

Living With and Loving Your Defiant Teen *Elizabeth Ellis, PhD*

"I don't know what has happened to my daughter. She was so sweet when she was 12. She always wanted to please us. Now that she is 15, she is out of control—arguing back at us, hanging out with friends we don't approve of, and coming in after curfew. She has no respect for us any more." Does this sound like your family situation? I often get calls like this from a distressed parent. They ask, "Is he using drugs?" "Is she depressed?" "Are her friends making her this way?" Most parents view the problem this way—that there is something wrong with the teenager and that individual counseling will solve the problem if they can find someone the teen "will like." In reality, the teen is probably not using drugs and probably not depressed. Effective interventions may lie in working primarily with the parents. In fact, some defiant teens won't even come to an appointment. And finding someone the teen "likes" might be desirable but not necessary. The best way to understand the problem of defiant teens is to understand the 5 factors that all have a role in shaping defiance in the teen years. We'll look at them each in depth.

Normal Defiance in Adolescence

Fact 1. Your teenager's primary developmental task is to become independent of you. You must understand that a certain amount of defiance in adolescence is not only common, it is a sign of growth to maturity. The search to develop an independent sense of self and to be self sufficient is not just important, it is essential to survival as an adult. A lot of what may annoy you—his mode of dress, his music, how he spends his spare time—is part of his search to define himself as different from you. If your son likes you to put his clothes out for him, you've got a problem. If your daughter wants you to tell her what courses to take, you may feel needed, but she may not be able to leave home to go to college.

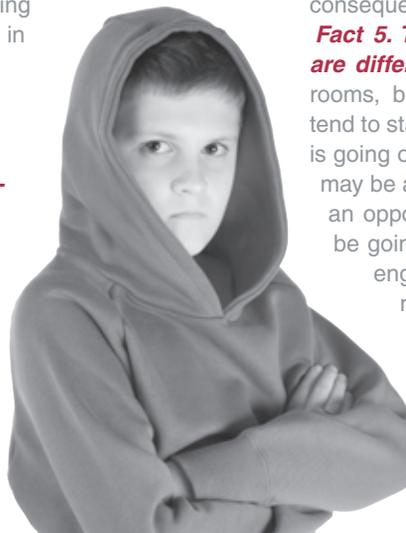
Fact 2. Friends begin to play a bigger role in a teen's life, sometimes supplanting adults. Forming strong bonds with friends their own age is absolutely crucial if your teen is to grow up and leave the nest. They will want to spend more time with friends than with parents. Parents need to put their hurt feelings aside. It is normal for teens to reject their parents' ideas, opinions, and values in favor of their friends' beliefs, advice, and values. In the majority of situations, however, teens will seek out friends who have backgrounds and families that are similar to those of their own family.

Fact 3. Seeking to be their own person, teenagers' often feel fragile inside, but don't want to appear weak to their parents. They often struggle between wanting to confide in you and asking for your advice and help on the one hand, and yet, because they would be embarrassed to do so, will put on a front that they have it all together, they know everything, and they don't need you at all. Thus, they often

will not back down from a power struggle over a trivial matter. They will plant a flag on that hill and "die" there even though they know they are wrong. You must find a way for them to save face. You must strive to avoid shame and embarrassment. You must find a way to help them solve a problem, while letting them feel that they solved it themselves.

Fact 4. Teenagers typically give their mothers a more difficult time than their fathers. This is not because mom is doing something wrong. Mothers make most of the rules in the home and are thus the enforcers. They are the ones to push against. Also, teens are naturally more intimidated by fathers because they are larger, taller, stronger, and have deeper voices than moms. They also tend to talk less, are less patient, and punish more harshly than moms. Moms, on the other hand, tend to nag, harangue, explain and complain verbally in an attempt to seek consensus. They tend to be drawn into lengthy arguments, but to be less decisive at following through with consequences.

Fact 5. Teenage boys seek independence in ways that are different from teenage girls. They withdraw into their rooms, become uncommunicative and keep secrets. They tend to stay away from the house. You may have no idea what is going on with them. Getting a conversation out of your son may be a challenge. This is normal. You may have to wait for an opportune moment, like a car ride, to hear what might be going on with him. Girls tend to be more verbal and to engage in prolonged arguments. They will tell mom "too much," then get angry when mom overreacts to what she's learned. Much of what they say they do not really mean and regret it later. I have found that girls who were particularly close to mom at 11 or 12 are often the same ones who push away from mom the hardest when they are 14.



Your Teenager's Personality and Temperament

Any parent will tell you that all their children are different, that they came into the world with their own very different dispositions. This one is shy, that one never met a stranger. The oldest is serious and studious, the youngest is a stand up comic. The son would give his most valued possession away but the daughter is quite self-centered. A great deal of research into the genetics of personality and temperament over the last 30 years have confirmed grandmother's wisdom and forced us to conclude that these traits are hard wired at birth and are largely genetic. Given these differences, we know that teens with difficult personalities are likely to approach the teen years with difficulty as well.

Teens with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are at high risk for problems of defiance. Though they are able to sit still by adolescence, the hallmark problems of inattentiveness, impulsivity,

Continued

Overanxious Tennagers, continued

and overactivity are closely associated with defiance. These teens will seek out new and novel experiences with little thought to the house rules, much less to the consequences. They are at greater risk of experimentation with drugs and alcohol and reckless driving. Girls with ADHD are at greater risk of early sexual activity and unwanted pregnancy. They “live in the moment” and see little value in working hard in school. They are driven to be with friends, hanging out and having fun.

Teens with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) are those who, even as children, have always been angry and argumentative. They are especially difficult to deal with in adolescence. They have always been demanding. They want what they want and they want it now, and they won't take no for an answer. They will dig in their heels and battle it out for some small victory. Their refusal to be flexible, to go with the flow, has disrupted many family outings. The teen years will be a battleground.

Teens with mood disorders are prone to problems of defiance as well. They may be overly dependent on their friends and become moody and volatile if they can't be in constant contact with them. They may become overly involved in the emotional problems of other defiant teens. They may be easily upset by parental limit setting and respond with tears, arguments, and threats to hurt themselves. They may vent their emotions on parents with statements like, “I hate my life! It's all your fault! You just want me to be miserable!”

Where Do You Come In?

Yes, you are a big factor in your teen's defiance, in several ways. Studies show that among defiant teens with ADHD, there is a 40-50% chance that one of the parents has ADHD as well. Thus, you may be a parent who tends to be rather disorganized, inconsistent, and impulsive when it comes to setting limits for your teen. You or your spouse might be poor at remembering what rules you set for the cell phone or how long your teen was supposed to be off the internet.

Similarly, many parents of oppositional defiant teens have similar personalities. They tend to be dogmatic and dictatorial in the rules they set for the teen, and will not listen to the teen's point of view. They demand instant compliance. Teens will say, “It's either his way or the highway.” They will engage the teen in power struggles over issues that are not that important, to the detriment of everyone in the family.

Some parents have explosive personalities. Studies show that teens who are quick to anger, have poor self control, and are easily frustrated, often have parents with the same traits. These parents may have expectations that are simply too high for the teen and blow up when these expectations are not met. Impatient and stressed by the situation, they may escalate with the teen into shouting, name calling, ridicule, sarcasm, and even physical struggles. They may say things they regret later such as, “Leave and don't come back!” or “I can't stand you any more!”

Some parents, especially mothers, are so anxious and fearful of their teen's safety and his future prospects, that they are overprotective. They try to tightly control the teen's every movement, every activity, even attempt to select the teen's friends. They check the teen's grades via email every day and battle the teen over every paper that was less than an A. They have a low tolerance for granting the teen independence and autonomy out of fear that something negative and

life altering will happen. They micromanage every detail of the teen's life in an attempt to keep her bound to her mother, while the teen is simultaneously trying to pull away.

Individual and Family Stressors

It is not surprising that stresses in your teen's life may result in some temporary irritability, angry acting out, and defiance. Your star baseball player who is sidelined permanently by a knee injury, your daughter whose best friend went out with her boyfriend, may be understandably angry and dejected. With time and patience they will adapt and go on to new interests. Other stressors are not so obvious. Geographical moves are often very hard on teens. They will have to adapt to a new peer “culture,” new values, language, and styles of dress. Their desperation to fit in and find a place for themselves may result in some defiance and getting into trouble.

Family stresses may play an even bigger role. Studies show that single mothers are the most likely group to have aggressive teens. These mothers tend to be very stressed and overwhelmed themselves and often have unrealistic expectations for teens. Mothers living with boyfriends are the next most common category in which we see defiant teens. It may be that the teen objects to the presence of the boyfriend in the home. It is also common that these homes are less stable in general and have been characterized by frequent disruptions and moves. Frequent changes in parental figures and frequent moves are directly correlated with angry acting out in teens.

Married couples tend to have the lowest rates of defiant teens, but even those families, if they are characterized by marital conflict, will have a higher than average percentage of defiant teens. One pattern seen often is where mother does all the limit setting and discipline, and is angry at the father who is disengaged and uninvolved. Still another common pattern seen in married families is where one parent is permissive and over indulgent in order to counteract the harshness of the other parent who is prone to explosive outbursts.

Parents who divorce and continue to be hostile toward each other may inadvertently

contribute to teen defiance as well. One parent may be overly permissive with the teen, over indulgent with expensive gifts, and may sabotage the other parent's efforts to set limits with the teen—all in an effort to win the teen's loyalty. This is “payback” for the wrongs the parent felt he/she suffered as a result of the other parent's actions in the marital breakdown.

The Cultural Context

“If I had said that to my parents, I would have gotten a slap in the face!” Have you heard yourself saying this? I have heard parents say this hundreds of times in my 30 years of practice. They then ask, “Why are teens today so defiant and disrespectful?” The shortest answer I can give them is that—we don't slap teenagers in the face any more. Nor do we beat them with belts (or most don't). These responses were common in the 1950's and 1960's. Today they are considered abusive.

The longer answer is that our society has changed in many ways which all contribute to a different relationship between teenagers and their parents. Fifty years ago parents and children had more distant relationships. Children did not confide in parents, nor did parents share their every day worries with children. Parents were distant figures who were seen as all-powerful, all-knowing. This began to change in the 1950's with the advent of television. Children began to spend



hundreds of hours watching adults on television behave irresponsibly, stupidly, even immorally. From Jackie Gleason in “The Honeymooners” in the 1950’s, to Archie Bunker and Edith in 1970’s, to Bart Simpson in the 1980’s, adults, even parents, were seen as foolish, laughable, and lovable—but certainly not God like.

By the 1970’s the divorce revolution was in progress. Children began to live in homes with just one parent. In these homes, children see parents go through emotional struggles and to “date” new people. Parents began to have only one or two children and they spent more time with the children they had. Mothers began to feel it was their obligation to “play” with the children, an idea unheard of in the 1950’s. Parents and older children began to relate to each other on a more equal level, as quasi-friendships. In this context, children naturally question the adult’s authority more so and to view the parent’s rules as optional.

Add to these the relaxation of social rules and conventions in society and in the media over the last 25 years. Many groups in the United States are distressed at the increasing levels of vulgarity and coarseness on television and in the movies. If one wants to see who teens admire, one can turn on Entertainment Tonight and see a daily round of exploits by drunken and drug using movie stars and rockers. The use of obscenities in rock and RAP music has become so pervasive as to desensitize us to the lyrics about aggressive and abusive behavior and the exploitation of others. Exposure to a constant barrage of this material has the effect on children and teens of making unruly behavior, a disrespectful attitude, and obscene language normal. “It’s no big deal,” teens will say.

Closing

In this brief newsletter, I hope I have broadened and added to your ideas about the causes of your teen’s defiant behavior. Think of it as an equation:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Normal} \quad + \quad \text{Your teen's-} \quad + \quad \text{Your charac-} \\ \text{Adolescence} \quad \text{temperament} \quad \text{teristics} \\ \\ \quad + \quad \text{Stresses} \quad + \quad \text{Culture} \quad = \quad \text{DEFIANCE} \end{array}$$

Hopefully, you’ve begun to sort out the 5 factors and determine which ones fit your situation. You may also have begun to think through which things you have some control over (particularly your characteristics and stressors) and how you might make some changes. Consider for a moment your last battle with your defiant teen. Here are some quick tips taken from the above material.

- Q. Could your teenager have been trying to assert his independence and move in an age appropriate direction? If so, how can you loosen up some and support that move?
- Q. Were your expectations reasonable? Were you expecting more of him than he can handle (especially if he has ADHD or ODD) ?
- Q. Was this a wise battle to pick, or could you have let it go?
- Q. Were the rules clear? Were you assuming she knew what you wanted without actually spelling it out?
- Q. Were you calm? in control? reasonable? brief and to the point? consistent?
- Q. Were you and her other parent united as a team?

In the next issue of this newsletter, we’ll look at a comprehensive plan for making interventions

Reference

Barkley, R. & Robin, A. (2008). *Your Defiant Teen*. (New York: Guilford Press).

Loving Your Teen

1. Learn to laugh at their inconsistencies. Have you seen the Zits cartoon where the teenage boy shouts at his mother that he doesn’t need her for anything, then asks her to take him to the Mall? Or have you had this happen—your daughter asks you to help her pick out a dress, but she finds something wrong with every dress you pick. So you stand quietly. Then she gets mad and says, “Well, don’t just stand there. Help me. Why won’t you tell me what you like?” Don’t argue with the logical inconsistency. Just smile.

2. When you find yourself annoyed with the wet towels on the bathroom floor or the soda cans in the family room, being still and breathing helps. Try not to take it so seriously. Smiling helps too. Judy Ford writes, “Sitting down makes you look available, smiling makes you look friendly, and being still makes you look ready to listen.” You may be surprised at how this opens up conversation sometimes.

3. Be careful to avoid embarrassing them. Even though you may dress conservatively, try to say the right thing, and stay in the background, and not embarrass them, they may be mortified by your presence. Here is a list of things parents do that teens find embarrassing: talk loudly in public, ask weird questions to strangers, get impatient with waiters and store clerks, ask their friends questions about their parents. While these may be ordinary comments, teens are hypersensitive to any unwanted negative reactions from others. Always keep in mind the fact that they are listening and watching.

from Judy Ford. *Wonderful Ways to Love a Teen*. (Conars Press, 1996).



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Dr. Ellis has been in practice in the Atlanta area since 1977. She works primarily with children, adolescents, and families and has specialized in child and family forensic evaluations since 1986. She is the author of two books:

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as well as numerous papers in the field of child and family forensic work. Her paper "Help for the Alienated Parent" appeared in the *Journal of Family Therapy* in the Fall of 2005 and "Ten Ethical Pitfalls to Avoid When Doing Child and Family Forensic Work" appeared in the May 2006 issue of the *Georgia Psychologist*.

Dr. Ellis' most recent paper, "A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for Parental Alienation Syndrome" was published in the *Journal of Child Custody* in January 2008.

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Coming Soon...

What Do I Do With My Defiant Teen?

Are you trying to ride out the storms with your defiant teen? If so, we'll show you what to do in Part II of *Living With and Loving Your Defiant Teen*. We'll walk you through a five part plan that has been shown to be effective, starting with (1) Making positive one-on-one time a regular habit, followed by (2) Getting your teen involved in establishing an effective behavior contract, then (3) Teaching your teen to collaborate with you in generating solutions to problems, (4) Learning and practicing communication skills, and finally (5) Developing more realistic expectations for your teen.