

# 13

## The Final Touches

### **Step 4**

At this point your child has still not given into your reasonable requests. If he has persisted this far it is clear that he feels, either consciously or unconsciously, that it is only a matter of time until you break down and back off. Most likely in the past you have behaved this way. He knows what it takes to get to you, and then your reaction is very predictable. Your teenager is just trying to get you to that point so your reaction will be something he is familiar with. Your job in Step 4 is to begin to change this pattern.

Now you are going to establish the idea in your teenager's mind that whatever you say you are going to do. You will stick to whatever you decide regardless of the level of resistance your teen puts up.

Your interactions with your child in the past have taught him that all he needs to do to get you to back down is:

- Fight a little harder.
- Scream a little more.
- Throw a bigger tantrum.
- Be a bit more abusive.

In the past you have always or at least often enough backed down just to get a bit of peace and quiet. Your child could rely on this. You were predictable. What you are going to do to prepare for Step 4 is to become unpredictable.

### ***Changing Your Teen's Image of You***

The first part of Step 4 is to change the way your teenager looks at you. If you do this right, you are going to have a lot of fun with this step.

Up until now you have been very predictable. Now you are going to establish yourself as someone who is not so predictable. You are going to do this with a series of dramatic and fun demonstrations that will say to your teenager:

1. You mean what you say,  
and
2. There is no telling what you will do next.

Here is the plan:

First, pick some minor irritation that bothers you and that happens on a fairly frequent basis. It doesn't have to be something specifically that your child does, though it could be. The main thing is that it is a small thing and it happens often. For example, let's say it bothers you when you go to the bathroom and there is no toilet paper there; whoever finished the last roll of toilet paper didn't replace it. He expects you to do it and may even think of it as part of your job. Now even if this type of thing might bother you, which it very well might, it certainly is not something that is destroying your life. So this is a good thing to use to show how surprising and unpredictable you can be.

Next, I am going to ask you to think of something you can do when this happens again that will meet the following six criteria:

1. You will enjoy doing it.
2. It will not be aimed at anyone specifically.
3. It would be something that is startling or unexpected, and maybe even funny.
4. It is related to what happened, but does not target any family member specifically.
5. It does not give negative attention to anyone.
6. It is something that you can do yourself.

Using our toilet paper example, you might plan to take a roll of masking tape and tape the toilet seat down. Then write on the tape in bright red crayon, will the person who finishes the roll of toilet paper please remember to replace it.

Before you do this it is only fair that you give warning. So announce to the family at large at a time when everyone can hear:

“For now on I expect the person who uses up the toilet paper to replace the roll.”

This establishes what you expect and what you feel is fair. Then wait until the incident happens again, which I can guarantee it will. Now you are going to make your polite request one more time, but this time you are going to add what you are going to do if it happens again.

“I really expect the person who uses up the toilet paper to replace the roll. If that doesn't happen I am going to tape the toilet seat down and write you a message in crayon to help you remember.”

Now, no one is going to take you seriously, at least the first time you do this. That is what makes this so much fun.

Next, wait for the incident to happen again and then do exactly what you said you were going to do.

So in our example, the next time you go into a bathroom and the toilet paper has run out, get out the masking tape, tape the toilet seat closed and write on the tape in red crayon:

“Please remember to replace the roll when you finish the toilet paper.”

### **Choosing Your Action**

What types of things should you choose to do?

Choose something that you will enjoy doing and that will make you feel good when you do it. Your actions should not be something that teaches a lesson or makes you feel like you are getting even. It should be something that is pure fun for you, that you can do yourself and then be able to walk away and forget it. It is also important that it is not directed at anyone. Your goal is to get to a level of surprise and astonishment, not to start a confrontation. Your other goal is to show that you are ready to do an unpredictable physical action in order to stand up for what you want and rightfully expect.

Whatever you decide to do, you should do it as a one time only action. You want to have fun with this as well as make your point. You don't want to create another battle front for yourself or create a new job.

You should be prepared to target a number of minor irritations and address them in a similar fashion. You should do this until you are internally comfortable with this type of response. Your goal not only is to convince your teenager that you are unpredictable, but also to become comfortable yourself with being unpredictable.

### **What Might Happen**

You might start to notice that your teenager is beginning to look at you in a different light. He may begin to ask you what your plans are. Are you going to be home for dinner or are you planning on doing the laundry?

These are all signs that your teenager is seeing you as capable of doing the unexpected.

### **Executing Step 4**

Once you feel comfortable targeting minor irritations, it is then time to use Step 4 to take care of some of those remaining items in your column.

The approach is basically the same, the only real difference being that the behavior you choose to target is something that is important to you. Also, the action you choose to use may have a bit more substance to it. For example:

“Bob, I am tired of taking care of the cat's litter box. I will not have this any more. If it happens that the litter box isn't cleaned on a daily basis, the cat is going to live somewhere else.”

Now if you had said this type of thing a few months ago, Bob would not believe you. Now that you have carried out the other actions as you said you would, Bob knows that you are dead serious. You have already shown everybody that when you say you are going to do something you mean it, even if it sounds like something completely outrageous. Bob realizes he now has a choice. Either clean the litter box or say goodbye to the cat. You will do what you say.

I want to point out that you are still not directly punishing Bob for not taking care of the cat. Your action is not directed at him at all. You are merely giving him the choice, and saying to him:

“Either you handle the situation in a way that is acceptable to me, or I will do it my way.”

### ***What You Have Accomplished***

At this point you have accomplished a number of things.

You have:

1. Given up taking responsibility for those things that don't affect you.
2. Given up taking responsibility for those things that you cannot control.
3. Given your child the greatest encouragement possible by letting him be in control of personal items.
4. Demonstrated that you are not interested in being in conflict with your teenager.
5. Demonstrated that you are not interested in controlling your teen's life.
6. Shown yourself to be fair to your teenager.
7. Shown that you expect fair treatment in return.
8. Identified those areas where your teenager is not being fair to you.
9. Given your teen the opportunity to explain why he thinks he is being fair to you.
10. Stated how you want the situation to change.
11. Given your teen ample opportunity to make those changes that you request.
12. Shown yourself to be someone who means what you say.
13. Shown yourself to be willing to follow through with what you say you are going to do.
14. Warned your teenager what you will do if specific situations do not improve.
15. Carried out your warnings.

By now, almost all parents have significantly reduced or eliminated the conflicts and problems they are having with their teenagers. They have also established a relationship based upon mutual respect. If this describes your situation, then most of the work you will have in the future will be to maintain the gains you have made.

For some parents, there may be a few items left that do not meet their satisfaction. These items can be divided into two categories: minor irritations and major problems.

If you are still experiencing minor irritations, but most of the major difficulties are repaired, then I would suggest you review the steps you have taken so far. Make sure you are applying correctly what we have discussed to these situations. If you feel confident you are applying the program correctly but your child is resistant in these areas, then you might choose to back down on these things. It could be that whatever behavior you are targeting is just too difficult for your teen to correct. If you can just endure these things a bit longer, then often your child will outgrow them.

However, in particularly difficult situations, some parents still have serious issues left, even after progressing this far through the program. If this is your situation, then again I suggest you go through everything we have discussed to make sure that you are applying what we have said in the correct way. If you are confident that you are doing so and your child is still out of bounds on major issues, then you should get ready to go to Step 5.