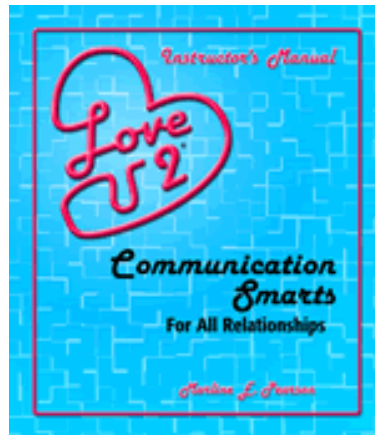


Sample Lesson

Love U2: Communication Smarts for All Relationships

By Marline Pearson for The Dibble Fund



Grades 7-12

Length: 7 one-hour lessons

To order or for more information, go to
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ABOUT COMMUNICATION SMARTS

This unit is a teen adaptation of a portion of PREP® (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), one of the leading skills-based programs for adult couples developed and refined by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, Susan Blumberg, Natalie Jenkins, and a host of colleagues, with ongoing research on the program being conducted at the University of Denver and elsewhere. Almost thirty years of empirical research on couples at various universities has shown that a couple’s ability to communicate and handle conflict over time is strongly associated with their future levels of satisfaction and divorce.¹ Interestingly, this body of research has given us a more precise understanding of the patterns that damage relationships, as well as the patterns that protect and preserve them. Equipped with this knowledge, these same researchers have developed intervention programs to teach skills and ways of acting to counter the patterns that erode relationships.

The findings of marital research in the area of how people communicate and handle conflict appears to yield universal principles for healthy patterns among adults and children across a wide range of relationships.

Communication Smarts focuses exclusively on the communications parts of PREP, which have been adapted especially for use with teens. The unit offers a concise and coherent package of communication and conflict management skills. These activity-based lessons make teens aware of the patterns that can wreck relationships and then teach teens a set of skills for reducing, stopping, and exiting from those negative patterns. Teens practice ways to exit escalating arguments, learn how to raise complaints more effectively, and acquire simple strategies for countering the “filters” that get in the way of clear communication. They learn a simple “Speaker-Listener” technique to repair their relationships after a fight or to use when talking about difficult or sensitive issues. Also offered are insights and tips for dealing with the issues that tend to “push their buttons.” Finally, a powerful but simple model for problem solving is practiced.

The beauty of this skills package is that it is not only research-based, but also useful for all kinds of relationships—that is, with friends, family, and at school or work.

Communication Smarts can be used as a module in a variety of different classes in school. It could also serve as an essential asset-building component for any youth development program. Indeed, educational and workplace establishments increasingly have identified communication and conflict management skills as critical core abilities for students. These in turn enhance one’s ability to cooperate and work in groups—another identified key core ability. Finally, as far as a goal of the entire *Love U2* series, these skills might increase the next generation’s “RQ,” that is—their relationship intelligence, which we all know will play an important role in their overall success.

¹ **OTHER RESEARCHERS WHO HAVE DONE A GREAT DEAL OF ANALYSIS OF HOW COUPLES INTERACT INCLUDE JOHN GOTTMAN AND COLLEAGUES, CLIFFORD NOTARIUS, ROBERT WEISS AND COLLEAGUES, AND TOM BRADBURY, AND MANY OTHERS.**

More on PREP

Evaluation studies of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) are very promising. Evaluations in many studies show that couples can learn to improve communication and conflict management, with the gains lasting as long as five years or more after taking PREP in the longest-term studies. Furthermore, in some studies, couples taking PREP maintained higher levels of satisfaction with their relationship and improved communication in the years following. In two studies, they experienced one-third to one-half as many breakups and only one-quarter the incidence of physical aggression as compared to couples in control groups (more detail can be found at www.PREPinc.com). Indeed, there is growing optimism in this country, and elsewhere, about the promise of skills-based prevention education for couples. Relationship and marriage education programs are increasingly available, and they typically all share a common core of stressing the importance of communication and conflict management skills.²

² SEE WWW.SMARTMARRIAGES.COM FOR MORE INFORMATION AND A DIRECTORY OF SKILLS-BASED PROGRAMS ACROSS THE U.S.

USING THE *COMMUNICATIONS SMARTS* UNIT

Communication Smarts for All Relationships is one unit within the four-unit series, *Love U2: Getting Smarter About Relationships, Sex, Babies and Marriage*. Although it makes a highly beneficial complement to any of the other units, *Communication Smarts* can stand totally on its own.

The activities and concepts of this unit lend themselves well for use across a wide age spectrum. Each lesson is packed with activities and background information to aid the teacher. As mentioned in the section above, this unit is adapted for teens from the PREP program, one of the leading skills-based prevention programs for adult couples. It is suggested that you read through the entire unit before starting in order to gain an overall framework for this skills package. Although plenty of talking points and background information for teaching these concepts and skills is provided in each of the lessons, some teachers may be interested in reading the companion book, *Fighting for Your Marriage*, for the actual PREP program. It is available for purchase along with the instructor's manual. For your convenience, each lesson will identify which chapter in that book corresponds to the skills or concepts taught in that particular lesson.

