



Teen Challenge: Questions & Answers About Defiance and Rebellion

Parents are faced with varying levels of challenges. For some parents, it is trying to get their teens to turn off the light in their bedroom. Other parents are dealing with more grave matters: drugs, sexual activity, and criminal activity. We believe the principles presented here can be scaled up or down to fit most situations. As a supplemental resource, this series of questions and answers provides general answers that fit a broad range of challenges with teens. We trust you will find it of value to your unique situation.

1. I didn't discover your books until too late. My teenager is in complete rebellion. I'm so afraid and angry and hurt. What can I do?

There is a false notion in our society that at age eighteen your kids will cease to be your children and you can no longer influence them. Chances are, you're going to live the next twenty, thirty, even forty years on this earth, so you'll have decades with your adult children. You may not have had the best years with your children in the past, but you've got the rest of your life to make it right. Begin by evaluating your own parenting to be sure you're not contributing to the problem. Then start working on rebuilding trust and influence. You haven't found this information too late. As long as you and your children both live, it's never too late to rebuild your relationship.

2. My teenager won't even talk to me. How can I work on the great communication suggestions you make in this book?

If you can't stand to look at each other because you know you're going to break out into a fight, then why not just slip a note under her door? It doesn't have to be a long note, and it certainly shouldn't be accusatory. Write something as simple as, "I really do love you. I'm just struggling, and I know you're struggling, too." And don't be surprised when a note comes flying by you when you've got your hands in the dishwasher. Sometimes we communicate better when we're not face-to-face. We can become so antagonistic to each other as parents and teens. Our physical presence reminds us of a hurtful word or a hurtful action, and before we know it, we're screaming. These walls can be broken down with just a simple note. If you learn to express your love in ways your teen can understand, and you persevere in doing so, eventually you will win through. Sometimes just placing your hand on your teenager's shoulder and saying, "I really appreciate what you've done," can break down a wall.

3. My teenager is showing signs that he doesn't respect me anymore. What can I do to regain my authority?

Usually the lack of respect for a parent has been there all along; it's just that the way a teenager demonstrates disrespect is more visible, especially now that he is the same size or bigger than the parent. Sometimes a teen feels a greater sense of security in himself, like maybe he doesn't need to give respect to the parent anymore. In all probability, respect has been missing for a long time. Your goal shouldn't be to regain dominance over your teenager, but to achieve influence. It's natural to want to control something that's out of control, especially when that something is your child. But when you have teenagers, using force won't get you where you want to go. You have no good options besides working to lead by your relational influence.

One area you'll want to work on is freedom. Not the unrestrained, do-whatever-you-want type of freedom, but the kind of freedom in which your teen is emancipated to communicate and to be his own person without the fear that an authority figure is going to force him to become something other than what he is. It is also possible that you have misinterpreted your teen. What you are hopefully headed toward with your teenager is a peer relationship. But neither you nor your teen knows exactly how to act as equals.

What you've interpreted as a lack of respect might be your teenager's first attempt at friendly familiarity. She might be teasing you.

It's usually quite clear when a teenager means to show disrespect. So if you're not sure, and if your child usually doesn't speak this way, you might at least ask yourself whether you two are just reaching a point in your relationship where you feel you can have a little bit of fun.

Don't try to regain control. Work instead on regaining your teen's respect and trust.

4. My teenager doesn't openly defy me, but rather pushes the limit a bit. If I say be home by ten, she's home at ten-fifteen. Do I have grounds to be upset?

Assuming this happens regularly and without good reason, this is what we call micro-rebellion. When your child was four and you told her to stay on the carpet, did she stand with her foot on the carpet but her toes poking over onto the tile? When she was ten and you asked her to put her dirty clothes in the hamper, did she toss them near the hamper?

As we say in *On Becoming Preteenwise*, for this young person micro-rebellion is full-scale rebellion. Parents may tend to dismiss this kind of rule bending as minor, but it is not minor to the child. Her toe may only be partly over the line, but her heart is completely over. Rebellion of any size, uncorrected, leads to contempt for authority. A micro-rebellious child who has not been corrected in the early or middle years is going to reveal the true depths of her rebellion as a teenager.

