

How do I tell my wonderful 11 year old son, (in a way that won't tear him down), that the way he has started talking to me (disrespectfully) makes me not want to be around him (I've already told him the bad attitude is unacceptable)?



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Updated Dec 24 2018 · Author has 424 answers and 7.7m answer views

Ah, puberty. It changes our sweet, wonderful little boys into sweet, eye-rolling, angsty, accidentally disrespectful, but still wonderful young proto-men.

My first son is eleven and a half right now. (I've been informed that the half is important.) I don't claim to know the best way to talk to your son about this — I'm only an expert on my own children — but I can tell you what I said to my son, and you can take from it anything that you feel is helpful.

The conversation went something like this:

"We need to have a chat," I said. I'd specifically waited until we were in the car, driving somewhere. That meant that we had half an hour that we'd be in a confined space together with no interruptions and — most importantly — due to the constraints of driving, we wouldn't be able to look directly at each other, making it easier to avoid accidental confrontation and to encourage vulnerability.

"Okay," my son said. He sounded dubious, like he was expecting to get into trouble for something.

"We've talked a lot about puberty over the last couple of years, haven't we? I just wanted to check in and find out if you've got any new questions."

"No," he said. But not in as surly a tone as I'd grown used to hearing.

"Okay. Well, let me know if you do. But I was thinking about things over the last few days, and I know I've been pulling you up a lot more on your tone of voice and the way you've been speaking to people. Yeah?"

"Yeah..." He was confused now. He didn't know where this was going.

"Well, it occurred to me that I really messed up."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I said with a deep breath. "I've spent all this time talking to you about the way puberty changes your body, and what to expect as you go through the changes, but I completely forgot to talk to you about what's going on in your brain right now. Puberty is the time when your brain grows and changes more than at any other time in your life —

well, except for when you're a baby, perhaps. So I really let you down by not preparing you for that. I'm so sorry."

My son reached out a hand and gently touched my arm. "I accept your apology, but it's okay. We can just talk about it now."

"Is that okay?" I asked.

He nodded, and then asked, "Why is my brain changing?"

"Ah," I said. "That's the amazing thing. Did you know that your brain grew and developed so quickly when you were little that by the time you were about five or six, your brain was almost as big and powerful as an adult's brain?"

"No," he said in wonder.

"Well, it's true. But here's the thing. Even though your brain was super powerful, the instructions were for a child's brain. And all the information about building an adult's brain was a bit... let's say fuzzy. So your brain did the best it could, but it didn't really know what kind of person you were going to be back then, or what shape brain you were going to need."

I paused to give him a minute to ask questions, but he waited for me to continue. "Now we come to puberty. See, puberty is amazing. Not only is your body being transformed from a child's body to an adult's body, your brain has to be completely rewritten from a child's brain to an adult's brain."

"That sounds hard."

"Yeah, it is," I said. "That's why I wish I'd warned you first. See, it takes a *lot* of energy to completely rewrite a brain. That's one of the reasons you get tired quicker at the moment — and that, of course, manifests in you being crankier and less patient than normal."

I paused again, but he didn't say anything, so I added, "That must be really frustrating for you."

He looked over at me, and wiped his hands over his eyes. "It is. Sometimes I just feel really angry and I don't know why."

I nodded. "The other thing is that one of the first part of your brain that gets super-sized to be like an adult is the amygdala. That's the part that controls your emotions and your survival instincts. You know how we've talked about fight/flight/freeze before, and how sometimes our brains think that being asked to speak in public is the same level of threat as being attacked by a sabre tooth tiger?"

He laughed. "Yes. So you have to tell your brain that there's no sabre tooth tiger to help you calm down."

"That's right. Well, that's what the amygdala looks after: sabre tooth tiger warnings and big emotions. So, the thing with puberty is that all of a sudden you've got an adult-sized amygdala hitting all your emotion buttons and your sabre-tooth tiger buttons. That must be really hard for you to manage."

He nodded, serious again. “Sometimes I don’t know why I say the things I do. They just come out, and then I feel bad.”

“I know, Sweetheart. Well, do you want to know one of the reasons why that might be?”

He nodded.

“See, the last part of your brain that gets rewritten is right at the front of your head. It’s called the frontal cortex. And that’s the part of your brain that’s good at decision making and understanding consequences. So you’ve got this powerful adult amygdala hitting you with massive emotions, but you’ve still got a fuzzy child frontal cortex that can’t make decisions or understand consequences as quickly as the amygdala wants you to. It pretty much sucks.”

“So it’s not my fault?”

“No, it’s puberty’s fault your brain works the way it does. But that doesn’t mean it’s not your responsibility to recognise what’s going on and change your actions. It’s not easy, but it’s not impossible, either. Your feelings are your feelings, and they’re always okay. But you get to choose your actions. You get to choose what you do with your feelings. And, when you make a mistake, you get to choose to apologise for that mistake and make amends.”

I paused for dramatic effect. “That’s how you prove that you’re becoming an adult.”

“Puberty sucks,” my son said.

“Puberty absolutely sucks,” I returned. “I’m not in your head, but I can only imagine that it’s a mess of confusion and chaos, and you don’t know from one minute to the next how you feel about things.”

He looked at me in surprise. “Yes! Exactly!”

I nodded. “If it’s confusing for you living inside there, imagine how confusing it is for me, when I only see your actions.”

“That must be *really* confusing.”

I nodded. “Do you know what that means?”

“What?”

“It means sometimes I’m going to make mistakes. Sometimes I’m going to get upset at things you do because I don’t understand what’s going on in your head. Sometimes I’m going to forget that you’re halfway to being a man, and accidentally treat you like a child. Sometimes I’m going to expect more from you than you’re able to give. This is my first time parenting someone through puberty, and I’m going to make mistakes. So can I ask you a favour?”

“What is it?”

“Can you just keep telling me what’s going on in your head? The more we talk, the easier it will be for both of us to get through this puberty thing unscathed. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said.

We arrived at our destination about then, and had a cuddle before we got out of the car.

It didn't completely stop him speaking disrespectfully to me. It didn't completely stop me forgetting that he's not my little boy anymore. But it opened the lines of communication.

It gave us a language to use.

He knows what I mean when I say, “Sweetheart, I'm not a sabre tooth tiger.”

And, together, we're muddling through this crazy puberty thing, and I'm completely confident that he'll come out the other end a sweet, wonderful young man.