To assist students in identifying positive and negative patterns, a videotape is provided as a teaching tool. It consists of short clips of real couples from the PREP Program who volunteered to have their interactions taped. These couples will be shown discussing their issues before (with hidden camera) and then after they've been taught some of the skills. Also included is a clip from the Partners Program.³ Each clip is identified, and you will find instructions inside the lessons for when to play each segment.

It is recommended that you either assign skill practice as homework or build in plenty of practice time while in session. These skills need to be practiced in order for students to master them. One idea is to assign a "practice log." You will find instructions for one successful strategy in doing this inside. Also, in Appendix A, there are a few end-of-unit review activities that are highly engaging and designed to reinforce memory. They involve group as well as individual work, action, and drawing activities.

A few stories from the anthology *The Art of Loving Well* are woven into some of the lessons. This anthology, an optional accessory for this unit and used in other units of *Love U2*, contains short stories, poems, and fairy tales on relationships, romance, and love from classical as well as contemporary teen literature. This anthology is the centerpiece of the Loving Well Project, an independent literature-based character education program pioneered by Boston University and used in language arts and sexuality classes for the 8th to 12th grades. Independent evaluations among 10,000 students found the Loving Well Program to have a significant effect on delaying the start of sexual involvement. The lessons that use these stories suggest that you read them aloud. We have found that stories bring concepts alive, touch the

³**THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION HAS KINDLY GRANTED PERMISSION TO USE THIS CLIP. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THEIR PARTNERS PROGRAM FOR TEENS; SEE WWW.ABANET.ORG/FAMILY/PARTNERS.**

emotions, and engage teens in a way straight information does not. You might also consider having teens read the stories themselves.⁴

Some lessons include take-home handouts and assignments for encouraging parent-teen discussion. Recent research underscores that, contrary to conventional wisdom, parents remain an important influence on their teens.⁵ Indeed, parent-teen connectedness has been found to be the most important protective factor for teens. Asking teens to practice these skills at home and encouraging their families to try them out, may have an added benefit for connections on the home front that parents may welcome.

You may find that a number of lessons, because of their straightforward skills, concepts, and practice activities, lend themselves particularly well to service learning. One pilot successfully engaged 11th and 12th graders in service learning by having them “teach” chosen parts to 7th and 8th graders. It’s highly recommended that you get a boom box and play music at times to engage your students. You might consider playing music at the start or finish of class or certain activities. Music engages the emotions and can put the brain in an active-alert mode. Find out what radio stations and songs your students listen to, but use your favorites as well, or ask students to bring in music.

We hope you’ll find the lessons easy to use with clear instructions for how to set up and teach the lessons and carry out the activities. Although no training is necessary, the author is available to do so if requested. You may contact the author through the publisher. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

⁴ **CONTACT NANCY McLAREN AT THE *LOVING WELL PROJECT* AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION FOR INFORMATION AND GRANT SUGGESTIONS FOR PURCHASING STUDENT BOOK SETS FOR YOUR CLASS OR YOUTH GROUP.**

⁵ ***PARENT POWER*, A BOOKLET PRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY, SUMMARIZES IN HIGHLY CONCISE AND READABLE FORM THE LATEST RESEARCH ON PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON TEENS AS WELL AS PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PARENTS; SEE WWW.TEENPREGNANCY.ORG.**

LESSON 2

SKILLS TO COUNTER NEGATIVE PATTERNS

OVERVIEW

This lesson introduces skills to counter destructive communication patterns. The first skill, the **time-out**, is an essential tool for exiting escalating interactions. Being able to stop when things are escalating or about to boil over is truly a valuable asset. Teens will explore why and how an angry and aroused state of mind is not likely to yield a fruitful discussion. Teens will then practice useful techniques for using time-outs effectively. The second skill of this lesson focuses on effective complaining. We'll examine the most common, but unproductive ways of complaining, and then learn a new strategy for raising issues or complaints that stand a better chance at being heard and not ignored.

Goals

- Learn that communication patterns are learned and that negative patterns can be countered by learning skills.
- Explore why it's so difficult to communicate effectively in an angry and aroused state of mind.
- Learn how to use the skill of time-outs effectively.
- Identify counterproductive ways of complaining. Practice a more effective strategy for complaining and raising issues.

Lesson-at-a-Glance

1. The Benefits of Communication Skills.
2. Angry Brains Aren't Smart Brains.
3. Time-outs: A Way Back to Your Smart Brain.
4. Do's and Don'ts During Time-outs.
5. Complaining and Gripping—Being Heard, Not Ignored.
6. Avoiding Negative Starts.

Material Checklist

Duplicate handouts: “Time-outs” (Resource 2a) and “Effective Complaining” (Resource 2b). Make a transparency or duplicate as a handout “Complaints” (Resource 2c). Duplicate one “Avoiding Negative Starts—Be Gentle” (Resource 2d) worksheet per group. Video Clips and playback machine.

