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Standing Up for Yourself

At this point you have already begun to acknowledge and encourage your teenager's decision making ability and you are not trying to control him in any way. You are giving your teenager responsibility for things that only involve him; that is, things in his life column. You are showing your child more respect. You have stopped triggering and reinforcing the troublesome things that your child does. And you are interacting with your child in a pleasant and courteous manner.

If you are doing all of these things then at this point most of the difficult behavior should have vanished. If you are still having difficulty with your child's behavior, the only reasonable explanation for this is that you are allowing or even encouraging your child to misbehave. You are doing this by putting up with the bad behavior. We are now going to learn how to stop doing this.

I want to preface this part of the program by saying that you must be sure that you have successfully given over those decisions that only involve your teenager to your child. It is also critical that you have thought about and eliminated all the triggers and reinforcements for the behaviors that are bothering you. What we are going to do now is based upon this premise.

If you have not completed the previous parts of the program, then if you go further now, you might be causing yourself a lot of trouble and conflict that you do not need. So please, do not try to implement this part of the program unless you have successfully completed what has come before.

The Five Step Approach

At this point you are respecting your child's rights. Now you are doing this it is only fair that your child respects your rights, also. If your child is still doing things that really bother you, then it is quite likely that he is not respecting your rights. We are about to change that.

What we are about to discuss is the way to handle those things that are still in your column. That is, things that your teenager does that affect your life directly. This approach will also be helpful for those things in your child's column that have some aspect that also belongs in your column.

Here are some examples of things that this approach will help:

- Your child makes a mess and doesn't clean up.
- He or she takes your things.
- Plays loud music all night long.
- Stays out late at night and then breaks into the house in order to get in.

- Continues to steal from you.
- Runs up an expensive long distance phone bill and doesn't pay for it.
- Freeloads and doesn't go to school or contribute to the running of the house in any way.
- Brings friends into the house when you are not home.
- Keeps drugs in the house.
- Has violent tantrums and breaks things in the house.

We are about to develop a five step process that will help you address and end these behaviors that are bothering you. Now this process will not be fast. It will take you some time to implement this approach, maybe even a few months. But when you finish with this process you should have everything in your home under your control and you will then be the one who is running your household.

So here are the five steps that we are going to execute. It is important that you do these in order:

Step 1 is to establish in your mind and in your teenager's mind that what you want is really fair. This will require you to make a serious attempt to negotiate with your teenager. Now the goal of this step is not to get your child to change his behavior. Rather it is to get him to acknowledge or at least hear that what you are requesting is legitimate and it is he who is the one who is being unfair.

Step 2 is stand firm against any pressure that your child may apply in order to get you to back down from what you want.

Step 3 is to do Step 2 again, repeatedly when necessary.

Step 4 is to establish your credibility; that is to show your child that you mean what you say and that you will do what is necessary to get what you want.

Step 5 is to actually take action in response to the unwanted behavior.

In most cases you will not need to go through all five steps. If you have established the legitimacy of your claim in Step 1 and shown your resolve to stand firm for what you want, most teenagers will back down during Step 3. However, in the event that this does not happen by the end of this program you are going to be prepared to do what is necessary to get your teenager to comply with your reasonable requests.

Even though you will probably not use all five steps, you should know them before you begin. This will give you the ability to execute the plan in a calm, relaxed manner. If you know what to expect and how to handle any situation that may come up, you will find that whatever happens will not upset you. You are prepared for it.

I want to point out that most parents want to jump right to Step 5. I get questions all the time from parents:

“What do I do when my child does _____?”

These parents are looking for a quick, one step answer. They want some form of punishment that is appropriate for the crime committed.

Well, there are one step answers to most behavior problems. However, the one step answer approach is not going to solve your problems permanently nor will it improve your relationship with your teenager. One step answers are great for the immediate problem at hand, but they are not a long term strategy.

Giving consequences should be the last step after the long process of:

1. Giving your child responsibility for his own life.
2. Giving your child respect.
3. Not doing things that trigger the unwanted behavior.
4. Not doing things that reinforce the unwanted behavior.
5. Establishing the fairness of your request.
6. Establishing yourself as the one who is being reasonable.
7. Showing that you are determined and that you are not going to back down.
8. Showing that you are prepared to take the necessary action to get what you want.

When you follow the entire process that I have outlined, you will regain control over your household, improve your relationship with your teenager and for the most part you will never have to ask:

“What do I do when my child does _____?”

Your teenager is going to stop doing whatever is bothering you before you get that far. When you focus only on “What do I do when my child does _____?” you will be constantly putting out fire at best, and very often you will be alienating your teenager.

So let’s go thru these steps in detail:

Step 1

The first thing you must do is establish that what you want and expect from your teenager is fair. This step is extremely important. Although it is quite clear to you that what you are asking for is fair, your teenager probably doesn’t see it that way.

