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Teaching Your Teenager to Act Responsibly

Now we know a bit about what is going on with your teenager, we are going to discuss some things you can do to make your experience as a parent a little more bearable. I am going to introduce some ideas that you probably have not heard from anywhere else. These things may come as a surprise, but I think you are going to find that they will be of great benefit to you.

If you are experiencing a great deal of trouble with your teenager, you are probably doing one or both of the following two things:

- You are failing in fulfilling a responsibility that you have.
- You are attempting to take on a responsibility that you should not be doing.

Let me explain exactly what I mean.

Your Obligation to Be Happy

Let's discuss the first one: failing to fulfill a responsibility that is yours.

What I am referring to is that you have a right and a responsibility to make your own life happy. This is a right, it is responsibility and it is uniquely yours. No one else can do this for you. It might strike you as selfish, immoral or revolutionary, but you do have the right and really the obligation to make your life a good one. This is something that is solely your responsibility; no one else can do this for you. Therefore, if you are experiencing troubles with your son or daughter to the extent that it is making you miserable, you are failing to fulfill this obligation to yourself. Don't worry, you're not alone. Most parents of difficult children have trouble in this area.

I want to explain what I mean by a "right" and I want to explain what I mean by an "obligation".

Here is a familiar quote:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Thomas Jefferson- *The Declaration of Independence*

If you are from the United States, I am sure you have heard this statement before. What Thomas Jefferson is expressing here is that every human being has a right to be happy. Now Thomas Jefferson didn't write "all men, unless of course they are parents of teenagers." He said, "**all** men." This means that you have an unalienable right to be happy. This does not mean that you forget about your family and ignore all your problems. I am not suggesting that you ignore your family, and I am not suggesting that

you sit back and relax and let your teen run wild. All I am pointing out is that you have a right to have a good, happy life. And this is only something that you can do for yourself. That means that if you are letting your child's behavior make you miserable you are, on a certain level, failing yourself. You do have to take steps to meet the challenges you face with your teenager and resolve them in a way that satisfies you, but you cannot let your difficulties with your child define your life, your happiness or your sense of self worth. You have to take charge and do those things you need to do to be happy. You have to make time for yourself. That means time off when you need it and vacations when you need it. It means time away from the children. You cannot let your role as a parent lock you into a miserable existence. You have an inalienable right to be happy.

More than that, you also have an obligation to be happy, and by that I mean a parental obligation. Being happy is not just for you; it is something that you must do for your child. Your role as a parent is to prepare your child to function as an adult. One of the things that you must be prepared to teach your child is how to be happy. We all want our children to live good and happy lives. You want your child to be well adjusted and happy. Well, if you want your child to have a good, happy life then you also need to have one. Even though your child is a teenager, you are still your child's primary role model. How can you expect your child to learn how to be a happy adult, if you don't make being happy a priority in your own life? It is not really reasonable to expect your child to learn from you how to be a happy adult if you, his parent, are miserable. So your obligation to your child is to be happy, so that he can also learn to be happy.

Being happy can be very hard, particularly if you are at constant odds with a defiant teen. One of the goals of this program is to give you the tools and direction to make parenting easier and therefore a lot more pleasant for you. We are going to start to discuss an approach to making your life easier and more pleasant, very shortly.

Taking the Back Seat

Another thing that you may be doing wrong is taking on responsibilities that don't rightfully belong to you.

When your child was young you were completely responsible for his life. You had to feed him and bathe him and care for him. As your child grew, more and more he took responsibility for his own life. He began to feed himself and dress himself. One of the hardest things we have to do as a parent is to relinquish control of our child's life to our child. We have a natural tendency to see our children as, well, children. And it doesn't matter how old they are. My mother still tells me to put on a coat when I go outside.

You are your child's parent. But that does not mean you have to run your child's life. You are not expected to do this and you really don't have the ability to do this; especially if your child is a teen. Your child is now a teenager and has a need to be in control of his own life. More than that, it is your responsibility as a parent to help your child learn to take control of his own life. This is part of teaching your child how to become an adult. I mean, if I still needed my mother to tell me to put on a coat when I go outside, I would never have been able to move away from home.

Advantages of Giving Over Responsibility to Your Child

One of the focuses of this program is going to be to show you how to give your teenager control of his life in a way that will train him to become a responsible adult. When you do this you will find that a lot of the arguments and tension magically disappear.

One of the things that make parents so unhappy when dealing with their teens is that they feel they should be in control of what their children do, but they also find in many cases they are helpless to enforce their authority. As a result, parents feel inadequate and ineffective. One of the advantages of making your child responsible for his or her own life is that you will no longer feel that inadequacy of being helpless in an area where you feel you should have control. This has the side benefit that it will also make you happier. But it goes further than that; the truth is that you really have no choice. If your child is already a teen, you cannot control his or her life. At that age your teen can do pretty much what he or she wants and there is not a lot you can do about it. By giving over to your teen the responsibility for his own life, you are relieving yourself of a burden that you really should not be dealing with anyway. You will be amazed how relieved you will feel when you do this, and also be surprised how responsible your child will become.

