

# Why Your Teen Is Pushing You Away

*And what they're really asking*

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I'm a father of two boys and a therapist who works with families in crisis: teenagers in residential treatment, parents who feel like they've lost their kids, relationships that look irreparable from the outside.

I want you to know something up front. I didn't grow up with secure attachment myself. I grew up in a chaotic home, healed from addiction in my twenties, and learned this work the hard way: first as a clinician, then as a father.

Everything in this guide is a taste of what I unpack in my book, *The Way Back Home: Healing Attachment Wounds With Your Teen*. Use it as a place to start.

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## **The question your teen is actually asking**

Most parents I meet aren't lacking love or commitment for their kids. They're a 10 out of 10 on caring. They're lacking direction: how to stay connected when their teen is pushing them away, how to regulate when their own nervous system is screaming threat, how to repair after it all blows up.

Your teen isn't pushing you away because they need space. They're pushing you away because they're testing something far more primal:

*"Will you stay when I'm unlovable?"*

When your teen is rude and you withdraw, they register: love is conditional.

When your teen is struggling and you fix it, they register: my feelings are too much for you.

When your teen is angry and you get angry back, they register: you can't handle me.

You're not doing anything wrong. You're doing what your own nervous system learned to do when you were a teenager. Their behavior activates your attachment wounds, and your response to them is, underneath, your response to your own unresolved pain.

This is neurobiology, not a character flaw. And it's changeable.

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## The five conditions of secure attachment

After years of clinical work, I've distilled secure attachment down to five things your teen needs to feel from you:

- 1 Safety** — Can I be myself and still belong to you?
- 2 Attunement** — Do you see me, or the version you wish I was?
- 3 Soothing** — Can you stay calm when I'm in chaos?
- 4 Expressed delight** — Do you actually like me?
- 5 Support for exploration** — Can I become who I'm meant to be and still come home?

These aren't techniques. They're presences you become. The book walks through each one in depth: what it looks like in real conversations, what blocks you from offering it, and how to build the capacity even if you didn't receive it yourself.

## REAL: your way back after rupture

Rupture is inevitable. You're going to react from your wound instead of your wisdom. The problem isn't that it happens. The problem is when you don't repair.

REAL is the framework I teach for finding your way back:

### **R Regulate**

Come back to your center before reaching out. You can't repair from a dysregulated state.

### **E Explore**

Get curious about what just happened, without blame. *"I noticed things got tense. Can we talk about what happened?"*

### **A Attune**

Validate your teen's emotional reality, even if their behavior needs to change. *"I imagine that felt disappointing. That must be really frustrating."*

### **L Lean back in**

Re-enter with warmth and steadiness. *"Even when we fight, I'm not going anywhere."* Then you stay. Even if they don't respond. Even if they're still mad.

The book gives you the full method, including how to regulate when you're flooded, what to do when your teen won't open the door, and how to build a repair practice that becomes second nature.

## What this teaches your teen

When you use REAL consistently, over months, over years, your teen learns something they'll carry into every relationship for the rest of their life:

*You can be angry and still loved.*

*You can mess up and still belong.*

*You can come back together, even after it all falls apart.*

That's not just good parenting. It's the template for how relationships work.

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## A final word

Your teen is asking the most important question of their life:

*"Will you stay when I'm unlovable?"*

The answer you give, not with your words but with your presence, will shape who they become.

You still have time. Adolescence is a second chance. The attachment window is open.

**Stay REAL.** Your teen is worth it. And so are you.

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## Where to go from here

**The book.** The Way Back Home: Healing Attachment Wounds With Your Teen. The full method, real family stories, and a complete roadmap. [danieljahearnlmft.com/the-way-back-home](http://danieljahearnlmft.com/the-way-back-home)

**The daily practice.** A free, ten-minute parenting practice grounded in the five conditions. No login, no fee. Use it the next time you feel yourself losing your ground. [waybackhome.app](http://waybackhome.app)

**Writing on Substack.** Where I publish regular notes on attachment, parenting teens, and the inner work this requires. [danieljahearnlmft.substack.com](http://danieljahearnlmft.substack.com)

**Work with me directly.** If your teen is shutting down or pushing you away and you want to talk about whether intensive family work is the right fit: book a free 30-minute consult, or text 213-290-1146.

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