



FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS • GRADES 9-12

"Let's Talk Respect"

*What your teenager heard,
and what to do with it at home.*

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Start here

Your teenager sat through a 50-minute assembly on respect and bullying, delivered by a magician and certified hypnotist who has been doing prevention work for over twenty years.

If you ask them about it, you will probably get *"it was fine"* — and then, two days later, they will turn a banana upside down at the kitchen counter and tell you that you have been opening it wrong your whole life.

That is not a tangent. That's the lesson, and it's the one thing in this guide most likely to open a conversation. More on the banana at the end.

What it was not

It was not an anti-bullying lecture, and nobody told your teenager to be friends with everybody. Robert says so in the first two minutes:

"It's not like you need to love everyone, be friends with everybody — that's not realistic."

What he asked instead was a question about the building they walk into every morning: **what kind of school do you want to go to?** And then he did something unusual — he said the cynical answer out loud before any student could:

"Even when I'm saying this, I can feel it. I can almost taste it, where you guys are just like — never happens. It'll never happen. Nothing ever changes."

His response wasn't a pep talk. It was closer to an argument: **you have to own that thought**, because the moment you accept it and repeat it, you make it true.

The one idea underneath all of it

Younger students get the Rule of Shoe — *before you say something, before you do something, stop and put yourself in the other person's shoes.*

Robert tells high schoolers that rule out loud, and then tells them exactly where it breaks for people their age:

"Have you ever had the experience where someone's like, 'would you want that said to you?' And you'd be like — I don't care."

He treats that as an honest answer rather than a bad attitude. Sometimes you genuinely don't care. So he rebuilt the rule around something teenagers do care about.

He fanned out a stack of cards with strangers' names on them. Nobody cared about any of them — *"why would you?"* Then one student wrote down the name of **one person she would protect** — somebody where, if

she heard what was being said about them, she'd get angry. That card turned up alone in a sealed glass case. She read her own handwriting out loud.

"My dad."

Everybody is that person to someone.

So treat others as you would want **that person** treated. Not even just yourself.

Six things worth knowing

1. He told them their attitude is a choice — carefully

Robert walked them through the bad-mood spiral: you wake up in one, and your brain **goes looking to validate it**. It hunts for the negative all day, it builds, and eventually somebody says something harmless and your teenager snaps at them. Often at you.

Then, from his own kids not wanting to go to martial arts:

*"In life there's gonna be times that you have to do things that you don't wanna do. So you have two options. You can go there with a good attitude or you can go there with a bad attitude. **Your choice.**"*

The honest version, which is what the classroom sessions land on: you don't choose the feeling. You choose what you do with it. If your teenager comes home and tells you a speaker said they should just choose to be happy, that is not what was said, and it's worth correcting.

2. Empathy, he told them, "doesn't work" on its own

This gets quoted out of context, so here is the actual argument.

Every decision comes out of what you know, and what you know comes from three places: **formal education, personal experience, and outside influence** — family, friends, whatever you scroll past. Nobody has the same three. So when you look at what somebody did and think *"I would never do that,"* you are judging their decision with information they don't have, about a situation you were never in.

You can only get into somebody's shoes by asking questions. There is no other door.

He applies it to the way we see ourselves too, and this is the part parents tend to find most useful:

*"Sometimes we judge ourselves, based on whatever we're born into, and we label ourselves — or other people label us and we accept it, and then we react accordingly. **Once you think you're something, then I'm gonna act to live up to that.**"*

3. Put it down. Calm down. Then talk.

Somebody sends a message that reads badly. *"Rob, you're so stupid."* Joking? Insult? Without tone or a face, there's no way to know, and the reader fills in the blank from whatever mood they're already in.

So what do most people do? Fire back. Or skip the person entirely and post about them. Or **troll for sympathy** — the deliberately vague post, *"some people are so mean,"* that exists to collect concerned replies.

What he told them to do instead, in this order:

Put it down. Calm down. Then go talk to them — face to face.

And when a student said that sounds uncomfortable:

"Good. It's okay to feel uncomfortable. That's a growth moment, something to work through, not run from."