In fact, your teen probably feels that he is the one who is being fair and your demands are unreasonable. Your teen probably feels that he has the right to treat you this way or even that this is the way you want to be treated. So you need to do this step first to inform your teenager that this is not the case and that you want and expect a change.

The goal of this step is to establish the fairness of your request in your teenager's mind and in your own mind, also. Since you are applying this technique to things that are in your column, things that your teenager does that affect your life, what you are requesting is something that any normal person in our society would consider fair and reasonable. If you present your request in a non-accusing matter-of-fact way, your child will also be very likely to consider it a fair request.

If your teenager is like most other teens, then your child knows and will recognize what is fair and reasonable when it is pointed out to him. It is just your teen doesn't act that way usually because he never thought about it.

Executing Step 1

Here is how you should approach your teenager.

Choose a time when you and your teenager are fairly relaxed and there is relative peace between you. In a neutral voice you are going to make a three statement declaration. The format is:

1. You are dissatisfied with the situation you are targeting.
2. You want to see the situation changed.
3. You would like your teenager's help to change it.

Here is an example:

You are tired of loud music blaring in the house at all hours of the night. You can handle about two hours a day, but more than that is too much for you. So let's begin.

Sentence 1: Bob, I am bothered by having loud music blaring all the time.

Sentence 2: I would like to have some quiet in the house.

Sentence 3: I would like some help from you to make this happen.

Your child will either respond in one of two ways.

He will respond in a way that says he is ready to negotiate a deal,

Or

He will push you off.

If he responds the first way, that's great. Negotiate an agreement that you both feel is fair. If the conversation goes this direction, be sure to make a specific agreement.

Here is an example, starting with your three statements:

You: Bob, I am bothered by having loud music blaring all the time. I would like to have some quiet in the house. I would like some help from you to make this happen.

Bob: I'm sorry. I didn't realize the music was so loud. (Notice Bob acknowledged your statement but did nothing toward working out a solution. If you stop here you have not accomplished anything. No agreement was reached.)

You: I would like some help from you to keep it a bit quieter in the house. (You are sticking to the subject and looking for a definite commitment.)

Bob: I won't play the music so loud anymore. (You are not done yet. This is in the right direction but it is not a definite commitment. What is called "so loud" is really a matter of opinion.)

You: I would like something a bit more definite than that. I can handle about two hours a day, but after that I would like you to wear headphones.

Bob: Okay, I'll play music loud from 10-midnight and the rest of the time I'll wear headphones.

You: That's a bit late for me, how about from 5-7.

Bob: Could we make it from 8-10?

You: That is fine with me. From 8-10 is your loud music time. Other times you agree to wear headphones. (Be sure to summarize the agreement you have made so that there is no mistake. You might want to write it down on paper.)

Now you have a fair verbal agreement with your teenager. Believe it or not, every once in a while your teen might surprise you and respond this way. It does happen on occasion.

What also happens is the second scenario. Your teen is not willing to discuss it and tries to push you off, change the subject, insults you or just ignores you and walks away.

Here is an example:

You: Brenda, it bothers me when I go into my closet and I can't find my clothes. I want to know when someone is using my things. I would like some help from you on this.

Brenda: Why are you coming to me? Sheila uses your clothes more than I do? (This is a push off. Your job is to stick to your point and get a verbal agreement.)

You: I would really like your help with this.

Brenda: I don't believe it. You're coming to me? You are so unfair. You let Sheila get away with everything. (This is a second attempt to change the subject. Stick to your goal.)

You: I would like your commitment to change this situation. (What you are doing is just rephrasing your third sentence a different way. Do not let your child get you off topic. The issue here is not Sheila, it is Brenda. If Sheila is using your clothes, you can talk to her later, privately.)

You should deliver your message quietly and politely. If your child responds to you in an inappropriate tone of voice or makes some unreasonable remark, just ignore it.

You must not let your child get you off topic and onto the "how dare you talk to me like that" topic. Your teenager is on comfortable ground there. He or she is much less comfortable when you are the one being reasonable. Every time you make a fair and reasonable request, you are putting pressure on your teenager to respond in a like manner. You want to use this pressure to your advantage. Your teenager may break down and show some signs of willingness to negotiate.

You: Brenda, I really expect your cooperation here.

Brenda: Okay... okay, get off my back already. (Ignore any swearing or reluctant tones. Just go forward with your agreement.)

You: I don't mind you using my things, but I want you to ask first. And I want them put back when you are done.

If after fifteen or twenty minutes, your teenager is not willing to discuss the topic or if he or she walks out on you, then drop the subject for the moment. Then either in a few hours or the next day begin Step 1 from the beginning. Repeat this process three or four times. Your child will either break down and start to negotiate or will continue to push you off. If after the third or fourth attempt, your child still pushes you off, then state clearly and one time only the arrangement that you would like.