* * *

1. The Benefits of Communication Skills

Teacher’s Note: The corresponding reading for this lesson in *Fighting for Your Marriage* is as follows: For time-outs see chapter 8, especially pages 184–194. On complaining effectively, see discussion of the “XYZ” approach on pages 165–166. Note that we call that approach “WWWF” in this lesson.

Begin by stating that in the last session, some of the most damaging patterns for relationships were identified. Point out the good news that communication patterns are learned and thus can be *unlearned* and replaced with more productive patterns. The key is recognizing these danger signs and then learning *skills* to reduce, stop, or exit out of these patterns. Although people in successful relationships also engage in damaging patterns, they do so much less often and are able to stop and exit them. Announce that in the next few lessons teens will be learning a set of powerful skills to help them communicate and handle conflict better.

* * *

2. Angry Brains Aren’t Smart Brains

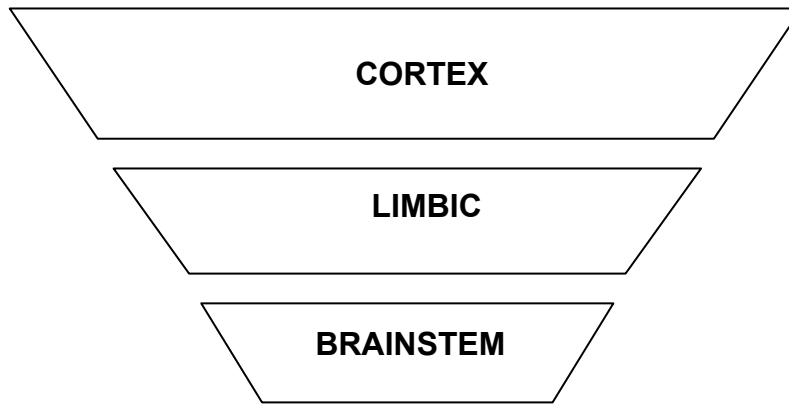
One of the most important skills for anyone to master is the art of time-outs. Being able to stop when things are escalating or about to boil over is a valuable asset. Ask the group to offer its ideas about why it can be very counterproductive to engage someone when one or both partners are really angry. Listen to their comments. Add, if necessary, that many people have come to regret what they’ve said or done when in an angry state. Point out that when a person is angry, or in what psychologists call an aroused state, they are not in their “thinking brain.” This is the physiological reason behind why people often do or say stupid things when angry. Announce that you are going to give the group a very short lesson on the brain to help them understand what’s happening in their brain when angry.

Draw a diagram on the board or newsprint and label as shown below. Continue with the following points:

- The lower part of the brain—the brainstem and midbrain—regulate vital bodily functions such as breathing, heartbeat, body temperature, reflexes, and our **reactive impulses**; automatic functions, such as appetite, sleep, motor control, and arousal patterns are also regulated by the lower brain. The lower brain is in place and fully functional at birth. Many people may have heard of the “flight or fight” response to

threat or danger. That response is located in the lower part of the brain. When someone is under threat, extreme stress, *or is angry*, he or she will be operating in this brain state. When angry and in our lower brain state, our brain perceives threat and reacts impulsively.

Parts of the Brain



- The higher parts of the brain are the limbic and cortex. The **limbic system** is the emotional center of the brain—it's where emotions, such as pleasure, pain, fear, anger, and attachment to others are registered. The limbic system begins to deal with our emotional reactions. The **cortex** controls formal thinking functions. The cortex is often called our "thinking" brain since it's where logic, perception, planning, problem solving, reason, and formal thinking take place. It will take years of experiences—emotional and cognitive—for these two parts of the brain to become fully functional. In fact, the cortex isn't fully developed until the early twenties.
- Experiences in a sense "build the brain." The more experiences a child has, the more developed his or her brain becomes. Neglect, which really amounts to an absence of experiences, is extremely harmful to a child's brain development.
- As the higher brain develops with age and experiences, the cortex, or the thinking brain, and the limbic system tend to "control" the more primitive or reactive parts of the lower brain. The higher brain will increasingly regulate emotions and communicate with the midbrain and brainstem and cortex about environmental stimuli that requires a response or a reaction. Eventually, the higher brain will be developed enough to increasingly moderate, or as you might say, "control," some of the reactive impulses or responses of the lower brain.

- Take for example, a three-year old with a relatively undeveloped cortex. She has had fewer experiences in life and so has less developed cortex and limbic systems. She will have a difficult time controlling her impulses (of her lower brain). When she wants something or is frustrated she will just grab, kick, scream, or throw herself on the floor. But an older child, let's say a 14-year-old, when frustrated or wanting something, will have a built-in capacity to inhibit those urges even though they may feel like grabbing it, kicking, or screaming. Her thinking brain says, "No, no, don't do that. It wouldn't be smart. You'd look like a fool." Their thinking brain is overriding their reactive lower brain. This is because they've had more experiences in life and thus more developed cortex and limbic systems to regulate those impulses.
- We can relate this understanding of the brain back to our discussion of anger. When a person is truly angry and escalating, the brain feels threatened or endangered and is governed primarily by the reactive and impulsive lower brain—not the thinking brain. You have probably noticed that it's not very easy to talk logic or sense to someone in this state. Only when he or she calms down can you talk reason. It's because while a person is angry she or he is in a stress-response mode and *operating in their lower brain state*.⁶

The good news is that time-outs can provide a way to get out of this aroused state dominated by the lower brain. By taking a time-out, a person can calm down and allow the brain to *return back into operating in their higher, thinking brain state*.