A phone call counts. FaceTime is better — you get a face and a voice. Working it out over text does not count.

4. The demonstration they'll remember

Two students stood facing each other. One closed her eyes and was told to pay attention to everything around her. Robert tapped the one whose eyes were **open** — and the one with her eyes closed felt it, on the same shoulder.

"Sticks and stones may break your bones, words will never hurt you."

That phrase came before the internet. Back when all they had was sticks and stones.

Just because you don't physically touch somebody doesn't mean they're not going to feel it.

He paired it with the honest problem about online cruelty. Roasting goes too far sometimes — in person, you know how, because *"the person's crying."* Online?

You don't. *"The biggest danger is that you don't see the hurt. You don't see the reaction."*

And the test he gave them, which is short enough to actually use:

Golden Rule 2.0 — post about others as you'd want posted about you, and about the people you care about.

Would I want this on a billboard for everybody to see? No? **Then don't send it to somebody else.**

5. Keeping your power

Bullying runs on an imbalance of power — and most of the time the power is handed over by the reaction. Anybody with a sibling knows the mechanism: *"I'm not touching you."* — *"Stop it."* — *"Okay."* — *"MOM."* That's the win.

So he taught them not to hand it over. Somebody says *"you're bald"* and the answer is *"you're totally right, I am — you've got a nice head of hair, styled all different ways."* *"You're so stupid"* gets *"I know, right? That's why"*

I'm in school, trying to get smarter." A thumbs up and nothing else works too.

They don't have to believe a word of it. The point isn't to feel good about the insult — it's that the fight needed two people and only one showed up.

"I'm not gonna hold what you think about me over what I think about myself."

One thing to say out loud at home: this is a tool, not a standard. If your teenager reacted instead, they did nothing wrong. And if something keeps happening, the answer is not a better comeback — it's telling somebody.

6. What he said about fighting

This is the part of the hour aimed squarely at the kid who thinks the answer is to throw down, and he does not soften it.

Robert has trained martial arts for years and competed — won and lost. **First defense: your legs.** *"You're totally right. My bad."* Turn and walk. **Second: your words.** *"Stop. I don't want to do this."* Physical force is for when you genuinely cannot leave and somebody has hold of you.

Then he walks the whole chain. A verbal argument. They lean in. A takedown. Somebody lands on their head. **Brain bleed.**

Who's liable? Me. Who has serious issues now? Me. And what's my defense — "he said I was bald"?

*"And I'm gonna give up all of my freedoms and everything else for that?" **That's ego.***

Talking to your teenager about it

The hardest part is the opening. Here is what works at this age, and what doesn't.

What doesn't work

"What did you learn today?" You will get *"nothing."* It sounds like a quiz and it puts them in the position of performing a lesson for you.

Making it about them. *"Is anybody being mean to you?"* gets a no, almost always — because the honest answer is complicated and the question sounds like the start of you calling the school.

Reacting to the first thing they say. If a teenager tests you with something small and you escalate, you've taught them not to bring you the big thing.

What works

Ask about the magic. *"Somebody told me there was a thing with a card in a glass case. What happened?"* They will explain the trick, and explaining the trick means explaining the point.

Ask what other people did, not what they did. *"What did people in the room think when he said nothing ever changes here?"* is a question they can answer without defending themselves.

Go sideways through the banana. It's a joke, and jokes are a door. *"Someone said you've been opening bananas wrong your whole life."*

Tell on yourself first. Teenagers match the honesty of the adult in the room and never exceed it. A real story about a message you sent angry, or somebody you snapped at who didn't deserve it, buys you far more than any question.

Seven openers that get actual answers

1. *"If you had to write down one person you'd protect, no matter what — you don't have to tell me who. Do you have one?"*
2. *"He said the Rule of Shoe doesn't work on people your age because the answer is 'I don't care.' Is he right?"*
3. *"Have you ever sent something you wish you hadn't? I have. Want to hear it?"*
4. *"Do you think you can tell from a text whether somebody's joking?"*
5. *"He asked what kind of school you want to go to, and then said everyone was thinking 'nothing ever changes.' Was he right?"*
6. *"What would you actually say if you walked up on something happening? Not what you should say — what you'd actually say."*
7. *"Who at that school would you go to if something was wrong? Give me a name."*

That last one is the most important question in this guide. Not because of what they say, but because of how long it takes them to answer. If your teenager cannot name an adult in that building, that's worth a quiet email to their counselor — not because something is wrong, but because something could be, and right now they have nowhere to put it.

