

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

And I'm Robert Siegel. Parents of teens, take heart. You may find yourself arguing constantly with your teenager, but researchers say that's not necessarily a bad thing. NPR's Patti Neighmond reports on a new study in the journal Child Development that finds these teenage arguments can provide lifelong benefits.

PATTI NEIGHMOND, BYLINE: Almost all parents and teenagers argue. But psychologist Joseph Allen, with the University of Virginia, says it's how they argue that makes all the difference.

JOSEPH ALLEN: We tell parents to think of those arguments not just as a nuisance. Think of them as a critical training ground.

NEIGHMOND: Training in how to argue with calm and persuasive points - not with yelling, whining, threats or insults. In Allen's study, 157 13-year-olds were videotaped describing their biggest disagreement with parents. The most common arguments were over grades, chores, money and friends. The tape was then played for both parent and teen.

ALLEN: Parents reacted in a whole variety of ways. You know, some of them laughed uncomfortably. Some of them rolled their eyes, and a number of them dove right in and said OK, let's talk about this.

NEIGHMOND: And talking seriously about it, says Allen, is exactly what parents should do.

ALLEN: We found that what a teen learned in handling these kinds of disagreements with their parents was almost exactly what they took into their peer world.

NEIGHMOND: The peer world, with all its pressures to conform to risky behavior like drugs and alcohol. Allen interviewed the teens again, at 15 and 16.

ALLEN: The teens who learned to be calm and confident and persuasive with their parents acted the same way when they were with their peers.

NEIGHMOND: And were able to confidently disagree - saying no, they didn't want to do drugs or drink alcohol. In fact, they were 40 percent more likely to say no than kids who didn't argue with their parents. For those kids, it was an entirely different story.

ALLEN: They would back down right away. They would say, well, I was going to talk about curfews, but I know you don't want me to have a late curfew, so you know, I guess we're OK on that. And from interviewing those teens, we knew they weren't OK about it. We knew they were just backing down; that somewhere they had learned there's no point in arguing about this. And those were the teens that we really had to worry about. Those were the teens that when their friends would say - you know - hey, let's go out and get drunk tonight, those were the teens that would say well, OK.

NEIGHMOND: Bottom line: Effective arguing acted as something of an inoculation against negative peer pressure. Kids who felt confident to express themselves to their parents also felt confident being honest with their friends. So ironically, the best thing parents can do is help their teenager argue more effectively.

For this, Allen offers one word: listen. In the study, when parents listened to their kids, their kids listened back.

ALLEN: They didn't necessarily always agree, but if one or the other made a good point, they would acknowledge that point. They weren't just trying to fight each other at every step, and wear each other down. They were really trying to persuade the other person.

NEIGHMOND: This doesn't mean parents should give in to everything teenagers want. Take the example of curfew. The teenager wants a later one; the parents aren't so sure. What parents should do, says Allen, is encourage kids to think about ways of making that later curfew acceptable.

ALLEN: How about if my curfew is a half-hour later, but I agree that I'll text you; or, I agree that I'll stay at certain places, and you'll know where I'll be. Or, how about I prove to you that I can handle it for three weeks before we make a final decision about it.

NEIGHMOND: Richard Weissbourd is a child psychologist at Harvard University. He says the findings of this study bolster earlier research.

RICHARD WEISSBOURD: Parents who really respect their kids' thinking, and their kids' input, are much more likely to have kids who end up being independent thinkers, and who are able to resist peer groups.

NEIGHMOND: Weissbourd points to one dramatic study, which analyzed parental relationships of Dutch citizens who ended up protecting Jews during World War II. They were parents who encouraged independent thinking, even if it differed from their own.

So the next time your teenager huffs and puffs and starts to argue, step back a minute, take a breath yourself, and try to listen. It may be one of the best lessons you teach your child.

Patti Neighmond, NPR News.