

Surviving the teenage years; Help your teen learn self-control

By Jan Hittelman

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As a parent, getting through your child's teenage years can be tough. The good news is that there are effective strategies that can help you to dramatically reduce conflicts and avoid potentially hostile confrontations. Instead of fighting over control, we must provide teenagers with opportunities to learn self-control. Instead of battling over our teenagers' irresponsible behaviors, we must encourage them to take more responsibility for their decisions and actions. Consider the following strategies:

Choosing your battles. Choosing your battles is essential to reducing conflict.

Otherwise, life often becomes a series of arguments and confrontations. More importantly, you want to catch your teen being good: Make an effort to provide positive feedback when your child behaves appropriately. Even though your teenager is no longer looking for as much of your time and attention as in the early childhood years, your approval is still very important whether he/she acts like it or not. For example, battling over how clean a child's room is may be less important than respecting curfew.

Shifting from dependence to independence. This shift is a normal developmental progression from adolescence to young adulthood. As parents, we need to teach our teenagers how to behave more responsibly and yet not make their decisions for them or oppose their efforts to take control over their lives. Ideally, we want to nurture their responsible independence. The best strategy to promote a healthy shift from dependence to independence is regular and frequent use of empowerment strategies. Empowerment involves giving your child a voice in his or her own discipline plan. As children grow older, parents need to place more and more of the decision-making responsibilities on them.

Control versus advice. The more controlling the parent, the more likely the teenager is to rebel and eventually defy the parent. In this scenario everyone loses. The parent is frustrated, and the child loses the opportunity to get useful advice from someone with a lot more experience in life and truly only their welfare in mind. As our adolescent children shift from dependence to independence, we as parents need to shift from controlling to advising. Your child needs to learn to make his/her own decisions to function effectively as a young adult. Help your child by offering suggestions and then say: "But what do you think makes the most sense for you?" And whenever possible go with the teen's ideas.

The school of hard knocks. As parents we naturally want to protect our children and help them avoid making mistakes or suffering the consequences. In the long run, however, we may be doing them more harm than good. If you foster responsible independence, it is quite likely your child will have some difficult times. That's part of growing into adulthood. Unless his actions are likely to be life threatening or extremely harmful, making mistakes is a productive learning experience.

When to just listen. Listening is a way of communicating respect. Lecturing implies an assumed lack of knowledge or ignorance. That's why children often become defensive and avoidant in response to lecturing. This is especially true of teenagers who are secretly crying out for parental respect for their independent judgments and choices, as their developing sense of autonomy emerges. Use open-ended phrases and questions, such as: "I'm really interested in knowing more. What was that like for you?" Respond with supportive phrases such as: "I think I would feel that way too, if that happened to me."

The above article is adapted from Jan Hittelman's book "Parenting Essentials."