So those are the two areas that most parents are getting wrong. They are not taking care to insure that they themselves are happy, and they are trying to run their children's lives at an age when the children should be doing this by themselves. Either one of these mistakes, and certainly both of them together, can cause parents of teenagers a lot of unnecessary stress and difficulties. It is my hope that by the end of this program you shall know exactly how to place more responsibility, for the things you can't control, on your child, so that you yourself can take more time out to focus on your own happiness. Again, it is your right to be happy. It is also your obligation as a parent to be happy. I am repeating this because most people have never thought of happiness this way before. As it is easier, we are going to start by discussing the second point first: how to place the responsibility for your teenager's life exactly where it belongs- in the hands of your teenager.

Placing Responsibility in the Hands of Your Teen

Your teen has to learn to deal with his own problems. It is your job as a parent to help your child learn to do this. You do no favors by taking away this responsibility from your teenager. It is through taking responsibility for his decisions that your child will learn to make decisions properly in an adult fashion. You must teach your child to think for himself and learn that there are consequences for his mistakes. Your teenager must realize that his problems are his own and that the success or failure of meeting these problems depends upon him only.

I am going to go into much more detail later about specific problems, but first I want to do an exercise with you. This exercise is important as it will be the basis of much we will be discussing, and if you do this it will immediately change the way you are feeling about your child.

Step 1

Open your workbook to Chapter 4. Sit down now and make a list of all the things your teenager does that bothers you. Take your time and be sure to be as thorough as you can. This list will be the basis of what you do in this program and it will serve as a list of items that you expect to improve on; therefore you should be as thorough as possible. Please do not go further with this program until you make this list.

Welcome back. Most parents come up with a list of eight to ten items, of which about three are really bothering them. The following is a list of common things that parents tell me their teens do that really bothers them:

- Stays up late.
- Stays out late.
- Sneaks out of the house at night.
- Stays away from home for days.
- Doesn't care about school.
- Doesn't do school work.
- Won't go to school.
- Failing in school.
- Dropped out of school.
- Getting expelled from school.
- Lies.
- Does not clean up after himself.
- Leaves the bathroom mess.
- Leaves dirty dishes around the house.
- Leaves the kitchen a mess.
- Uses my clothing without asking.
- Gives my things away to friends.
- Dresses like a bum.
- Wears too much make up.
- Leaves his things outside where they can be stolen or ruined.
- Leaves my things outside where they can be stolen or ruined.
- Talks on the phone for hours.
- Runs up a large long distance phone bill.
- Watches too much TV.
- Spends all day playing video games.
- Spends all day online.
- Has a bad attitude.
- Is defiant.
- Is argumentative.

- Is moody.
- Has bad friends.
- Involved in a religious cult.
- Brings friends over when I'm not home.
- Steals from me.
- Steals from others.
- Uses drugs.
- Doesn't do anything productive.
- Won't clean up his room.
- Doesn't bath.
- Won't do chores.
- Has tantrums.
- Threatens me.
- Says she hates me.
- Lies about me.
- Tells others I mistreat her.
- Uses bad language.
- Disrespectful.
- Defiant.
- Constantly argues.
- Refuses to obey rules.
- Doesn't respect authority.
- Doesn't accept responsibility.
- Bad attitude.
- Breaks things when angry.
- Won't admit it when wrong.
- Self centered.
- Constant whining.
- Apathetic.
- Always blames others.
- Manipulative.
- Curses at me.
- Rude to me
- Won't do things with the family.
- Fights with siblings.
- Smokes.
- Uses alcohol.
- Is sexually promiscuous.
- Got pregnant or got girlfriend pregnant.
- Had an abortion and is still promiscuous.
- Gets angry a lot.
- Yells.
- Shoplifts.
- Threatens suicide.

- Tried to commit suicide.
- Drives irresponsibly.
- Stole someone's car.
- Wrecked the car.
- Drives drunk.
- In trouble with the law.
- Destroying my marriage.

This is a list of about eighty common things teenagers do that bother their parents. Some of these things are more of a nuisance and some of them are quite serious. One of the nice things about this list is you will see a lot of things other children do that your teen is not doing. That means things could be a lot worse for you than it is. This alone should make you feel a little better about your child.

This program will help give you an approach as to how to deal with all of these problems and show you how to change your life for the better.

Step 2

Now that you have your list of things that really bother you, we are going to divide the list into three columns. In the first column I want you to place those things which your child does that perhaps may have some consequences on your child's future but really have no influence on your life. We will call this your teen's column.

In the second column I want you to put those things your child does that clearly affect you. This is going to be your column.