You: I do not mind others sharing my things, but I expect to be notified first. And I want them put back in order when the person is finished. That means I expect my clothes laundered and ironed and put away, and my makeup cleaned up and in order.

What You Can Expect to Happen

It doesn't matter whether your child gives in and negotiates an agreement that is acceptable to you or he continues to push you off. Either way, if you have calmly and quietly stated what you expect and think is fair, then you are successful. The goal of this

step is not to get to an agreement; it is to establish your fairness and your legitimate right to have what you want. You have accomplished this.

For now on, whenever this issue comes up you have made it clear to everybody that you are the fair one. If your teenager violates your wishes, then he is the one who is unreasonable. This gives you a tremendous advantage, because as I said before your child really wants to be reasonable. He just doesn't think much about what he is doing, so he doesn't realize that he is being unreasonable. Therefore, no matter how your teenager responds, Step 1 has made it clear to everyone that you are the reasonable one. Keep in mind, however, that even if your child has willingly agreed to negotiate with you and you have reached an acceptable arrangement, you should not expect things to change. Your child is likely to go back on the arrangement no matter what was agreed upon. But when that happens, you will be ready with Step 2.

Step 2

The purpose of Step 2 is to be persistent in attaining your goals and to become adept at not being distracted and sidetracked away from what you are trying to achieve. Even if your child does not yet comply with what you wish him to do, if you can maintain your focus and not get dragged into other things, then you can consider this step a success.

Preparing for Step 2

Prepare a short statement describing exactly what you want. For example:

For a job that needs to be done:

- I want the bathroom cleaned up this morning.
- I expect the dog fed and walked this afternoon.
- I would like to see the laundry folded and put away.

If the item is something that already happened and can't be fixed you should say something like this:

- I expect no more foul language in my home.
- I don't want any guests in the house when I am not home.
- I would like to be able to go to sleep at night knowing that no one is going in or out of the house.

Here are some other examples:

- I expect my sweater back laundered and folded the way it was found.
- I want to know that no one will be taking my things without permission.
- I expect money for this phone bill.
- I expect the hole in this door repaired.

When you have your statement ready, memorize it and get ready to use it.

Realize that you are standing up for a fair and reasonable right and your child knows this. But you should also realize that as part of the game, your child is going to put up resistance. To that effect, your child is going to do what he can to get you off track and drag you into some side issue. That is why it is so important for you to stay directed and be prepared for this. You must be firm and stay on track and resist any temptation to address the other issues that you can be sure your child will throw at you.

So your goal is to start this conversation on the subject that you choose and to stay on topic, no matter how important any issue that your teenager might throw at you seems to be. When you engage your teenager, be prepared to be fully involved in the conversation. This is not something you want to discuss when calling out from the next room or when cutting up vegetables for a salad. This topic requires your full attention.

Executing Step 2

The next time the situation that is bothering you comes up, this is what you must do:

Go to wherever your teenager is, stand in front of him. Now you are going to make a polite request. The purpose of this request is not to get your teenager to cooperate, which he probably won't, rather it is to lay the foundation for the process that is about to follow.

It is to remind your child that:

- You have rights.
- You are courteous.
- You are going to stand up for yourself.

Here are some examples:

“Bob, will you please take out the garbage?”

“Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?”

“Jeff, will you please tell me whether you plan to continue going to school or start paying for your room and board?”

Now your child will respond in one of two ways. Either he will say something that is in line with what you like or he will say something that leaves you dissatisfied.

If your child says something that puts your mind at ease, then you should acknowledge this and you are finished.

You: Bob, will you take out the garbage?

Bob: Oh, sorry, Mom. I forgot. I'll do it in five minutes when I finish this game.

You: Thanks, Bob, I would like that.

You: Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?

Betty: I am not really so good at the laundry. Would it be okay if I washed the dishes instead?

You: Sure, that will be okay.

You can be flexible as long as your child says or does something that satisfies you.

It is much more likely that your teenager will respond in a way that will not satisfy you.

You: Bob, will you take out the garbage?

Bob: I'm doing my homework now.

You: Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?

Betty: But it's Sarah's turn.

Or your teen may say something like:

“Okay, I'll do it later.”

“How come you make me do everything?”

“You are always picking on me.”

These are all statements designed to get you off topic and get stuck talking about something else. You have already given your teenager a chance to express his concerns and objections in Step 1. If objections come to the surface now, it is fair to ignore them.

When Your Teenager Tries to Sidetrack the Issue

The most common response is that your teenager will try to get you onto a different topic; one with which he is much more comfortable. If your teenager tries to throw you a curve at this point, your response is to make a three part assertive sentence.

