When you know what to do, but not at 6 pm · Ages 13–17

What to say to your teenager on a night you have nothing left

"I know how I want to handle the big talks with my fourteen-year-old. At six in the evening I just snap. What do I say on the nights I've got nothing left?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Tomorrow I'll just try harder."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I've got nothing left tonight, and it isn't about you. Can we do the phone conversation at breakfast? I'll be better at it."

Good advice doesn't fail at six because you're a bad parent. It fails because it asks for your best at the hardest hour of your day. So don't count on trying harder at six: decide at four.

What is known, and at what age

In two week-long diary studies, mothers and fathers were more pressuring with their children than their own usual on the days they felt more stressed or low. In one, the children noticed it too. Parents filled in the diaries; nobody watched them, and which came first is unknown. The children in them were six to twelve; nothing here is specific to teenagers.

Across hundreds of experiments, people who decided in advance, "if this happens, I'll do that," followed through more often than people who only meant to. The gain is small. It has barely been tested on parenting.

What the words do

Take 2 asks less of the evening, out loud: a reason that is not your teen ("it isn't about you"), when the talk will happen instead, and nothing asked in return. It is for the odd bad night, not every night.

These words are everyday practice, not research findings. The American Academy of Pediatrics says a parent can give themselves a time out when they feel out of control, once the child is in a safe place.

Everything here is about ordinary tiredness, the kind that comes and goes. If it's most days for two weeks or more; if the short fuse is there all day and not just at six; if you feel flat, or far from your children, or you catch yourself wanting to get away; talk to your doctor. That is what they're for. And if you're ever frightened of what you might do, don't wait.

If you or a child are in danger, contact emergency services (911 in the US, 999 in the UK). US: call or text 988 for crisis support, any time. US: parents can call or text the National Parent & Youth Helpline, 1-855-427-2736, any time. UK and Ireland: Samaritans, 116 123. Elsewhere: findahelpline.com.

If you live in two homes

In your home you may be the only adult, so there is often nobody to hand over to. Then your one minute at the far end of the room is the hand-over. Keep the tiredness line about you and your day, never about the other home, and never ask your teen to carry it there or to look after you.

In the UK

The NHS says to see a GP if you have symptoms of depression for most of the day, every day, for more than two weeks. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children. For everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential; in Scotland, Children First, 08000 28 22 33. Worried about a child's safety: NSPCC, 0808 800 5000 (weekdays 10am–4pm). If anyone is in danger, call 999. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.