.

“You’ll do what I say because I said so / because I’m the parent/boss.”

Okay, these tired lines have been used for generations. Maybe your mom or dad said it to you, and your grandparents said it to them. But statements like these aren’t going to lead us to anything good. They may be true, but they’re bully talk. Seriously: This is parental bullying.

And nobody thinks that what a bully does is good or right or fair. If we make statements like these, here's what our teens hear: *"I'm more powerful than you—and I hold all the cards. You'll do it my way or else."*

And if that's what our teenagers hear, they'll daydream about the day when they're stronger than us, and how they'll put us in our place. We don't want that.

I've seen many parents use these types of conversation killers—and sometimes they got positive results. But only *temporarily*. Those parents only got behavior changes with their teens, not heart changes. It always comes back to haunt those parents eventually. If we make a habit of using any of the above tactics, our relationship with our teens often changes, leaving us much worse off than we ever imagined. Our bridges to our teens will burn, and we'll be stranded and unable to reach them.

Instead, we want to help our teens grow into the kind of people God intended them to be. That will be easier to do if we avoid saying the things on this list.

If you have teenagers, you may only have a couple of years left with them living under your roof. You want those years to be good. You want to finish strong. If you do that, you can be sure they'll be coming to you for advice and counsel as they get older. And someday when *they* have kids, they'll trust Grandma and Grandpa to babysit, something you'll desperately want.

Bridges are easy to destroy but hard to rebuild.