It's also possible for parents to unintentionally raise up a child who does not respect their instructions. When your son was five, how many times did you ask him to pick up his toys? If he delayed picking them up or did not pick them up all the time, did you finally do it for him? When he was nine, how many times did you have to ask him to put his bike in the garage before he finally did it? Did you nag? Did you threaten punishment but never follow through? If so, is it any wonder that your teenager doesn't think he needs to do what you ask?

Correct this problem by following our suggestions for how to regain influence with your teenager. Eventually you will want to confront your teen about her micro-rebellion. But be sure not to do it in the heat of the moment. When she strolls in at ten-fifteen is not the time. But you might want to talk about it tomorrow morning over cereal and coffee.

While the time for authoritative parenting is over with this child, it's never too late to mean what you say. If you set a curfew for your teenager, there has to be a consequence for breaking it. Otherwise it's not a rule; it's a suggestion. It's time to grow a backbone, Mom or Dad. If your teen breaks the curfew without a good reason, enforce the consequence. A parent who does not follow through on promises will be despised.

There is something better than a curfew: trust. When the relationship between parents and teens is very good, certain rules become superfluous. The Ezzos set no curfew for their daughters. Because the girls had proven themselves trustworthy in the small things, their parents were willing to trust them in this.

But it wasn't a blind trust. It was a courtesy trust. It had parameters on it. The girls would tell their parents what their plans were and when they expected to be home. If those plans changed, they called home. But even in those conversations there was a mutual respect. It wasn't, "Hey, Mom and Dad, this is what we're going to do, so deal with it." It was a dialogue.

5. My teenager came home with a certain part of his (or her) body pierced. What can I do?

Every generation comes out with new fads to shock old folks. It was shocking in the fifties to watch the Fabulous Four come over from England with long hair. It created a rage: Suddenly, long hair was in, and the good, Republican, short haircut was out. It also created an outrage: People were talking about it, preaching about it, writing editorials on it. Long hair was thought to herald the decline of the American ethical system. Now long hair is mostly out and short hair is in again.

In the seventies, young girls started to wear bracelets around their ankles. Originally, that was the symbol for a prostitute, so parents didn't want their daughters wearing anklets. In time, it became just a style option and no longer carried the connotation of prostitution. It became culturally acceptable. The same is true for men wearing earrings or ponytails. Once it was done for rebellion; then it passed into the mainstream and became just a fashion choice.

These days the rage is tattooing and body piercing: nose, lip, tongue, eyebrow, belly button, etc. There is shock value here. Many times a young person will adopt this style to express rebellion or nonconformity. Eventually, tattoos and body piercing will pass into the mainstream. Young people will get things painted or pierced simply because they truly believe it looks good. Some would argue that this transition has already taken place. Indeed, we know several delightful teenagers who have had their belly buttons pierced.

We think health concerns justify some limitations on body piercing. For instance, tongue piercing is out: You can't eat, and there's a danger of infection. If your teenager is considering body art or piercing, another thing you may want to discuss is the very real possibility that this style may go out of fashion. What may be considered attractive in ten years is a body without holes from former piercings all over it. "Honey, just think about this: You might meet someone in a few years whom you'd dearly love to marry but who is totally turned off by the fact that you once had your nose pierced."

The question you have to ask when your teenager comes home with some body part pierced is why she did it. Was it done to offend authority or flout the establishment? Or did she do it just because her friend Julie did it, and it's the latest style? If her motive is to keep up with teen fads, that's one thing. But if she has done it out of insolence, the matter is more serious.

The teenager who comes home with something pierced in order to shock you is saying, "Hello, where have you been?" The pierced tongue, lip, nose, or eyebrow is your teen's way of telling you that there is a disparity between who he is and who you are. When you see it, your tendency will be to give a knee-jerk reaction. "What in the world have you done!" That may, in fact, be the teen's goal: to at least get you to pay attention to him. You do need to deal with it, but we would advise you wait until you're cooled down.

When your teen does something like this to show that he or she is rejecting you and your values, your inclination may be to strike back: "How can I hurt you for hurting me?" But that won't get you anywhere. Your teen is crying out to you that something is wrong, and he wants you to fix it. Otherwise why would you be the target of his shocking fashion statement? Just as suicide is so often a cry for help, so something like this is often a cry for attention.

Your question has to be, "How do I win him back?" That's going to be hard. The process will probably take months. You've got to regain the love, confidence, and trust of your teen. This gets back to the whole premise of our book on this subject which is that you're going to fix most teen problems through the strength of your parent/teen relationship.

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