

How serious is it that my adolescent is staying out after curfew, experimenting with drugs, skipping school, and has been caught shoplifting?

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Q. Will he continue toward becoming a juvenile delinquent? Is there anything I can do?

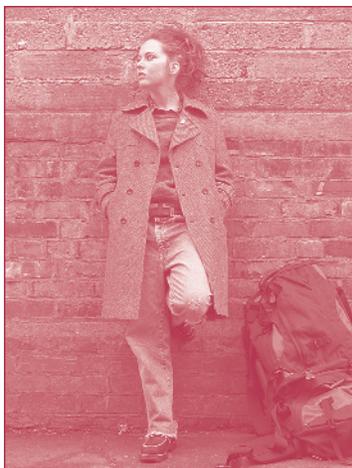
This kind of question, coming from a concerned parent, has become quite common in my practice over the years as the incidence of acting out in adolescence has escalated. The answer to the question, "How serious is this?" is "It depends." Researchers have been studying patterns of juvenile delinquency since the 1940's and have amassed a large amount of data about this problem. We now know that there are two kinds of juvenile delinquents, with very different causes, and very different outcomes.

The Problem of Early and Chronic Delinquency Among Adolescents

The more serious pattern of juvenile delinquency is called life-course-persistent antisocial behavior. This term means that the teenager has a pattern of behavior problems that began as early as the toddler years, which has persisted throughout his/her life, and is highly likely to persist well into adulthood. These adolescents' histories go something like this: the child seems to be born with a difficult temperament that shows up by age 3, with biting, hitting, and extreme tantrums by age 4, and tantrums persisting into the elementary school years. They are often diagnosed with ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder and are characterized as highly impulsive. These children are often risk takers with little fear and are engaged in shoplifting and truancy by age 10 to 12. They move on to fighting and aggressive behavior and property crimes in the early teen years. They are not anxious or upset by punishment and they move on toward selling drugs and stealing cars by age 16. Some may go on to robbery and rape by the early 20's and fraud, child abuse, and substance abuse by age 30. Those whose antisocial behavior persists past age 25 have histories of sexual promiscuity, reckless driving, violence in relationships, drug and alcohol addiction, abandoned or neglected children, poor work histories, multiple and unstable relationships, and chronic psychiatric illness. Though the crimes change, the general pattern of failing to adjust well to society and to exploit and abuse others remains the same.

What do we know about the causes of this pattern? The evidence suggests that these children come into the world with subtle neuropsychological deficits. There is strong scientific support for two deficits in particular—language deficits, and problems with attention and impulsivity. With regard to language deficits, we find that these life-course-persistent delinquents have low levels of language comprehension, low reading levels, poor expressive speech, and poor writing skills. Also, studies show that these children are highly impulsive throughout their lives and thus have poor capacities to plan ahead, to evaluate the consequences of their actions, to make better choices, and to control their behavior so that it conforms to other people's

expectations. Because these problems may be inherited to some extent, these children are often born to parents whose lives are stressed as well by poor employment histories, unstable relationships, financial problems, frequent moves, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. These children often have volatile and negative moods and are very difficult to raise. They evoke angry, frustrated reactions from even the most patient of parents, but especially from over-stressed parents. They fair poorly in school and often challenge authority. Thus, they evoke negative responses from teachers as well. The sex ratio is 10:1, boys to girls in this group, but girls follow essentially the same path. There appears to be a strong genetic predisposition toward this type of delinquency. Studies show that there is a much higher concordance among identical twins than among fraternal twins or siblings. However, at least one study found that the genetic contribution to this pattern is greater among Caucasian and Hispanic than among African-American children.



