



## Red Lights – Green Lights

Good communication starts with this overarching goal: to stay connected and keep moving forward. You have, no doubt, already tried to talk to your child (or shout at, plead with, etc.) about changing their behavior. We'd guess you have started many a conversation with great intentions only to see them go off course and become unproductive or downright destructive.

Imagine if there were traffic signals in conversation to tell you when to stop or go; to help you get safely to your destination.

- The light is **green** when your child is positively engaged with you, willing to listen and respond constructively, and maybe, though not necessarily, talking about change.
- The light is **red** when your child is destructively engaged with you (yelling, cursing, going silent), not listening, and probably moving away from the idea of change. For example, when they are defending their use of substances.

That may sound obvious, but when you pay attention to these lights and respond accordingly, you are much more likely to get somewhere and avoid harm along the way.

Here are some examples:

You: "I'd like to talk to you about not drinking at the party tonight."

Your child may respond with:

### Green Lights

"Okay, but can we not have a fight about it?"

"Can I tell you what I think?"

"I won't drink, I have practice early in the morning."

### Red Lights

"You're just going to force your rules on me."

"Why do you always overreact?"

"I hate when you interfere with my social life."

Red lights are frustrating, especially when you're in a rush to see change. You may be tempted to "gun it" and try to force your way through. But you know from experience that ignoring red lights is dangerous: people end up fighting, saying things they regret, feeling worse instead of better, and no closer to positive change—in fact, often further from it.

Paying attention to the lights will help you stay oriented to the goal of communication: you want it to go forward. You don't want to crash. What follows are strategies and approaches to communicating that will allow for more green lights than red, as well as ways to notice those red lights, so you can stop and try again.

## PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

Your initial reaction to using the skills and techniques we are teaching you might be, “but I’ve tried this before, and it didn’t work.” Maybe so, but perhaps you have not combined the consistency, timing, collaboration, and persistence that gets results.

Taking part in this change process means you’re learning too. Take pride when something goes better because of an effort you made to change and be kind to yourself and patient with your child when it doesn’t. Learning any new thing takes practice, whether it’s positive communication, golf, cooperating with your partner, figuring out your new phone. At first, most of us feel awkward, even “bad at it.”

As you practice with CRAFT, you might get frustrated and be tempted to give up. You might say to yourself, “this isn’t working,” “this isn’t me,” or “I can’t do this, and my child doesn’t care anyway.” Such thoughts and impulses are normal when you’re learning; that is, they are part of the process, not reason to quit.

As in all learning, wanting to know the skill doesn’t get you the skill; practice does. Practice again and again. Developing your helping skills will take time and patience. Helping your teen or young adult change through your relationship will be a process. Give yourself room to practice, make mistakes, and not get discouraged. You will get better at the changes you are trying to make, and so will your child.

**Reflection: Think about a recent conversation with your child with a red light. What could you have done differently to change the situation to a green light?**

**Why is this so hard - and so important too?**

Material adapted from: The Parents 20 Minute Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Center for Motivation and Change (CMC), 2016.