Part one acknowledges that you heard your child's objection. To do this you just parrot back what your child says to you. This is simply to establish that you are listening and not ignoring what your teenager is saying.

“I hear you are doing your homework...”

“I understand you want to do it later...”

“You feel that it is not your turn...”

The second part of the sentence is the word “and”. You may be tempted to say “but”, however “and” is the better choice.

“But” expresses the idea that what is to follow is in conflict with what was said previously. It invites an argument.

“And” just establishes that there are two separate wishes and that they may coexist. It will help you avoid being sucked into an argument.

The third part of the sentence is the statement you have already prepared.

“...I would like to see the laundry folded and put away.”

So the whole dialogue goes something like this:

You: Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?

Betty: But it's Sarah's turn.

You: You feel that it is not your turn and I would like to see the laundry folded and put away.

You: Bob, will you take out the garbage?

Bob: I'm doing my homework now.

You: I hear you are doing your homework and I want the garbage taken out.

Your child will probably throw you another curve to get you off topic. You should just continue with the same format. That is, a statement that acknowledges what was said, the word “and”, then your prepared statement. You should remain calm and courteous at all times. This will further strengthen your position that you are the one who is being reasonable.

Remaining calm should be much easier for you since you are prepared for what is going to happen. You already know what you are going to do and you don't have to put a lot of thought into it. You should realize that you can't lose, because you always know what to do.

Your child will probably respond by upping the emotional intensity. You respond by remaining calm and sticking to this basic structure.

You: Bob, will you take out the garbage?

Bob: I'm doing my homework now.

You: I hear you are doing your homework and I want the garbage taken out.

Bob: You are always on my back.

You: I see you feel that I am always on your back and I want the garbage taken out.

You: Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?

Betty: But it's Sarah's turn.

You: You feel that it is not your turn and I would like to see the laundry folded and put away.

Betty: It's not fair. Sarah doesn't do anything around here.

You: You feel that Sarah doesn't do anything around here and I want the laundry folded and put away.

Please note that all you need to do is acknowledge that you are listening. You do not need to answer the complaint. You do not need to justify what you want. You do not

need to prove that you are being fair. Your job is simply to stay on topic and continue to state what you want.

Your child may continue to throw back another curve to get you off topic. So how long do you keep this up? Until either you get the response that you are looking for, your child runs out of the room or you have gone through the process twenty times.

If your child has held out for twenty times, you should stop the three part response. Now either do the job yourself or make some other arrangements to have it done. Be sure not to give your child any negativity at this point. Even if your child holds out for twenty times, you should be quite satisfied at this point.

The outcome of this step is not what is important. The main purpose of this step is to go through the process. If you make your statement twenty times and walk away without showing anger or disappointment, you have won this round. It does not matter how your child responds.

If your teenager agrees to do what you ask, then you are finished for the moment. If he or she still resists, you are now ready to go to Step 3.

Step 3

What you are going to do in Step 3 is to repeat exactly what you did in Step 2.

I want to stress to you how powerful this is.

What happened in Step 2 is that you stood up for your rights and either your teenager complied, ran out of the room or went twenty rounds with you. You came out calm and looking like the one who was fair and reasonable.

Now you are showing your teenager that it is no problem for you to start the whole process over again. He or she will have to comply, run away or go another twenty rounds. This is after you have already shown your teen in Step 1 that you are the one who is being fair and reasonable.

Any person, your teenager included, will only fight so hard when he knows that he is the one who is wrong. You have already established that you are right and he is being unreasonable. Now you are showing that you are going to stand on what is right. You are not giving up, backing down or going away.

Step 3 is where most teenagers finally break down and give in.

Executing Step 3

This is what you do:

The next time your teen does the behavior you are targeting go up to him again and make your polite request.

“Betty, will you fold and put away the laundry?”

“Bob, will you take out the garbage?”

I can guarantee your teenager was not comfortable during Step 2. All people, your teen included, feel very uncomfortable saying no to a reasonable fair request, when it is made in a polite friendly way. Even if your teen gave you an attitude and lasted through all twenty rounds, I can guarantee you that he or she did not enjoy the process. Now you are showing your child that you are ready to start the thing over again and there seems to be no end in sight.

As I said before, most children will give in at this point provided you let them save face while giving in. That is the reason you must remain calm and courteous, so they have no excuse to find you unreasonable, demanding or controlling. That is also why you thank your child and let him know that what he agrees to do makes you feel better.

You: Bob, will you take out the garbage?

Bob: Again? Oh, alright already, I’ll take it out now.

You: Thanks, I am glad you will do it now.

You can repeat Step 3 when necessary over the next few days or weeks. You should be able to see some pretty quick improvement. Be sure that you execute this step properly; be courteous, friendly and persistent throughout the process.