- **Group Discussion:** At this point, try to briefly engage the group in a discussion about any experiences they have had of trying to talk to someone who was very angry or extremely upset. Or, ask if anyone remembers an anger experience where the next day, after a period of cool-down, issues were clearer and instincts were more intelligent about what to say or do. Ask if anyone has ever taken the opportunity to write about an upset. Point out that usually with time, space, and greater calm, a person has a more productive perspective.

The big point to underscore is that in a very real sense, getting out of a state of arousal (anger) gives you *power*. Your angry state is neither smart nor powerful. You aren't operating in your smart brain—your cortex, but you are operating in your lower brain. You're not powerful; instead you're being controlled by reactive impulses.

⁶ **SEE DR. BRUCE PERRY'S WORK ON EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPACT OF NEGLECT AND TRAUMA AT WWW.CHILDTRAUMA.ORG. ALSO, SEE STEVEN STOSNY'S WORK ON ANGER REGULATION AT WWW.COMPASSIONPOWER.COM.**

Point out that it takes the body, on average, almost half an hour to calm down. Just counting to ten won't quite do the trick when fully aroused and angry. Announce that next, they will learn a technique for taking time-outs.

* * *

3. Time-outs: A Way Back to Your Smart Brain

Begin by stating that the time-out is a pretty simple concept. We use it a lot with children, but adults and teens can benefit just as much from it. Ask the group how many times when an adult was yelling or lecturing, did you wish that you could have put them in a time-out? When you're all riled up, and you feel as if someone is attacking or criticizing you, how much can you really listen to what the person is saying? Probably you are just getting madder and more defensive. A cool-down period could help. Time-outs can help you get back to your smart brain. Time-outs are a way for you to control the conflict rather than having the conflict control you.

Ideally, you want to have an agreement to use this term or some other word or sign as a cue when things aren't going right. But, the beauty of using time-outs is that you can use them by yourself even if the other person has never heard of it. You can say something like:

- "I need a time-out. It's hard for me to listen right now."
- "Let's agree to stop for now and come back and talk about it tomorrow. I need some time to think."
- "I really want to understand you, but it's hard right now."

Remember, no one can make you stay in a discussion that's escalating. You have the power to remove yourself.

The cardinal rule for using the time-out skill: Never, ever say "you" need a time-out. It's pretty obvious that this will make someone even more defensive. Always say "we" or "I" need a time-out.

There are two options when using the time-out:

1. Decide to drop it for now and come back later. It's important to set a time to deal with it later, preferably within 24 hours.
2. Shift to a safer way to communicate that will calm things down. The **Speaker-Listener Technique** is a powerful and safer technique to use when talking is difficult. Shortly, we'll teach it to you.

Activity: When to Call a Time-out

Ask the group at this time to take out the escalation scenarios they wrote at the end of the last session or as homework. Have the group select a few to use for this activity. Divide the class into smaller groups and have each group use one scenario. After reviewing their scenario, they should pinpoint a moment in the escalating dialogue when the two people could have moved towards a time-out. Star that place and ask each group to elaborate on what one or both could have said to stop the escalation. Have one member from each group jot down the statement(s). Go around the class and share examples. Two volunteers from each group can read the dialogues up to the point where they add their statements that move them towards a time-out.

* * *

4. Do's and Don'ts during a Time-out

Point out that it is important to pay some attention to what you do inside your head during a time-out for it to be effective. If you spend all your time rehearsing nasty thoughts about the other person, you'll just keep yourself all riled up. The time-out won't help your brain get back into its powerful state. Below are some simple do's and don'ts to pay attention to:

- **Don't rehearse negative thoughts that keep you angry during a time-out.** Don't rehearse hurtful, vengeful comments you plan to make when you talk again. You'll defeat the whole purpose of the time-out, which is to calm down and bring you back to your smart brain. Ask the group to give you some examples of "hot thoughts" that one might keep repeating in his or her head during a time-out. Have the group consider the last time they got really angry with someone and any hot thoughts they might remember repeating to themselves. Examples: "She does this all the time. I'll get even," or, "I don't deserve this," or, "He's such a so and so... I'm not taking this anymore."
- **Do have a few soothing mantras to repeat to yourself when you're angry.** What about, "We're really good friends, we're just having a bad time right now. We'll figure this out." Or, "Don't take it personally, she's had a bad day. It isn't always like this." Or, "We both might be a little wrong here." Invite the group to brainstorm more soothing mantras.

