

T1435 The Parents' Survival Guide: Coping with a Teenager
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8. Arguments against thinking about behaviour

"I want my child to grow up naturally."

The most common reasons given by parents for not planning how they want to change the way their children behave is that it is somehow 'unnatural'. Some people also claim that all the planning means that the children are somehow 'taking over' the parents' lives.

The fact is of course that there is no natural form of behaviour, just as there is no natural form of upbringing. Most of us remember the way we were brought up with affection. This is then seen as the natural way of bringing up children. Yet it is no more natural or unnatural than any other approach.

"But changing my child's behaviour sounds like some horrible science fiction experiment. I don't want to have to plan."

Once in work your child will be faced with a set of rules more stringent than those at home or school. These rules are set out so that everyone can get on with their work. The rules encourage certain forms of behaviour and seek to stop other behaviour. Most teenagers adapt to the rules of work very readily despite all their earlier protests at home or school. Some adapt while at school or at college - others suddenly change on day one of work.

Why does this year's rebel become a compliant worker?

Two reasons - one is an immediate adaptation to the environmental norm. We mostly seek to behave like others - we don't want to stand out. The other is the need for money. Work has something the teenager wants, and he or she will do a lot to get it.

"I'm not going to let my child walk all over me. It's my home."

This is fine - if you can do it. But if life is a constant battle then maybe it is time to admit there is something wrong, and another method may help. If giving the teenager responsibility seems like letting the child walk all over you, you may do well to consider exactly what you are achieving - and what you want to achieve. You may be right - and this is your son or daughter - so it is very much up to you to decide.

"When I was young it was just lots of fun. We didn't have all this planning and talk of responsibility. Where's the joy of childhood? Where's the happiest days of their lives?"

Maybe you were lucky. But most of us who have teenagers now spent some time in our own teenage years in conflict with our parents over something - hairstyle, clothes, music, lateness out, drugs.... It wasn't all laughter and fun.

"So I was in conflict but I came out of it OK."

This is the point - most teenagers live in a state of conflict with their parents, then work out OK and return to the family fold as friends. The end result probably can't be changed; what we are looking at is the day to day effect of living with teenagers, making your life happier during that time and making their period of teenage years less self-centred, less wearing and more fun for you - and in the end more rewarding for them.

The heart of this debate is simple:

If you have a clear idea about good and bad behaviour, then you have the chance to encourage your teenager to be well behaved.

You do this through:

- a) Knowing exactly what behaviour you are trying to change.
- b) Agreeing your targets with your partner and your child.
- c) Using the best method available as a way of changing behaviour.
- d) Agreeing the method with your partner and sticking to it.
- e) Making sure that you are 'in tune' with the approach of the school.
- f) Taking a limited number of steps at a time.

Point e) may need a little explanation. For example, if your view of the world is that it is a rough and tough place in which it's 'each man for himself', then you might feel it is a good idea to make your teenage son or daughter a bit tougher. In the process of this your child may well become involved in behaviour which some people would call 'bullying'. The school will not accept this. Now you and the school are in conflict. It is much better for you and your child if you consider any conflict there might be sooner rather than later and seek to talk it through with the school before you collide head on.

Overall, if you want your child to behave in a certain way you have to take the lead. If you just react to events (for example just punishing your child when he or she does something wrong) you are unlikely to have a great success in improving your child's behaviour.

In the eyes of your child you are a leader - the lawmaker, judge and jury. Leadership as a parent involves being certain of what you want to do, being certain of the method and doing it. But it also involves a fair degree of flexibility in how you handle the situation. Remember great leaders listen and consider as well as hand down judgements and enforce the law. The teenager has found what fun it is to be the pirate, the outlaw, the revolutionary who doesn't care for conventional wisdom. What we suggest you do is turn the tables. Let the revolutionary win the revolution and then have a taste of power and responsibility.

Leadership is your great advantage. It is time to use it.

9. Is your teenager badly behaved?

If you think the answer is a resounding 'yes', just pause for a moment and ask yourself again, "Is your teenager really different from every other child of the same age?"

If you take your teenage son out for a Sunday lunch with your mother or father, and he sits at the table frowning and sulking, you will feel disappointed - perhaps angry. You've made a special effort to come out, and this is how your son behaves. You want granny to be impressed, and sulking isn't the way to impress granny (even though granny has clear recollections of you doing the same thing at that age, and for some reason feels this is the best moment to remind you what a difficult teenager you were).

If your a 15 year old son then asks granny for a pint of lager and says, "I'm not eating this muck," and refuses to eat any of the food that granny has obviously spent several hours cooking, you may start getting even more annoyed. This is now getting embarrassing - especially with granny fussing around offering to do some baked beans or a burger instead of the Sunday roast.

But now your son gets up and announces he's off down to the pub for his usual lunchtime gallon then embarrassment is not really the word for it. And when granny says, "Your father would have given him a good walloping," you know it's time to give up and leave.

All three examples of behaviour can give you some concern - but the level of worry you get in each case is different. What we have done in these examples is move from typical annoying teenage behaviour to behaviour that is increasingly provocative.

But being provocative is what teenagers do - and they do it for a reason - to redefine their lifestyles. For their own credibility teenagers seek to define themselves as being part of teenage culture - or the element of teenage culture they particularly admire. To do this they must distance themselves from the culture of older people. Even if the pub and talk about drinking eight pints is all bravado it is still part of the distancing between parent and teenager so vital to the teenagers well being.