If your teenager is being targeted

A few things that are true, in the order they matter.

It is a relationship problem. It doesn't resolve by your teenager becoming tougher or wittier, and it doesn't resolve overnight. It resolves when other people — adults and peers — know and are paying attention.

Telling you was the hard part. Whatever else happens in that conversation, they got the hard part done. Say so.

Ask before you act. *"What do you want me to do, and what do you want me to not do?"* The fastest way to guarantee they don't tell you next time is to do the thing they were afraid you'd do. Sometimes you will have to act anyway — but say that out loud rather than doing it quietly.

Write it down. Dates, what happened, who saw it, screenshots. Schools respond differently to a pattern than to an incident, and memory is worse than you think.

Go to the school in writing. An email creates a record and a date. Ask what the process is and what the timeline is, and ask for it in writing too.

Keep an eye on the part nobody asks about. Sleeping, eating, whether they still want to do the things they used to do. Those change before a teenager says anything.

If you are worried about their safety, treat it as urgent. Call the school counselor, your pediatrician, or 988 (call or text, any time). You do not need to be certain to make the call.

If your teenager is the one doing it

This is harder to read and more common than most parents expect. Robert's framing is the one to borrow, because it leaves a door open:

Nobody's born a bully. It's a learned behavior. *"If you've done it to somebody, understand it's behavior. It can change. You get to choose the person that you wanna be."*

He also names the mechanism honestly. It usually isn't cruelty for its own sake — it's **insecurity**, and often it's belonging: *"I'm gonna act a little mean, then other people are like, oh, you're one of us."* Suddenly you're included, and tearing people down is the price of the ticket.

What he tells them about that:

"As soon as you're doing that, all you're showing everybody else is that you're insecure."
And: *"blowing out somebody else's candle doesn't make your candle glow any brighter."*

What helps at home: separate the behavior from the person, out loud and more than once. A teenager who believes they *are* the label will defend it. A teenager who believes it's something they did can stop doing it. Then get curious about what the behavior is buying them — status, a group, a feeling — because that's the thing that has to be replaced, not just removed.

The banana

Near the end, Robert asks why we don't step in when we see something. Students give three honest reasons:

- *If I say something, they might start targeting me.*
- *It was done to me, so it's fine for it to be done to somebody else.*
- *It's always been this way. Nothing's ever going to change.*

"And to that I say — bananas."

Everybody opens a banana from the stem. We are the only primates who do. Every other one turns it the other way up and pinches the bottom — which is easier, skips the little black bit, and leaves you a handle to hold.

So why do we all do it the hard way?

"Cause whoever taught you this way." The first person to open a banana showed the next person, all the way down the line to you.

And the point:

Just because it's the way it's always been done **doesn't mean it's the best way**. The only way to change it is through **action and education**.

This is why your teenager is going to ambush you at the kitchen counter. Let them. It is the only assignment in the whole program where a student changes an adult's behavior, which is exactly what the lesson claims is possible — and the conversation that follows the banana is usually the real one.

Six sentences

If nothing else from this guide survives the week, these are the ones worth keeping. They're on the poster in their classroom too.

Everybody is that person to someone.

Be curious, not judgmental.

The goal of a conversation is to listen and learn. The goal of a debate is to win.

Put it down. Calm down. Then go talk.

You don't see the hurt. You don't see the reaction.

Just because it's the way it's always been done doesn't mean it's the best way.

Where to get help

Your school counselor or social worker — the fastest route, and the one with the most context about your teenager's day.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988, any time, for you or for them. You do not have to be sure to call.

StopBullying.gov — the federal plain-language guide to what schools are and aren't required to do.

Your pediatrician — an underused first call when sleep, appetite or mood have changed.

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