- **Do try to recognize what's really behind the anger—hurt feelings.**⁷ Anger is almost always a reaction to a temporarily painful or diminished sense of self. You're angry, but if you stop and think, you may discover that it is really that you're feeling rejected, devalued, disregarded, falsely accused, distrusted, guilty, powerless, or un-liked or unloved. Hurt feelings are almost always behind anger. When you are angry you are projecting outward and not thinking about your own internal hurts.

It can help calm you down just to *stop and identify* which kind of hurt you are experiencing when you are angry. Again, is it that this person is disregarding or devaluing you? Rejecting you? Are you jealous? Do you feel falsely accused? Distrusted? Or do you simply feel un-liked, unloved, or utterly powerless?

It also helps during a time-out to remind your self that you are—no matter what the other person says or does—*valuable, important, equal* and *worthy*. Suggest that teens may easily remember this by recalling the letters VIEW. It also helps for you to know that the other person most likely has some hurt behind his or her anger and behavior. Hurt feelings are the true motivators behind bad behavior. Typically, the worse the behavior, the deeper the core hurts.

By bringing this to mind, you will be developing some compassion for yourself and for the other person. It can have a calming effect and bring you out of a state of anger or arousal and back to your smart brain. You are more powerful in that state and better able to deal intelligently with problems with others.⁸

Time-outs may seem a small matter, but it probably is one of the most important PREP skills to master, aside from the Speaker/Listener Technique.

- View video clip “Anger” segment

This very short but powerful segment underscores how hurt feelings are generally behind and driving anger. This will help reinforce the messages above.

* * *

5. Complaining and Gripping: Being Heard, Not Ignored

⁷ THE FOLLOWING IDEAS ARE CREDITED TO STEVEN STOSNY. FOR AN IN-DEPTH APPROACH TO ANGER REGULATION, SEE STOSNY'S COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUE CALLED HEALS. FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO WWW.COMPASSIONPOWER.COM. A CD IS AVAILABLE THAT IS ESPECIALLY DESIGNED FOR ADOLESCENTS TO PRACTICE HEALS, AN ANGER REGULATION TECHNIQUE

⁸ *ibid.*

Take a few minutes and have teens jot down a gripe or complaint they have or have had recently with someone. After they jot it down, ask them to think about what it is they want this person to do, or what it is they want to have happen? Solicit their responses. Point out that their responses indicate that what they want, in essence, is typically for someone to *stop* doing something, or to *start* doing something, or to *listen* to them, or to *change*. Now ask them if they notice a pattern to what happens after they complain. Ask if their complaints work. Typically, we do not get what we want with our gripes and complaints. Often, the other person doesn't stop, change, start, or listen. In fact, most often the other person gets even more defensive or angry—just the opposite of what you want. The reason for this is that most of us are lousy complainers. We've never learned how to complain effectively.

Announce to the group that one of the nicest and sweetest things they can do for their relationships is to learn how to complain more effectively. Sounds pretty romantic, eh? Let them know that in a few minutes you will be teaching them how to complain more effectively. But first, they're going to review the most common, but counterproductive ways to complain. Present the following:

Common But Ineffective Ways to Complain

1. **Mind Reading:** Notice that most of our gripes or complaints begin with a "you" as in "you never," or "you always do such and such." Mind reading is all about assuming that you know what the other person is thinking, or what they intended, or why they did something. But no one likes their mind (incorrectly) read by others: "Thank you, but I'll speak for myself!"

Examples:

- "You didn't want Chris to come over anyway!"
- "You don't care at all about my feelings"
- "You're just doing that to get back at me."
- "I know why you did this."
- "He made me wait on purpose because he's still angry about yesterday."
- "All you care about is your friends, you could care less about our family."

The point about mind reading is that it just generates anger and defensiveness. You could be right in your assumptions, but at least check out your assumptions. Most times our assumptions are off the mark.

The key is to say what you think and feel, not what you think the other person thinks and feels. "I feel ignored and unimportant," is a lot different than, "You don't care about me."

2. **Character Assassination:** Sounds pretty heavy, doesn't it? This happens when, instead of focusing on a specific behavior that bugs you, you attack a person's character or assume the existence of an aggravating trait about him or her.

Examples:

- "You're so irresponsible," versus, "I'm really upset you didn't follow through on such and such when you promised you would."
- "You're such a slob," versus, "I feel like a servant when you leave your clothes all over the floor, including the bathroom."

The problem with character assassination is that it's a comment about a person's character or traits and those don't change much. You can change a specific problem behavior, but not a whole trait or character very easily. Yes, you may be kind of sloppy with your clothes on the floor, but you're not totally irresponsible in *every* area of your life. This is why people react defensively. Focus on specific behaviors!

3. **Catastrophic Interpretations:** This is a fancy way to refer to the habit of saying, "You always..." or "You never..."

Examples:

- "You never say anything nice."
- "You never do anything helpful."
- "You always make excuses."

