

A PLUME BOOK

DO I GET MY ALLOWANCE BEFORE OR  
AFTER I'M GROUNDED?

VANESSA VAN PETTEN is a youthologist and the founder of RadicalParenting.com, a blog written by Vanessa and one hundred teen contributors that won the Mom's Choice Award in 2009. In addition to writing for her site, Vanessa pens columns online for Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Brazen Careerist, and Mom Logic. Named one of the Top 100 Women Bloggers to Watch by *Women's Business Week*, Vanessa has appeared on *The Doctors*, CNN, CBS News, and ABC News Now as well as in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Businessweek*.

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**Praise for Vanessa Van Petten**

“She’s young, hip, and knows what’s going on.”

—Lynne Curtin, *Real Housewives of Orange County*



Do I Get My Allowance  
*Before or After I'm*  
Grounded?



**Stop Fighting, Start Talking,  
and Get to Know Your Teen**

Vanessa Van Petten



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## PLUME

Published by Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Plume, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, September 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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 REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Janson Text

Designed by Eve L. Kirch

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*This book is dedicated to Scott Edwards.  
You encourage me, you love me, and you inspire me.*



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## Introduction

I'm a teenage accomplice, fighting to balance both sides of the parent and teen struggle. I can tell you what happens to teens' faces when they lie to their parents: their eyes widen, their brows pinch together, and the sides of their mouths turn downward. I can also tell teens how to know whether their parent is making rules out of love or out of fear.

But as often as I catch and decipher hidden emotions, I also help both sides get what they want—at home, at school, and in life. I have negotiated for teens to get more allowance, bargained for more freedom, and convinced a parent or two to back off. At the same time, I also help parents get what they want: honesty, connection, communication, and household calm. I have commandeered pantry cleanouts, dissected arguments, and searched sock drawers.

I am not a therapist, a doctor, or a counselor. I am not a parent or a fellow judgmental teen, but I am young enough to get kids to open up and old enough to be a translator for parents—conveying and deciphering the true intent behind harsh words or actions. These are often hidden in micro facial expressions, gestures, and tones. I expose parents to a different, perhaps more vulnerable side of their child, so they can see the emotional intent behind a curse or verbal assault and then find the

answer to address it. The confessions in this book range from scandalous to inspirational to funny, and they come in the form of parent worries, teen diary entries, kids' bucket lists, scientific research studies, and e-mail rants.

That's not to say that I don't often have to convince teenagers I am not picking sides when I translate their emotions for parents. One particularly angry seventeen-year-old boy shouted, "You are ratting us out!" after one of my events. I had just shown four hundred parents how kids sneak around parental control software. He was mad—until I showed him the slide entitled "Why You Should Give Your Kid a Later Curfew."

## About Me and My Work

When I was a teenager, alcohol made me sleepy, sex made me nervous, and smoking pot scared me. Therefore I decided the best way to rebel against my parents was to write a book exposing them. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), as I started interviewing other teens about their own parents, I realized mine were not so terrible after all. In fact, I began to recognize my parents were pretty decent; they were just severely misinformed. I saw them reading parenting books that told them to say and do the exact things that drove me crazy—and pushed me further away from having a strong relationship with them.

Soon I realized that there were thousands of resources for parents written by and for adults, but none from the teen perspective! From a cramped desk at Emory University and using a lot of babysitting money, I decided to launch the first teen-written parenting resource, [RadicalParenting.com](http://RadicalParenting.com). The blog exploded—mostly because parents were dying to read the teen confessions, interview transcripts, and secrets I had gathered from teens all over the world. After graduating from college, I dedicated all my time to answering the hundreds of e-mails,

instant messages, and video chats I received daily from distressed teens and parents.

My blog, e-mail in-box, and answering machine became a collective mecca for troubled, distressed, and lonely families, and I learned to pick up on the emotional cues of teenagers. I started speaking around the country and hired teenage writers to write their own parenting advice—as anonymous “exposers” of the teen world. Since I am no longer a teen, I have no problem giving away secrets—like vodka eye shots or teen biting trends—because I know that in opening the lines of communication, teens stay safe and will have better relationships with their parents in the long run. Yet I still listen to the same music, play FarmVille on Facebook, and shop in the same stores, so I can relate and connect with teens on the issues they are dealing with—because they are my issues, too! I am also not a parent, and I believe this lets me take a step back and see problems and patterns from a different viewpoint.

### Why This Book Is *Super* Different

Some of the advice you read in this book you may not like. Parents might find the advice I give both atypical and counterintuitive, but it is useful and current. Today’s teens are dealing with the same life issues as previous generations—flirting, homework, and careers—in completely different ways, from Facebook e-flirting to wiki study guides. My goal is not only to highlight current teen trends and the most cutting-edge research on youth, but also to point out patterns and vicious circles I am sure you experience every day but haven’t quite figured out how to fix.

