

ADOLESCENCE: DEALING WITH NORMAL REBELLION

Adolescence is a time when a teenager attempts to become psychologically separated from his parents and casts aside the dependant relationship of childhood. Before he can develop an adult relationship with his parents, however, the adolescent must first distance himself from the way he related to them in the past. This process is characterized by a certain amount of intermittent rebellion, defiance, discontent, turmoil, restlessness, and ambivalence, all of which are normal behaviors. Emotions usually run high. Mood swings are common. Under the best of circumstances this adolescent rebellion continues for approximately 2 years; not uncommonly it lasts for 4-6 years.

DEALING WITH NORMAL ADOLESCENT REBELLION

- Create a relationship of mutual respect

By the time your child is 12 years old, start working on developing the kind of relationship you would like to have with your child when he is an adult. Treat your teen the way you would like him to treat you when he is an adult. Your goal is mutual respect, support, and the ability to have fun together. Strive for relaxed, casual conversations during bicycling, hiking, shopping, playing catch, driving, cooking, mealtime, working, and other times together. Use praise and trust to help build his self-esteem. Recognize and validate your child's feelings by listening sympathetically and making nonjudgmental comments. Remember that listening doesn't mean you have to solve your teen's problems.

- Avoid criticism about "no-win" topics

Most negative parent-adolescent relationships develop because the parents criticize their teenager too much. Much of the teen's objectionable behavior merely reflects conformity with the current tastes of his peer group. Peer-group immersion is one of the essential stages of adolescent development. Dressing, talking, and acting differently than adults helps your child feel independent from you. Try not to attack your teenager's clothing, hairstyle, makeup, music, dance steps, friends, recreational interests, room decorations, use of free time, use of money, speech, posture, religion, and philosophy. This does not mean parents should withhold their personal views about these subjects. But allowing your teen to rebel in these harmless areas often prevents testing in major areas, such as experimentation with drugs, truancy, or stealing. Intervene and try to make a change only if your teenager's behavior is harmful, illegal, or infringes on your rights.

Another common error is to criticize your teen's mood or attitude. A negative or lazy attitude can only be changed through good example and praise. The more you dwell on nontraditional (even strange) behaviors, the longer they will last.

- Let society's rules and consequences teach responsibility outside the home

Your teenager must learn from trial and error. As he experiments, he will learn to take responsibility for his decisions and actions. The parent should speak up only if the adolescent is going to do something dangerous or illegal. Otherwise, the parent must rely on the teen's own self-discipline, pressure from his peers to behave responsibly, and the lessons learned from the consequences of his actions.

A school's requirement for punctual attendance will influence when your child goes to bed at night. School grades will hold your teenager accountable for homework and other aspects of school performance. If your teen has bad work habits, he will lose his job. If your teenager makes a poor choice of friends, he may find his confidences broken or that he gets into trouble. If he doesn't practice hard for a sport, he will be pressured by the team and coach to do better. If he mispends his allowance or earnings, he will run out of money before the end of the month.

If by chance your teenager asks you for advice about these problem areas, try to describe the pros and cons in a brief, impartial way. Ask some questions to help him think about the main risks. Then conclude your remarks with a comment such as "Do what you think is best." Teenagers need plenty of opportunity to learn from their own mistakes before they leave home and have to solve problems without an ever-present support system.

- Clarify the house rules and consequences

You have the right and responsibility to make rules regarding your house and other possessions. A teenager's preferences can be tolerated within his own room but they need not be imposed on the rest of the house. You can forbid loud music that interferes with other people's activities, or incoming telephone calls after 10 pm. While you should make your teen's friends feel welcome in your home, clarify the ground rules about parties or where snacks can be eaten. Your teen should be in charge of cleaning his room and washing his clothes as well as helping with family chores and responsibilities. You can insist upon clean clothes and enough showers to prevent or overcome body odor. You must decide whether you will loan your car, bicycle, TV, clothes, and so forth.

Reasonable consequences for breaking house rules include loss of telephone, TV, internet, stereo, and car privileges. Time-out is rarely useful in this age group.

Physical punishment, which can escalate to a serious breakdown in your relationship, should not be used. If your teenager breaks something, he should repair it or pay for its repair or replacement. If he makes a mess, he should clean it up. If your teen is doing poorly in school, you can restrict TV time. You can also put a limit on telephone privileges and weeknights out. If your teen stays out too late or doesn't call you when he's delayed, you can ground him for a day or a weekend. In general, grounding for more than a few days is looked upon as unfair and is hard to enforce.

- Use family conferences for negotiating house rules

Some families find it helpful to have a brief meeting after dinner once a week. At this time your teenager can ask for changes in the house rules or bring up family issues that are causing problems.

You can also bring up issues (such as your teen's demand to drive him to too many places and your need for his help in arranging carpools). The family unit often functions better if the decision-making is democratic. The objective of negotiation would be that both parties win. The atmosphere can be one of "nobody is at fault, but we have a problem. How can we solve it?"

- Give space to a teenager who is in a bad mood

Generally when your teenager is in a bad mood, he won't want to talk about it with you. If teenagers want to discuss a problem with anybody, it is usually with a close friend. In general, it is advisable at such times to give your teen lots of space and privacy. This is a poor time to talk to your teenager about anything, pleasant or otherwise.

- Use "I" messages for rudeness

Some talking back is normal. We want our teenagers to express their anger through talking and to challenge our opinions in a logical way. We need to listen. Expect your teenager to present his case passionately, even unreasonably. Disregard the small issues but don't accept disrespectful remarks such as calling you a "jerk". Unlike a negative attitude, these remarks should not be ignored. You can respond with a comment like, "It really hurts me when you put me down or don't answer my question." Make your statement in as non-angry a way as possible. If your adolescent continues to make angry, unpleasant remarks, leave the room. Don't get into a shouting match with your teenager because this is not a type of behavior that is acceptable in outside relationships.

What you are trying to teach is that everyone has the right to disagree and even to express anger, but that screaming and rude conversations are not allowed in your house. You can prevent some rude behavior by being a role model of politeness, constructive disagreement, and the willingness to apologize.

CALL OUR OFFICE FOR AN APPOINTMENT IF

- You think your teenager is depressed, suicidal, drinking or using drugs, or going to run away
- Your teenager is taking undue risks (i.e. reckless driving)
- Your teenager has no close friends
- Your teenager's school performance is declining markedly
- Your teenager is skipping school frequently
- Your teenager's outbursts of temper are destructive or violent
- You feel your teenager's rebellion is excessive
- Your family life is seriously disrupted by your teenager
- You find yourself escalating the criticism and punishment

- Your relationship with your teenager does not improve within 3 months after you begin using these approaches
- You have any other questions or concerns

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Caring for your Teenager* Donald E. Greydanus MD, American Academy of Pediatrics
- *Building Resilience in Children and Teens* Kenneth R. Ginsburg MD
- *Cybersafe: Protecting and Empowering Kids in the Digital World of Texting, Gaming and Social Media* Gwenn Schurgin O’Keeffe MD
- *Sports Success Rx* Paul R. Stricker MD
- *Less Stress, More Success* Kenneth R. Ginsburg MD