It's incredibly common for us to start our complaints in this fashion. This is a loaded statement and again a person is likely to respond defensively. And, guess what? "Always" statements are *always* wrong. No one is that consistent. They may do something a lot, but s/he doesn't do it every time, all the time. Moreover, what if a person is trying to change the offending pattern as might, for example, a person with a tendency to be late a lot. Let's say s/he has been on time the last four out of five times, but today s/he is late. It would be very demoralizing to hear, "You're always late," when you are working hard on changing that behavior. Finally, using an always statement tends to lead to negative interpretations of someone's behavior. Once you get wedded to an overly negative view of someone, you are likely only to see negative things and none of the positive things that they might do.

4. **Blaming:** Blaming is usually done with a hostile, angry intent to hurt another person.

Examples:

- “It’s all your fault this happened.”
- “You knew it would happen, it’s your fault.”
- “We blew this game because of you.”
- “If you hadn’t been so picky, this would have never happened.”

The problem with blaming is two-fold. People overwhelmingly react defensively to attack. And blaming doesn’t bring the two people closer to dealing with the problem or the issues.

There are other kinds of ineffective complaining such as:⁹

- “**Kitchen-sinking**” — that is, when you start with one complaint and then drag in every other possible complaint (everything but the kitchen sink) you’ve been storing up. The problem here is that you tend to overwhelm the person and they will probably shut down.
- “**Cross-complaining**” is another bad way to complain. This happens when, after a person brings up a complaint, the other person responds, “Yes, but what about when *you*...” This makes the first speaker feel totally discounted. The agenda has effectively been hijacked by the other person, and the first person now feels on trial. Cross-complaining is disrespectful. The second person may very well have a legitimate complaint, but it’s a sign of respect to listen and deal with the complaint that has been raised first.

A Better Way, the WWWF Formula (please, no wrestling...)

Above all, it is important to remember that a complaint is your opportunity to let the other person know what’s on your mind. In other words, it’s an opportunity to let another person know how and why something bothers you. Most likely the other person doesn’t really understand why it bothers you or is a problem. The challenge with effective complaining is to elaborate on your feelings and explain how it affects you. And this may be trickier than you think. It requires you to think first about *why* something upsets you. This simple framework presented below may help. It’s called the **WWWF Formula** for voicing complaints. It’s about what, when or where, and feelings.

W *What happened*—that is, focus on the specific behavior or thing that bugs you.

W or W.. When or Where it happened—that is, focus on the last time it

⁹ **THOSE LATTER TWO FORMS OF COMPLAINING ARE FROM GOTTMAN, J., NOTARIUS, C., GONSO, J. & MARKMAN, H. (1976) A COUPLE’S GUIDE TO COMMUNICATION. CHAMPAIGN, IL: RESEARCH PRESS.**

happened. Specific time or place to avoid the “you always/you never.”

F **Feelings**—that is, speak about your feelings, your reaction, or how and why the behavior bothers you.

Notice how this little formula counters all the negative patterns described above:

W **What** specifies a particular problem behavior as opposed to character assassination.

W or W .. When or Where counters the “you always/you never”

- **F** **Feelings** counters mind reading or blaming. You speak for yourself; give information about the behavior’s effect on you.

When a person learns *how* and *why* something bugs the other person, it can be a powerful motivator for change.

Activity: Identify the W, W or W, and F, and Compare

Ask the group to identify the parts (W, W or W, and F) in each of the complaints below. Then compare them with the old way of voicing them.

Example A: “When you didn’t show up yesterday at school like you promised you would, I felt really betrayed because I trusted you. I’ve gone the extra mile to keep you from getting suspended.”

Teacher’s Note: What—didn’t show up; When or Where—yesterday at school; and Feeling—I felt betrayed because I trusted you.

- Ask them to compare that complaint with this ineffective way of complaining: *There you go again, always late or never showing up. I should have known. You’re so irresponsible.*

Example B: “When you brushed off my suggestion that we go out and do something fun last weekend, I felt uncared for. I really miss doing the fun things we used to do. That makes me feel close to you.”

Teacher’s Note: What—brushed off my suggestion, When—last weekend, and Feeling—I felt uncared for and I miss doing things with you.

- Again, compare the typical way that complaint might be stated: *You never want to do anything. You don’t care about me*

Activity: Converting a Complaint into the WWWF Format

Ask participants to now take out the complaint or gripe they jotted down at the start of this section and turn it into a WWWF complaint. Give them a minute or two and then ask for

volunteers to read theirs aloud. Ask the group to evaluate it for the three parts of the WWWF formula and, if needed, help improve it.

More Practice with Complaints

Put up overhead or pass out handouts of “Complaints: Is It Good or Bad?” (Resource 2c). Focus the group on this list of complaints and gripes. Some are more effective ways than others for stating a complaint. Ask the teens for a show of hands if a particular complaint is good or bad. If bad, ask the group to identify if it’s character assassination, blaming, always/never, mind reading, kitchen-sinking, or cross-complaining.

Teacher’s note: Students benefit from lots of practice with this skill.

6. Avoiding Negative Starts

Point out that when raising a concern or complaint, it’s important to be gentle. If you start out negative and harsh, the other person will tend to *turn off* or *turn defensive*. We know from research that arguments typically end on the tone they are begun.¹⁰ If you start negatively it will probably end negatively.