For life-course-persistent juvenile delinquents, life moves in a downward spiral with the cumulative effects of negative events. These adolescents associate with older adolescents that are similar to them in their criminal histories, and they thus adopt the lifestyles of these older peers. Repeated school failure means that success through education is a road closed to them. Their unstable work histories close out the possibility of success through employment. Their abuse of their girlfriends and wives close out the possibility of finding happiness through a stable marriage and parenthood. Continued drug and alcohol abuse further prevent success in any area of mainstream life. Thus, by the twenties, young men in this group have lives that are all but impossible to change. Virtually all attempts at intervention with this group through rehabilitation and mental health treatment have met with dismal results. The only recourse left is incarceration, and the turning point seems to be age. After age 40, this group slows down in terms of the number and type of offenses against society (though family violence appears to continue well into the 60's).

This is the bad news about life-course-persistent juvenile delinquents. The good news is that this group makes up a very small percentage of the large number of juveniles who break the law and/or commit status offenses. For those unfamiliar to this term, status offenses are those that are a crime by virtue of the child's age and would not be considered a crime if the person were above 18—skipping school, using alcohol, staying out all night, etc. Only about 5% of boys and adolescent males in our society are life-course-persistent offenders. They are characterized by: early onset (before age 13) and the frequency and variety (though not necessarily the severity) of their

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Cutting Among Adolescents, continued

crimes. For example, we know that about 5% of juvenile offenders commit more than 50% of juvenile crimes.

Adolescence Limited Offenders

The vast majority of juvenile offenses are committed by what we call adolescence-limited offenders. By that we mean adolescents who first act out in a serious way against social norms after the age of 13 and who stop acting out in their mid-twenties. For example, in one major longitudinal study, 12% of youngsters were classified as “new offenders” or first time offenders by age 13. By age 15 another 20% had joined these newcomers to delinquency despite having no previous history. When interviewed at age 18, 93% of adolescent boys admitted to at least some form of delinquent activity. By their mid twenties three fourths of the boys had stopped committing any offenses against society. Incidentally, this pattern is almost equally likely to among boys and girls with a sex ratio of 1.5 to 1. This pattern has been noted for many years by experts who work with juvenile delinquents. In fact, behavioral scientists have been studying this pattern in great detail as we now understand that it is the 5% life-course-persistent group whom we should focus on as far as early intervention and incarceration. The latter group, we now know, fairs best when kept out of the prison system. Time and maturity seem to take care of the problem.

Why Do So Many Teens Commit Status Offenses in Adolescence?

How can we explain the fact that the majority of teenagers (or at least teenage boys) engage in some form of illegal behavior between the ages of 13 and 23? While many theories have been offered, the best understanding we have at this time is that it is due to the gap between biological maturity and social maturity. In my book, *Raising a Responsible Child*, I described the trend that has been occurring in our society (and perhaps in all industrialized, urban societies) toward earlier physical maturity and later social maturity over the last 100 years. In the 1800's, adolescents went through puberty and matured physically around the age of 15 to 16. They quit school, began to work, and married around the age of 16 to 17. Thus, there was really no gap between childhood and adulthood. In fact, adolescence, as we know it today, didn't exist.

With better diet and better health, adolescents now go through puberty around ages 12 to 13. The age at which adolescents complete their education, earn income sufficient to support themselves, and marry, is a broad range extending from 18 to 28, with a mean around 23. Thus, the gap between being physically an adult, and feeling ready to take on adult roles, but not yet being able to, is often a span of 10 years. Experts on adolescence suggest that it is during these 10 years that adolescents engage in antisocial behavior (law-breaking behavior) because it affords them access to social maturity. Some even suggest that it is the 5% of teens who are the life-course-persistent juvenile offenders that are the role models.

Why should the teens with bad reputations and who get into trouble be role models? Because it is these teens who have all the trappings of social maturity—they don't conform to parents' rules and thus they have more freedom, they are sexually active, they have more money, they smoke and drink alcohol, they are out of school often and working, they even have babies or father babies. They are engaged in behaviors that are typical of adults in our culture. They engage in risky behaviors that adults would disapprove of. They have had “adult” encounters with society such as contact with police and probation officers, birth control clinics, and the courts. Viewed from the perspective of their more inhibited and younger peers, the “fast crowd” are not only more adult

like, they are having more fun too. Further studies have indicated that teens don't need to be friends with this group to be influenced by them; they only need to know about them or to see them to be influenced by their higher social status.