This is why attempts by parents to discuss such matters is always doomed to failure. To admit to being swayed by an argument from someone as sad as a parent would be just too much.

What most parents want to do is to edge their teenagers out of the annoying, disruptive, time-consuming and self-centred behaviour. But this behaviour must not be confused with behaviour that is criminal or so unusual that it may be the result of a medical condition. If you feel that your teenager's behaviour is worse than most then you may want to discuss the matter with others. You might want to talk to the parents of your son or daughter's friends, to compare notes. You may wish to talk with teachers at school, or if you think there might be a medical cause you may wish to consult your GP.

Throughout you will have to answer the question - just how bad is a teenager who shoplifts, drinks underage in pubs, takes soft drugs (which are themselves legal in parts of the European Union), and in other ways reveals criminal behaviour patterns? The fact is that a large number of teenagers do something illegal occasionally. This does not excuse the behaviour, nor does it make it acceptable. But it might change our reaction to it.

When we see this behaviour we have the choice of reactions. Quite probably the best answer to the problem with the visit to granny's is to say, "I was not happy with the way you behaved at granny's last time so I guess we'll go without you this time. There's some food in the cupboard

so you can get your own lunch.” But please note, it is very unwise to leave any child under 13 at home alone no matter how bad their behaviour is when taken out.

As we’ve noted before with food, this approach won’t do you much good if:

- You leave junk food like crisps around so your son or daughter can eat without effort.
- You worry the whole time you are out, phone twice to check all is OK, and return early to see if your son or daughter is still alive.
- You cook a special meal for your son or daughter when you get back because he or she is so hungry.

The idea is that you have a better time and your child suffers the consequences of previous behaviour without having to argue. You come back happy and friendly, while not compromising the stand you have taken. Your teenager has just learned about the consequences of behaviour.

But to get to this point you have to be clear just how bad your teenager’s behaviour actually is.

Many of us in our society tend to agree about what is good and what is not. Mostly we agree that stealing is bad. Apart from the extreme embarrassment we would feel about having to go to the police station to get our child who has just been caught stealing from the sweet shop, most people feel that stealing is morally wrong. By and large we obey most laws.

But there are many other areas of behaviour on which some parents won’t agree. A parent who earns a living as an artist and believes that children should express themselves artistically might not get at all upset upon finding a fifteen year old painting a mural on her bedroom wall. The parent who has no interest in art and who lives in a house that has just been redecorated might find this the most awful behaviour imaginable and worthy of considerable outrage and punishment. Each parent reacts differently, and each finds the reaction of the other rather strange.

To take another example, in some families reading a book is highly valued. In others it is seen as being anti-social - withdrawing from the group when everyone else is joining in. By not joining in the reading the child is seen to be rejecting the family and all it stands for. “Everyone else is here having fun why do you have to be so different? Aren’t we good enough for you?” Of course this is a parody for the sake of example, but it illustrates a point that is very real for a lot of children.

Even more confusing is the fact that teenagers have a habit of behaving in different ways at different times and in different places. The twelve-year-old who has developed a fine line in rude and abusive behaviour towards his or her parents might be an angel at school. The angel at home can be a fearsome bully at school.

So when we think about good and bad behaviour we have to remember three basic points:

1. Bad behaviour is behaviour we don’t like - the more we don’t like it the worse it seems. But what we call unacceptably bad behaviour is often behaviour that we indulged in as teenagers.
2. Most of us agree that certain types of behaviour are good and certain types bad. We know bad behaviour when we see it either because we see it as morally wrong (e.g. when something

done inflicts pain), or it is illegal (and by and large we obey the law), or it feels unpleasant. But we probably broke the law as teenagers - and may still do so in driving above the speed limit, for example.

3. Some behaviour is seen as wrong in some families and OK in others - and that doesn't make either family right or wrong. It is just part of the rich diversity of parenthood! If you were brought up in hard times or by parents who put their families and homes together after the war and were taught never to waste anything, you will find it very annoying if your teenager picks up a perfectly good banana, peels it, takes one bite, and then just leaves it on the table, forgotten. Other people might find this less frustrating, and worthy only of a mild rebuke.

So now if we ask the question, "Is your teenage son or daughter badly behaved?" we can see a more difficult question than it might appear at first.

Perhaps we should ask another question:

How does your child's behaviour differ from that of other teenagers?

To answer that question we need to bear in mind once more that children's behaviour changes from one place to another. Compare your child with other children in a variety of surroundings:

- at a disco
- at your home
- at another teenager's home
- in the car.

Do talk to other parents. Ask them their concerns and worries about their teenager's behaviour. If it begins to look as if the person that you see as a civilised well behaved young woman when visiting your house, is in fact a serious cause for concern in her own home, and if her parents see your teenager as delightful to have to visit because of his or her 'civilising influence' then you may start to feel that your teenager is really no different from the rest.

This doesn't mean that you don't have to try and change your child's behaviour at all - there is still the issue of you reclaiming your own life and having your own fun - but it does show you that maybe you don't have too much to worry about. You have a normal teenager. You are a normal parent. In such circumstances trying to improve your child's behaviour is also perfectly normal.

All that is wrong is that the method used most of the time is not particularly effective.