Activity: Group Work on Gentler Starts

Divide into groups and pass out “Avoiding Negative Starts: Be Gentle” (Resource 2d), one per group. Assign each group one situation for which they are to develop a gentler and more effective way to raise the complaint or issue. After groups have had a few minutes, ask each group to read their scenario, the harsh start, and then the more gentle start they came up with.

Teacher’s Note: It is important to help teens understand that *how* they start in on an issue with another has a great deal to do with whether or not they will be heard or accomplish what they hope for with another. But it’s also important to acknowledge that sometimes, even when you do your best to raise an issue or start a conversation with respect, the other person may still not respond well. With an acquaintance that they do not have to have a future with, it may be a sign that it’s better to move on to a healthier relationship. With parents or siblings, it’s trickier. They

¹⁰ **IN A NUMBER OF STUDIES, JOHN GOTTMAN AND COLLEAGUES HAVE FOUND THAT HOW A CONVERSATION STARTS HAS A STRONG BEARING ON HOW THEY WILL GO AND HOW THEY WILL END. START NEGATIVELY OR HARSHLY, AND THEY ARE LIKELY TO END THAT WAY. GOTTMAN REFERES TO THIS AS HARSH START-UP, DRAWING ON AN EARLIER TERM IN THE FIELD OF NEGATIVE STARTUP, USED BY THE PATTERSON GROUP THAT STUDIED CHILD AND ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR. HERE, WE USE THE TERM NEGATIVE START TO CAPTURE THE SAME POINT ABOUT HOW ONE BEGINS AN ARGUMENT IS SO IMPORTANT.**

might have to write a letter or seek the advice of another they trust about how they can get their point across in the most constructive way with someone who doesn't seem to want to listen.

Homework (Optional)

Ask teens to come up with a list of some gripes or complaints they have with various people. Tell them to write these down as they might normally express them. Then, ask them to rewrite these same complaints using the WWWF framework. They should also pay attention to raising complaints or issues more gently.

Also, challenge teens to write up an appreciation using the WWWF format to show appreciation for positive actions. Point out that we probably don't give as many appreciations as we could to the people we care about. Suggest they get into the habit of giving a daily appreciation to the people they care about. Example: "Dad, when you made my friends those great pizzas last night, I felt really proud of you. You can sure cook well."

Activity: Parent-Teen Dialogue Options

- Ask teens to take home the "Time-outs: A Way Back to Your Smart Brain" (Resource 2a) handout for their parents/guardians to read. Ask them to explain what they've learned about the brain that helps explain why, when you're angry, you don't often say or do the smart thing. Perhaps they might ask parents/guardians about trying time-outs at home for the next couple of weeks. Sign and return.
- Ask parent(s) to take the quiz, "Complaints: Is it Good or Bad?" With the key, the student should grade it and explain to parents the parts of the WWWF formula for effective complaining. Sign and return.

* * *

Resources to be found on the following pages:

Resource 2a..... "Time-outs: A Way Back to Your Smart Brain."

Resource 2b "Effective Complaining: Being Heard, Not Ignored."

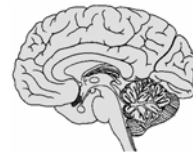
Resource 2c..... "Complaints: Is It Good or Bad?"

Resource 2d..... "Teacher's Answer Key: Complaints: Is It Good or Bad?"

Resource 2e..... "Avoiding Negative Starts: Be Gentle."

Resource 2a.....

TIME-OUTS: A WAY BACK TO YOUR SMART BRAIN



Being able to stop when things are escalating or about to boil over is an important skill. Many people regret what they've said or done when in an angry state. When angry, you are not in your "thinking brain." Time-outs are a way to get back to your smart brain. Time-outs help you control a conflict instead of letting it control you.

Key Rule

Never, ever say "you" need a time-out. Always say "we" or "I" need a time-out.

Two Options When Using Time-out

1. Decide to drop it for now and come back later when you've calmed down. It's important to set a time to deal with it later, preferably within 24 hours.
2. Shift to a safer and calmer way to communicate. The Speaker-Listener Technique is a powerful technique to use when talking is difficult.

Do's and Don'ts During a Time-out

- **Do come up with a few soothing mantras** to repeat to yourself when you're angry. Examples: "We're really good friends. We'll figure this out. Don't take it personally, she's had a bad day. It isn't always like this. We both might be a little wrong here. Mom's being a pain right now, but she's basically a good mom."
- **Do remember what's really behind anger**—hurt feelings. You're angry, but if you stop and think what you may really be feeling is rejected, devalued, disregarded, falsely accused, distrusted, guilty, powerless, or unlovable. Stop and identify what hurt you are experiencing when you are angry. Remember that you are valuable, important, equal, and worthy (VIEW). Also, recognize that the other person has some hurt behind their anger too.
- **Don't rehearse negative thoughts that keep you angry during a time-out.** Don't rehearse hurtful, vengeful comments you plan to make when you talk again. You'll defeat the whole purpose of a time-out, which is to calm down and bring you back into your smart brain.
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Resource 2b

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINING: BEING HEARD, NOT IGNORED

Complaints or gripes are generally requests for someone to *stop* doing something, *start* doing something, or to *change*. Learn to complain more effectively.