So, we now understand that it may well be very normal motives that drive ordinarily law-abiding teenagers to engage in antisocial and risky behaviors—the drive toward being recognized as mature, the desire to prove themselves, and the desire for independence. But why don't all teenagers act out? Interestingly, studies of adolescents who don't act out at all have found three things—(1) they seem to enter puberty later than other teens, (2) they are prevented from contact with other teens (for example, girls who are enrolled in all-girl boarding schools don't act out), (3) or they have above average levels of emotional problems. One study found that teens who never experimented with drugs at all were more nervous and tense than other teens and had few friends. On the positive side, some teens who never act out in high school seem to do so because they were allowed to take on adult roles with a good deal of responsibility when they were young, which then gave them a sense of maturity.

But why do these teenagers stop acting out in early adulthood? Again, the biological-social maturity gap seems to be the key factor. For most adolescents, by the time they are in their late teens to early twenties, the disadvantages of acting out outweigh the advantages. When aging delinquents attain some of the privileges they coveted as adolescents, the consequences of their illegal behavior shift from desirable to undesirable. The teen who lost his license at 19 due to a DUI no longer drinks or at least no longer drinks and drives. Moreover, his DUI record prevents him from getting the job he wants and is no longer a badge of honor. The girl who at 16 left school to work and make money, at age 19 or 20 is no longer seen as having any maturity advantage over her peers. In fact, she is likely to regret leaving school and to consider pursuing some advanced training.



Some late adolescents stop acting out abruptly when they cross a threshold into adult roles. The young man who joins the military, for example, is accorded adult status immediately when he returns from basic training with a shaved head and a military uniform and all the respect that the uniform and rank convey. Similarly, I have seen many young women mature upon giving birth to a child. They no longer have a need to “hang out with friends at the Mall” but are instead focused on the long range plan of caring for their child.

The other key factor is that this group with adolescence limited acting out is likely to have all the skills needed to be productive people and to have developed those skills before adolescence and the onset of their antisocial behavior. They are likely to have average to above average intelligence, to be able to obtain educational goals, to have the ability to get along with other people and to form lasting relationships. If they don't have neuropsychological deficits, they are, with maturity, more able to control their impulsivity and to plan ahead. Thus, the answer to the parent's question about how worried to be is that it depends on which group your adolescent is in. For the majority of parents, their acting out, even law-breaking adolescent, is in the “adolescence-limited” group and the outlook is positive, provided they don't have any mishaps with life-altering consequences—a lengthy prison stay, or a severe and debilitating injury.

What Can We Do as Parents to Prevent Our Teens from Getting into Trouble?

For the most part, parents in this situation must buckle their seatbelts and get ready to ride out what is to be a rocky road of 5 to 10

years' duration.

(1) Keep in mind that it is the adolescent's envy of the "socially mature" crowd and the copying of the peer group that is such a fundamental problem. Removing the adolescent from his peer group and putting him in a vastly different environment with a peer group that has a whole different value system may make a big difference. In the 1970's and 1980's adolescents who were acting out were often sent to psychiatric hospitals for lengthy stays. The costs were extremely high and the managed care plans have largely stopped paying for these 3-, 6-, and 9- month stays that cost over \$100,000. However, studies showed that adolescents benefited little from these programs beyond the obvious benefit of separating the adolescent from his peer group and giving him some time to mature in a safe place. Another recent finding has been that drug rehabilitation programs for adolescents do not work. Instead they provide ready access to a group of drug-using peers and foster a climate of story-telling about getting high.