I am not afraid to talk about fears and failures—and then resolve them. When I walk into a speaking engagement, whether with teens or parents, the room feels like it is holding its breath.

Everyone is worried. Teens are worried about their popularity, that they won't do well enough in school to get into a top university, or that their parents aren't proud of them or their accomplishments. Parents are freaked out that their kids might do drugs, stop loving them, or make unsafe choices. Both parents and teens have many nagging doubts about their own familial roles and their individual drives for success. Many parents feel alone. Virtually every mother and every father I've worked with feels as if they are losing their relationship with their teen.

### Parent Confession

"I'm drowning every day. I dread picking her up from school because I have no idea what kind of mood she will be in and how I should react. School seems to be so stressful these days, and I don't know how to help her—I don't even understand her homework!"

—Chellie, mother of two

I will be using real quotes, interviews, e-mails, and advice from actual teens I have worked with and readers of my blog. This book addresses the current needs, questions, and advice parents crave and delves into subjects that teens, mature tweens, and late-blooming twenty-somethings all struggle with.

This book is not about being a perfect parent. Believe me, there is no such thing as either a flawless parent or a perfect teenager. I think when I first started this journey, I was looking for the ideal family. Though I did not find the "perfect parent" to model my own behavior on, I think I did discover the most important concept of all for parents, the one I will implement when I feel it is the right time to have my own family: you are your own best parenting expert. The central premise of this book is to teach you how to be exactly that.

## What to Expect

In this book I will give you a new way of interacting with your children and help you make sense of some of the new youth behaviors and trends emerging in the last few years. I have broken the book up into three parts: building a relationship, learning about their life, and seeing why you don't need to worry too much, all based on understanding the mentality and attitude of today's teens. Each chapter begins with a true story. I will dissect the trends, characteristics, and issues that the story exemplifies and offer resolutions to the specific problems it raises. Then I'll conclude with points for you to remember (you can flip back to these points after reading the whole book, as needed) as well as challenges for you to do, either individually or as a family, to improve the relationship between you and your teen.

Part 1 examines the most fundamental aspects of constructing a solid relationship with your child and the common communication traps parents fall into when trying to connect with teenagers. Chapter 1 focuses on how both parents and teenagers are emotionally programmed to have false expectations about each other, and how to overcome related setbacks. Chapter 2 delves into the differences between communication and arguments. This is where I show parents both how to avoid friction with their teen in the home and how to stop and solve it once a fight is already under way.

Part 2 covers the major areas of a teen's social life: peer relationships, technology, and risky behavior. Friendships among teenagers are the focus of chapter 3. Here I talk about everything from longtime friends to bad peers and show what parents need to do to ensure that their children have a strong social support network amid an increasingly socially illiterate generation. Chapter 4 is an in-depth look at how the Internet, social networking, and mobile devices have changed the way teenagers

interact with each other as well as with their parents, and how we can leverage the benefits and avoid the negative consequences of online activity for teens. In chapter 5 I talk about the new bully. Cyberbullying and meanness are, unfortunately, a huge part of life for many teens today. Although this is an old issue, in the digital age many aspects of bullying and being a victim have changed. Chapter 6 is an overview of what motivates teenagers to put themselves in dangerous situations, what those circumstances are, and how parents can minimize risk without limiting their teenager's independence.

Part 3 covers today's teen attitudes about lifestyle, school, and their futures. Chapter 7 reviews the academic lives of teenagers today. Whether you have a slacker or a unicorn—a student who always feels the need to be perfect—the tips and stories in this chapter will help you help your teenager do well in school, without adding more pressure. In chapter 8 I share how this generation of young people is more motivated, entrepreneurial, and creative than any previous generation and how parents can encourage these streaks for good.

Some of the advice you read will be absolutely familiar and will make you think, “Yes! That totally happens to me, I love it and live it.” Other solutions you might find interesting or intriguing. Finally you will read some sections that you think are outside your comfort zone or not relevant to your family. These are the sections I hope you will give the most attention to. As I have learned with teenagers, you never know what to expect. What is an issue now might be gone tomorrow, and problems you never thought you would be dealing with could come up for your family next week. I always want the parents I help to feel prepared. In addition, what brings us out of our comfort zone also ignites the most change. When we leave what is familiar and safe, we have more opportunity to reset bad habits and cycles. So, when you read something that sounds a little different

or untraditional, all I ask is that you keep an open mind and see if it has the potential to transform an area of your family life that you have grown too comfortable with. There are many pieces of advice in this book. Don't think you must tackle every area at the same time. Pick the issues you think are most important and implement them slowly; trying all the techniques at once might scare your teen and overwhelm you.

You are welcome to read this book passively, laugh at the funny stories, pick up a few interesting tidbits, and move on to the next book on your shelf. Yet I want to offer the idea that, as with everything in life, the more positive energy you put in, the more you'll get back.