Most Common but Ineffective Ways to Complain

Mind Reading: Most gripes or complaints begin with a “you,” as in, “You never do, or you always do such and such.” You assume you know what the other person is thinking, why s/he did something. Say what *you* think and feel, not what you think the other person thinks and feels.

Character Assassination: You attack a person’s character, or assume a trait about the other person instead of focusing on a specific behavior that bugs you. You can change a specific problem behavior, but not a general trait or a character very easily.

Catastrophic Interpretations: This is a fancy way to refer to the habit of saying, “You always... or you never...”

Blaming: Blaming is usually done with a hostile, angry intent designed (wittingly or unwittingly) to hurt the other person.

Cross-Complaining: The “yes, but what about when you...” approach that avoids a respectful focus on a person’s specific complaint.

Kitchen-Sinking: Beginning with one complaint and using it as the chance to bring up a slew of additional, less pertinent ones.

A Better Way—The WWWF Formula

W..... *What happened*—focus on a specific behavior: “*When you did such and such....*”

W or W...When or Where—focus on the last time the behavior happened. “*yesterday...*”

F..... *Feelings*—speak about your reaction, what you feel, how and why it bothers you: “*I felt... It bothered me because...*”

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Resource 2c

COMPLAINTS: IS IT GOOD OR BAD?

Effective complaining focuses on *specific behavior*, indicates *when* it happened and expresses *one's feelings or reactions*—that is, how and why it bothers or affects you. Examine the complaints below and circle the correct word depending on whether that complaint is “good/effective” or “bad/ineffective.” If the answer is bad, determine which category: character assassination, blaming, catastrophic interpretations, mind reading, kitchen-sinking, or cross-complaining.

- | | | |
|------|-----|---|
| GOOD | BAD | 1. You're so irresponsible. You didn't do your homework, you didn't take the dog out, and you haven't written that thank you note to grandma. |
| GOOD | BAD | 2. You're so lazy! |
| GOOD | BAD | 3. I'm upset you didn't take the garbage out again this week. |
| GOOD | BAD | 4. I'm sick and tired of your behavior! |
| GOOD | BAD | 5. You don't care at all about me. |
| GOOD | BAD | 6. When you don't ask about my opinion, but just lecture me, I feel like my thoughts don't matter |
| GOOD | BAD | 7. I don't think you like yourself. |
| GOOD | BAD | 8. You're always covering up your feelings. I hate it that you never talk. |
| GOOD | BAD | 9. If you hadn't gone, this would have never happened. It's all your fault. |
| GOOD | BAD | 10. You always over-react. I can't stand it. |
| GOOD | BAD | 11. Yeah, okay ... but ... how do you think I feel when you always forget to bring milk home. |

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Resource 2d

TEACHER'S ANSWER KEY: "COMPLAINTS: IS IT GOOD OR BAD?"

1. Bad: Character assassination and kitchen-sinking.
2. Bad: Character assassination.
3. Good.
4. Bad: Character assassination.
5. Bad: Mind reading.
6. Good.
7. Bad: Mind reading.
8. Bad: Catastrophic interpretation and mind reading.
9. Bad: Blaming.
10. Bad: Catastrophic interpretation and mind reading.
11. Bad: Cross-complaining.

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Resource 2e

AVOIDING NEGATIVE STARTS: BE GENTLE

Read the statements below and craft a better and gentler way to voice this complaint or raise this issue. Remember, if you start with on a negative tone, the listener is likely to *turn off* or *turn defensive*.

1. When your son has his friends over tonight, you plan to tell him how much you hate it when they leave without bothering to clean up. You don't mind him having his friends over, but you want them to pick up.

Harsh Start: *I can't stand it when your sloppy friends come over and leave the house a wreck!*

Gentler Start:

2. You think your friend isn't spending as much time with you since she started going with Brett. You want her to make more time for you.

Harsh Start: *Ever since you started going with Brett you just ignore everyone. You're going to lose all your friends, and then you'll be sorry when he dumps you.*

Gentler Start:

3. You want your teen to ask a teacher for some extra help to improve his grade in a certain class.

Harsh Start: *Don't be stupid! Get help from the teacher before you flunk out.*

Gentler Start:

4. You can't stand it when you parents tease you about girls. It makes you not want to tell them anything, ever.

Harsh Start: *Just leave me alone!*

Gentler Start:

5. Your girlfriend gossips too much. She's always dissing someone. You like her and all, but sometimes it's just a drag. Like ... there are more interesting things in the world to talk about.

Harsh Start: *Get a life! Have you nothing more interesting inside your head to talk about?*

Gentler Start:

6. Your mom is such workaholic lately. You remember a time not too long ago when she was more laid back and fun to be around. You wish she'd spend more time with the family like before.

Harsh Start: *You never have any time for us anymore. You just don't care about us.*

Gentler Start:

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