A better choice would be the all girl boarding school cited above or the all male military school. These programs provide a more mainstream peer group than treatment programs. Some parents have found wilderness programs which will take the adolescent and subject him to strenuous physical activity and group bonding experiences. These programs foster independence, survival skills, confidence building, and teamwork, but can be very expensive. A much less expensive option is to send the teen to the home of a relative for a year. Ideally the relative would be located in a small town or rural area where there is little access to an acting out peer group.

(2) I always advise parents to not hesitate to accept the services of the juvenile court when they are available. Taking out an "unruly" petition on an adolescent who is violent at home, staying out all night, or truant from school, can be a very powerful step. Teenagers tend to minimize the parents' concerns as "over-reacting" and see very little downside to ignoring parents' warnings and consequences. However, appearing in court before a judge, having to report to a probation office, even just sitting on the bench at the courthouse surrounded by sheriff's deputies and bailiffs, can be a sobering experience. The court, by imposing early curfews, community service hours, drug screens, drug awareness classes, suspension of the teen's driver's license, and close supervision and monitoring, provides a strong backup to parental authority.

(3) Beyond that, keep in mind that it is the healthy search for meaningful adult roles that drive much of adolescent acting-out. In third world countries adolescents, by the age of 15, are major breadwinners for the family. They play roles in the family and community that are essential to the survival of the group. In our culture, they play video games all night, hang out at the Mall, cruise around in cars, and get their nails done. It is a lifestyle that is empty of opportunities for learning skills or growing in self esteem. We must search for ways to give young people meaningful roles. Working in the family business is one option if you are self employed. Many teens derive a sense of productivity from starting a small business--doing lawn maintenance, pet sitting, or selling their arts and crafts from a booth at a festival. Contrary to public opinion, adolescents who have after school jobs appear to be more responsible and have better grades than those who don't. Many adolescents take pride in their work as tutors in after care programs or caregivers to young children. If parents are opposed to the heavy burden that that entails on the adolescent, involve them in important roles in church and civic groups instead, such as working in a political campaign, building houses with Habit for Humanity, going on church relief missions to South America. We may want to keep in mind that most teens, even those who act out, are seeking, in their own misdirected way, to grow up.

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Bulletin on Teen Girls and Sports

Think sports are only beneficial to boys in the teen years? Think again. Last year a major national report by the Women's Sports Foundation found the following:

- Participation in team sports in high school is associated with higher, not lower, time, energy, and commitment to getting good grades. Girl athletes in high school take more math and science courses and do better in those courses than non athletes. Two years after high school the girl athletes are more likely to be enrolled in a university.
- Girls who play sports are less likely to smoke cigarettes or use marijuana or other illegal drugs. They suffer lower rates of depression and are less likely to be sexually active. They worry less about body image and look less to relationships with boys to build self-esteem.
- Girls who succeed in sports are more likely to succeed in careers as well. A study of 401 successful women found that 82% of them had played sports in high school and/or college. "Sports is nothing more than organizing a group for high performance. And that's what businesses do; they organize groups for high performance," said Donna Lopiano of the Women's Sports Foundation.

Like many studies, we don't know if we should conclude from the above results that participation in sports causes these positive benefits in adolescent girls, or that adolescent girls who are good students to begin with, and who are happier and more self confident, are more likely to try out for a varsity team. At the very least we can conclude that participation in sports of any kind contributes to maintaining physical fitness and a healthy weight for girls. Even girls who aren't cut out for team sports can take up jogging, skateboarding, horseback riding, and bicycling. These sports convey a sense of mastery and hopefully lifelong habits of striving to achieve one's personal best.

Source: "Sports to the Rescue" by Peter Cary. In: *Mysteries of the Teen Years*, U.S. News and World Report, May, 2005.

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Coming Soon...

Have you concluded that your teen's high and low mood swings, angry outbursts, and reckless behaviors are due to raging hormones? Guess what, you're wrong. New advances in brain imaging have found that teens' irrational behavior is due to the explosive growth and paring down of nerve fibers in the brain. Look for the Spring issue to see "why they act that way."

Also, we'll look at what neuroscience has discovered about how alcohol affects the teen brain.