

# Adventures in Communication

## Bear hugs, bored shrugs, and the search for connection

By Jayasri Srinivasan

“I’m so tired of your behavior! Just go to India with your grandparents and don’t come back till you’re 18!”

My younger son Atula and I had had yet another argument. I forget what it was about. His messy room? Falling grades? Picky eating? Not practicing his cello? Excessive screen time? Constant tardiness? All of the above?

I stormed off, but my heart was heavy. This was not the relationship I’d hoped to have with my teenager. Was this really what my sweet little baby boy had grown up into?

“He’s only 13, what else do you expect? Be patient, he’ll grow out of it,” a friend advised. At 85, she’s seen a lot, having raised twins, a boy and girl. “Boys are more difficult, although girls have their drama too. Just don’t give up on him. Talk to him lovingly and figure out what’s going on.”

This was great advice. But every time I tried talking to him, he just sighed, shrugged, and walked away. And try as I might, I just couldn’t stay calm. Instead of giving him space to decompress, I usually followed him to his room where we’d get into an escalating shouting match ending with Atula in exasperated tears.

“You hate me, Amma!”

“Yes, good guess!”

But there are little pockets when he is his old, cuddly self. Just the other day, he threw himself on his dad in a giant hug and they both fell onto the bed.

“Atuli, get off Appa! You’ll break his bones, and the bed!”

“It’s ok, he’s just a baby.” Ram’s voice floated up from somewhere in the depths of the blankets.

“Baby? Baby?! Maybe a baby giant panda! Don’t let him fall on you like that. He’s almost as tall as you and much heavier! You’re not that young anymore you know!”

“Amma, just chill. Appa’s fine!”

I know... you might get the impression that I’m just a tad uptight. Maybe that’s why Atula avoids me. But I’m not always like this. I do say nice things to him sometimes. Like the time he needed a haircut. As my sister described it, his hair had gotten bushy enough to hide a small woodland creature. He wanted to go to this popular hair salon downtown but they were all booked up. So I took him to another place.

“What a lovely haircut, you look so cute!”

“You don’t understand about haircuts, Amma! If your mom likes your haircut, it means it’s ugly! I hate my haircut!”

“No sweetie, it looks great!”

“Whatever, Amma.”

And then there was the time he was sashaying along listening to strange music blasting from his headphones, while candy wrappers and other junk spilled from his pockets.

“Atuli, you’re becoming a walking dumpster!”

“You’re funny, Amma!”

“You do realize I’m not complimenting you, right?! No need to grin. Now please pick up all this trash and put those filthy clothes in the laundry.”

I wondered... when was the last time I said something truly kind to him and we really connected? I couldn’t remember. Could that be the problem? Was there a pattern here?

I didn’t want to know. I just needed a break.

“You guys take over, I’m done with him!” I said to my parents. And they stepped in.

My mother cooks a variety of tasty dishes and coaxes him to eat. My father helps him with algebra

homework, irons his concert clothes, and teaches him Sanskrit verses. Both of them constantly fuss over him to dress warm, eat well, and go to bed early. His

older brother Tharun checks in on him  
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