

You-Statement

“You made such a mess of this project!”

“You always leave me holding the bag when you commit to being part of a group project!”

“You said you’d call, but of course you didn’t—you just can’t be counted on!”

I-Statement

“I get frustrated after we put so much time into preparing for these projects and then they don’t turn out as we’d planned.”

“When commitments are made and then I have to follow through, I get angry.”

“When I don’t know where you are, I get upset because I don’t know whether I should go about my business or not.”

Expressing feelings responsibly with I-statements takes a bit of practice, but doing so helps to prevent conflicts and allows you to keep resentments from building.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Covey, Sean. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens: The Ultimate Teenage Success Guide*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

McGraw, Jay, and McGraw, Phillip. *Life Strategies for Teens*. New York: Fireside, 2000.

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Assertiveness Skills (for Teens)

Building People Skills (for Teens)

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WHAT TRAPS DO TEENS FALL INTO WHEN THEY EXPRESS FEELINGS?

When it comes to expressing emotions, many teens—and adults—have a difficult time. Some go overboard, slipping into blame and anger. Others keep their feelings to themselves, and you never know where you stand. It is also not unusual for people to respond to emotions by denying them.

Let’s consider an example. You come home from a long day at school, and you discover that your brother has had two friends over after he got home from his school. The house is a mess. There are dishes in the sink and crumbs sprinkled across the sofa. The smell of cigarette smoke hangs in the air. You feel very angry, because you were looking forward to a nice relaxing evening and can’t stand the mess. You



also hate smoking. There are several different ways to express your feelings of frustration:

- You yell, “How many times have I told you that you have to clean up after yourself? And what idiot has been smoking in this house?”
- You swallow your anger and say nothing. You clean up the mess yourself and refuse to speak to your brother until the next day.
- You say to your brother, “When I come home after a long day at school, I feel very angry to find the sink full of dirty dishes and the air smelling like cigarette smoke.”

Blaming and name-calling is easy to slip into because it allows you to release the emotions quickly and makes you feel powerful for a moment.

Most people probably choose the first option—blaming and name-calling. (This is true for teens *and* adults.) This behavior is the easiest one to slip into, because it allows you to release the emotions quickly and makes you feel powerful for a moment. However, it also makes the other person feel defensive and hurt and almost guarantees that the argument will escalate.

The problem with suppressing your feelings (as in the second option) is that you don’t resolve them. They sit inside of you, and you find yourself feeling angrier at the other person and everyone around him or her. Until you express the feelings and get a satisfactory response from the other person, you have a difficult time being with him or her.

Besides blaming and denying, some other common ways of expressing feelings (especially negative ones) include:

- **Generalizing.** “You always do this to me!”
- **Name-calling.** “You are such an idiot!”
- **Accusing.** “You obviously don’t care about this family!”
- **Commanding.** “You get in this room right now!”
- **Interrogating.** “Why do you always let your friends walk all over you? Don’t you have any respect for yourself? Don’t you have any respect for me?”
- **Disagreeing.** “That couldn’t possibly be true!”
- **Put-downs.** “You wouldn’t know about keeping this place clean! You can’t even get yourself out of bed in the morning without Mom’s help!”
- **Intimidating.** “You clean this dump up right now or I’ll tell Dad that your friends were smoking here!”

All of these kinds of statements are destructive. They result in negative feelings and more anger, and are designed to exert power over the other person. Notice that most of them include the word *you*, which makes them seem more threatening and argumentative. A much more effective and productive way of expressing feelings is to use the *I-statement*.

The most important feature of I-statements is that they are neutral. There is no effort to threaten, argue, or blame.

WHAT ARE I-STATEMENTS?

When you want to express a problem, use an I-statement instead of a you-statement. They

take some practice, but they can make a big difference in how successfully you communicate your feelings to others.

This is the formula: “I feel _____ when _____.”

Here are some examples.

- “I feel angry when I come home and there are dirty dishes in the sink.”
- “I feel upset when I know that you have been smoking in the house.”
- “I get so excited when I see how much you enjoy working on your project.”

You can also change the wording around like this:

- “When I have to stand out on the curb for an extra hour, I feel really frustrated.”
- “When there are so many mistakes on your part of this project, I feel embarrassed and worried about what kind of grade we’ll get.”
- “Having so many friends over when Mom’s not home makes me worry that things are going to get out of control.”

The most important feature of I-statements is that they are neutral. There is no effort to threaten, argue, or blame in any of these statements. The speaker is simply making a statement and takes full responsibility for his or her feelings. They are an excellent way to express feelings in a nonintimidating, noncontrolling way.

HOW CAN I CHANGE YOU-STATEMENTS TO I-STATEMENTS?

Here are some examples of how you-statements can be changed to more productive and neutral I-statements. Notice how the revised statements are less blameful and hostile than the original statements: