

Living With and Loving Your Defiant Teen, Part 2 Elizabeth Ellis, PhD

Last Fall I wrote about the causes of defiant behavior in teens. Rather than viewing the problem as lying solely with the teen, I gave you an equation that involved 5 factors:

$$\text{Normal Adolescence} + \text{Your teen's temperament} + \text{Your characteristics} + \text{Stresses} + \text{Culture} = \text{DEFIANCE}$$

In this issue I'd like to take a look at a six part plan for living with and loving your defiant teen.

Start with Your Own Contribution to the Problem

Yes, this means you! Many times I have seen an adolescent girl whose mother complained she was "totally out of control." Yet when I interviewed her to find out why she kicked her mother, she told me, "She was yelling at me for 15 minutes and wouldn't stop, then called me a b___ and a sl___, and when I called her a b___ back, she grabbed me and pulled my hair, so I hit her." Who is out of control here?

In an earlier issue of this newsletter, I wrote about the teenage brain and the changes it goes through in adolescence. Patterns of growth in the teen brain, as well as the effect of hormones on those areas, contribute to the intense emotions and moody ups and downs of teenagers. This growth occurs long before similar development in the "executive center" of the brain is complete. The executive center is the area of the brain that helps us control our behavior, inhibit impulses, plan ahead, preview consequences and make good choices. It also helps us think clearly in the midst of an intensely emotional situation. In other words, the gas pedal on the teenager's emotions is very sensitive while the brakes are still faulty or nonexistent. Thus, it is the parent who has to be what I call, "the surrogate executive system." You, the parent, have to rely on your own mature level of self control in these situations. You must not only be a role model of self control, but you must rely on your own calmness to keep the situation under control.

Keep these tips in mind: (a) be brief in what you say. Do not go on and on repetitiously, oblivious to the fact that your teen is about to explode. (b) Do not use curse words. You cannot justify cursing your teen, yet forbidding them to curse you back. (c) Do not ridicule them. Remember their ego is very fragile. (d) Do not make ridiculous threats (i.e., "You're grounded forever!"), or cruel threats (i.e., "I can't stand you, I'm sending you to live with your father, or "I'm going to put you in a foster home."). (e) Never, ever get physical with your teen. They are likely to hit you back and the result can be disastrous. (f) If they need to leave the room, let them. It is their way of de-escalating the situation.

Take An Inventory of Your Parenting Style

Many of these principles apply to parenting kids of any age.

1. Are the rules and consequences clear? In many homes, rules and consequences evolve from one situation to another. Teens test the limits to see how far they can go with—staying out

late, messy bedrooms, cursing, chores not done, failing grades in school, reckless use of the car, and smoking pot. I've had countless family sessions where we literally sat down with paper and pen and wrote out the rules and consequences. To most parents' surprise, the average teenager actually likes having things spelled out so they know just where the lines are drawn.

2. Are the rules reasonably consistent? Teens will tell me that some rules are enforced, some aren't. Often it depends on the parent's mood. This is particularly true for overwhelmed single parents who are often tired and stressed. However, it is also true for married, dual career parents who work long hours and are tired and stressed as well.

3. Do you have clear boundaries? My daughter related this story to me recently. "Emily's mother broke up with her boyfriend, so now she's being all chummy with Emily and they went to get matching tattoos. She's using Emily as her best friend be-

cause she's lonely. Can you believe that?" As I said in the previous issue, parents and teens now have much closer relationships than they did 30 to 40 years ago. At times the boundaries are blurred. A mom who gets a matching tattoo with her daughter will have a difficult time justifying why she can drink alcohol but her daughter can't.

4. Are you and the other parent a team? If one parent indulges, while the other invokes limitations, you have a problem. If one parent punishes, while the other consoles, you have a problem. If one parent carries out the drudgery of homework, chores, and bedtimes, while the other parent takes the teen to Malibu or Dave and Buster's (game palaces), you have a problem. This is especially problematic for divorced parents, but also for parent and step-parent couples.



Make Positive One-on-One Time a Habit

This is probably the single most overlooked aspect of parenting teens. While many parents dread the teen years with the expectation that it is a negative time in their children's progress toward adulthood, they should consider this: teens often view their parents as very negative people during this time as well. Here are some common complaints from teens:

"When my mom walks in the door from work, the first thing out of her mouth is a criticism." Ex. "Why didn't you empty the dishwasher?" "Why are these coke cans sitting out?" "Why isn't your homework done?"

"I wish my dad would say something positive to me. All I hear is criticism."

"My parents are always busy. I'm always with my friends. We don't spend time together as a family any more."

"They're always comparing me to kids who are perfect (or to the older sibling who is perfect). Why don't they compare me to the bad kids. They're much worse than me."



By the time I see many adults and teens, they are in a logjam of negativity. The parents don't like their teens because the teen is negative toward them most of the time. The teen, likewise, does not like their parents because what they hear from their parents is negative most of the time. The parents would like their teen to be pleasant and respectful, but, remember, it is far easier to start with yourself, rather than getting your teen to change. Teens are only human. They like people who like them. How do you get to where you like them again?

Start with spending positive time together. This is a challenge. They don't like anything you like and they want to be with their

friends all the time. Start somewhere. Cook dinner together one night a week. Teenagers like to eat and many enjoy learning to cook, including boys. Take an interest in one of their interests. When my son was an angry, rebellious 16 year old, his only interest was spray painting graffiti inside railroad tunnels and in back alleys and on abandoned buildings. I became interested in graffiti as well and we shot rolls



of film of graffiti in Atlanta and other big cities in the U.S. Try to get them interested in something you like to do—jogging, bicycling, photography, travel, the stock market, Broadway shows, fashion, or restoring old cars, etc.

Notice when he's not doing something bad. "I see you're doing homework. That's great." "Your room doesn't look bad at all. It looks pretty good." "I appreciate you're getting home by curfew."

Anytime she volunteers to do something, or does it on her own, praise her. Don't fall back on the time worn, "She shouldn't need to be praised for doing what she ought to do." All people like praise.

Think of something your defiant teen does, like arguing with you when you ask her to do something. Every time she doesn't do it, praise her. Ex. "Thanks for not arguing with me." Ex. "You started to blow up about this, but let it go. I appreciate that."

If you're really stuck and can't think of anything good to say, set up an opportunity to say something positive. Ask her to do something she would ordinarily do anyway, then praise her for doing it. Examples: "Bring your plate to the table.... Thanks."

"Go get yourself a coke.... Thanks."

"Take the last piece of chicken.... Thanks."

"Sleep in late tomorrow.... Thanks."

Give Up Unrealistic Beliefs and Expectations

In the previous newsletter I brought up the issue of unrealistic beliefs and expectations about teens and how that contributes to our frustration, disappointment, and anger toward them. Now it's time to tackle them head on. We need to identify them, challenge them, and replace them with more realistic expectations. Here are just a few, adapted from Barkley and Robin, 2008.

Malicious intent:

"My teen misbehaves on purpose just to annoy me, hurt me, or get even with me." Don't take teen behavior personally. It has little to do with you. Replace this with: "My teen misbehaves because she is self centered, she is learning, and she is seeking her independence. That's the way teens are."

Ruination:

"If I give my son too much freedom, he will mess up, get in big trouble, and ruin his life." It's possible, but then, all of us were teens once, and most of us turned out ok. Replace this with: "He will make mistakes some times if I give him more freedom, but that's how he will learn responsibility. If he messes up, I'll just rein him in for a while, then give him another chance."

Love/Appreciation:

"My teen should show love and appreciation for all the great sacrifices I make." and "If he really loved us, he wouldn't spend so much time in his room." Replace this with: "Teens do tend to take their parents for granted. C'est la vie." and "Spending time in his room has nothing to do with us. It has to do with wanting more privacy as he becomes more independent."

Perfectionism:

"My daughter should always apply what I've taught her and never make mistakes." Replace this with: "She is just a kid and she's still learning. She has so little life experience, she's bound to make many mistakes." Even my son once said, "Mom, I'm just a prepubescent kid with peach fuzz on my lip and I don't know anything. I'm a work in progress." We all cracked up at the dinner table at the profound wisdom of that statement. Keep in mind, too, that ADHD teens (my son was one) are 3 to 5 years behind their peers in maturity.

Blind Obedience:

"My daughter should do whatever we ask her to

do and jump up and do it immediately.” No way! Teens are not little children. They have a more advanced brain capable of independent thinking. They will listen to your request, consider whether it is fair and reasonable, and choose accordingly. Studies show that teens who are more defiant are more likely to graduate high school and college. Replace this with: “While it might annoy me, I need to realize that this is how she is trying to show me that she is more independent now. I’ve got to be patient with her.”

Learn and Practice Good Communication Skills

Good communication starts with you. Always consider the situation you’re in when you’re trying to talk to your teen. When you are tired or irritable, or he or she is in a bad mood, is a bad time. Table it. Try to talk about something difficult when you’ve just had some positive time together. A good situation is when you’re doing an activity together, like driving somewhere or going out to dinner together. Don’t try to force the issue if they’re giving you a clear signal that they can’t handle the discussion right then.

Always keep it short. This is the biggest complaint I get from teens. “It isn’t a discussion. It’s a lecture that goes on and on and I’m not allowed to say anything, and they don’t just say it once, they say it over and over.” Remember that they stop listening after the first 10 words, so say it in 10 words or less, then let them respond.

Avoid what we call “harsh startups.” This is true for any kind of relationship. A harsh start up generates anger and defensiveness. A softer startup may get your teen to listen to you. For example, don’t start with, “There you go, late again! You’re never home on time! Start with “When you don’t come home by curfew, I worry about you.”

Silence is golden. Sometimes it’s best to just listen and let them vent. He may need to get something off his chest. You may learn something new about what’s bothering him by just listening quietly. Offer some innocuous comments like, “Unh-un,” and “ok,” and “tell me some more about that.” Offer some empathic statements like “I can see how frustrating this is for you,” or “I didn’t know this bothered you so much,” or “Wow, this is a really big deal to you, isn’t it.”

Avoid the trap of going for the bait and getting into defensive arguing. This is one I see so often with parents and teens. Yet it is also very difficult for parents to become aware of and to avoid. The teen starts out with the hook, a provocative comment like, “You never let me go anywhere,” to which the parent replies, “Yes I do, why just last week I let you go the Mall with your friends,” to which the teen responds, “But you only let me go for an hour and only after I cleaned my room, because you’re so controlling,” to which the parent responds, “I am not controlling, why I let you...” etc. This goes on for 10 or 15 minutes at which point both are yelling and losing control. I work with parents to avoid arguing and focus on questions instead. Thus, the hook above might be followed by, “Oh really, you think I never let you go anywhere. Tell me why feel that way.” and “So what you mean by controlling?” or “So tell me where you think the line is between being a caring parent and being too controlling?” The result of this series of questions and answers might be a dialogue that is productive for both parent and teen.

Use Collaborative Problem Solving Skills

By now, we have established a good foundation for living with and loving your defiant teen. Be in control of your emotions. Have good boundaries, clear and consistent rules and consequences. Try to work together as parents. Focus more on the positive, let up on the negative. Give up some unrealistic expectations that are getting in your way. Give up harsh, critical, negative communication with your teen. Now it is time to consider how the two of you resolve conflict.

One of the unrealistic expectations that you must give up is the belief that negotiating with your teen is wrong. It is absolutely the right thing. Studies show that teens who can reasonably and responsibly negotiate for what they want with others are more mature, and more well adjusted than those who can’t. They have better interpersonal skills and get along better with friends, teachers, and employers. One of your most important roles as a parent is to teach your teen how to solve problems with others.

The first step is to define the problem. You need to put your position on the table and get your teen to put his position on the table as clearly and concisely as possible. Summarizing this process very briefly might go like this. “Ok, here’s where I’m coming from. I don’t want you out late at night because a quarter of the drivers out there are intoxicated. I can’t go to bed until I know you are home safely. If I understand you right, your position is that you want to be able to be with friends as long as you’re safe and you’re not breaking the law.”

Next, you must brainstorm options. Get your teen to put every possible solution on the table. At first, it may be difficult to get your teen to generate solutions because he/she is so used to listening to you tell her what her options are and arguing with you about why each one of those won’t work. Be creative. Follow the example of game shows. Encourage her to “poll the audience,” call a friend, etc. Don’t judge the ideas. Be creative. Throw in some ideas of your own. Be willing to move off your initial position. Keep the mood light.

Review the pros and cons of each option. Ask “How will we know if this solution works?” “Will that solve the problem?” “How will I know if you are where you say you are?” “What if you don’t keep up your end of the bargain?”



Rank order your options together in terms of what appears to be the best possible solution. It is especially important to look at what will be a “win-win situation” for both parent and teen. Start with trying out the solution that is your first choice, but be open to giving it up if it doesn’t work and trying solution number two. Write it down as a contract between the two of you and sign it along with your teen. Be willing to revise the contract as necessary until you have one that is workable for the time being. All contracts have to be revised as the teen gets older and more mature. Remember that this method may be more time consuming than simply giving an order but it has several advantages. Your adolescent son or daughter will learn valuable lessons about how to solve conflicts with other people in their lives. They will buy into an agreement better if they participated in making it. They will respect you more for being willing to listen to them and consider their ideas. Your love and concern for them will be more evident as they see that you are willing to go through this process with them.

Good luck!

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Raising a Responsible Child

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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 About the Boys?

What is behind the epidemic of unmotivated, underachieving adolescent boys? Why are they falling behind girls academically? Is it the way schools are organized? Should we blame video games? Do they suffer from a lack of male role models? We'll take a look at some surprising statistics and some controversial theories in the next issue.