In the third column place those things your child does which do not affect you on the whole, but have some component that does. What you are going to have to do with this column is to break down the behavior into parts. Those parts that affect you go into your column. Those parts that will not affect you belong in your child's column.

Your goal by the end of this part of the exercise is to have only two lists of items; those things that your child does that affect you and those things that do not affect you. If you are having trouble deciding in which list an item belongs, here are a few guidelines.

First, how would you feel if it was the neighbor's kid doing this and not your teen. For example, most parents wouldn't be too overly upset if the neighbor's kid didn't wash. Therefore if your child also doesn't wash, it is really his problem and not yours. Not bathing belongs in your teen's column. However, if your neighbor's child was stealing from you, this would upset you. So if your child is stealing from you this belongs in your column.

Another guideline to help you decide where a certain behavior belongs is to ask yourself if you can do anything about it. For example, if your teenager drives your car recklessly, you can stop him by not allowing him to use the car. Driving your car recklessly belongs

in your column. However, if your teen is smoking cigarettes or smoking other things and he is doing this only when he is out of the house, you really have no control over the situation. Smoking out of the house belongs in your child's column.

Smoking is an example of something that you might want to divide up into two. If it bothers you that your child smokes **in** the house, this belongs in your column because it does affect you. But smoking out of the house has nothing to do with you, nor can you do anything about it. Smoking out of the house belongs in your child's column.

In general, the items that have no real affect on your life are items that you have no real control over anyway. It is usually a very bad idea to start making your stand on an item that you can do nothing about. You can only battle on so many fronts at one time, so it is best to place those things that are out of your control in your child's column and focus your energy where you have some power. This is not to say that we are giving up on these items on your child's list, but we are going to put them aside for a while.

Just to make this perfectly clear, I am going to go through some of the behaviors on the list we have made and decide exactly in which column these behaviors belong. Keep in mind that everyone's situation is different and things that I put in one column you might feel belong in the other column.

Stays Up Late

This usually is your child's issue. Many parents are worried by this because they feel their children need their rest, but the true consequences of not enough sleep really fall upon your child. He is the one that is going to be overly tired the next day, not you.

There are some aspects of this problem, however, that may belong in your column. For example, if your child is grumpy to you when he is overly tired, if his staying up late prevents you from having privacy at night or if your child expects you to get him up in the morning, then these components belong in your column.

Watches Too Much TV

I am sure that it bothers you that your child is wasting his time; however this does not affect your life directly. Watching too much TV can safely be placed in your child's column.

The components that might belong in your column include if he is preventing you from watching what you wish to see or if he is making the TV so loud that it disturbs you or others in the house. These secondary items belong on your list. Remember the criteria. If your neighbor's kid watched too much TV, you probably wouldn't care. But if the TV were so loud that the noise constantly disturbed you then you would care.

Your Teen Doesn't Bathe

We touched on this already. Other than your concern that people will think that you are a bad parent, which they probably won't, this will not affect you. This problem belongs in your child's column. An aspect of this problem that might affect you is if your teen is so dirty that he gets the house dirty.

Leaving Things Where They Can Get Stolen or Ruined

Any person who has to work will be upset when he sees things left carelessly about so that they get lost or ruined for no reason. Also, since you provided these things for your child you may feel resentful and unappreciated when he uses these belongings in such a cavalier fashion. Still, we need to differentiate between those things that are yours and the family's, and those things that belong to your teen.

If it is your teen's things that are being used carelessly, then the problem is really his. When those things are gone, he is the one who is going to be missing them. However, if it is your things that are being left around to be lost or stolen, then this definitely affects you and belongs in your column.

Your Teen Fights With Siblings

This is a major problem in homes with more than one child. Most parents are extremely bothered when their children fight. Your major concern should be if there is a possibility that one child will seriously hurt another. Beyond that there is the concern that your children will fall into negative patterns- one being the constant victim and the other the constant bully. Although these are real concerns and can be serious issues, they really affect only the children's lives. Therefore, fighting among your children really belongs in the child's column.

The only exceptions may be if there is a real possibility of injury or if one of your children is being victimized on a continual basis. Then, since you might need to get involved it may belong in your column. Other than these cases, fights among siblings are a problem that is definitely theirs, not yours. In fact, when parents get involved in spats between children, it usually just makes things worse.

I don't think we will get to it during this series, but I have an article on sibling rivalry posted at <http://addadhdadvances.com/sibrivalry.html>. If fighting among your children is a serious problem for you, I suggest you go there.

Has Tantrums When He Doesn't Get His Way

Tantrums were not pleasant when your child was three and they are not pleasant when your child is thirteen. Yet, other than the noise, tantrums really don't affect you that much. Tantrums definitely belong in your child's column. However, some tantrums are accompanied by flying objects. Your child, in his anger, throws things. If these things belong to you or if you are the target, then this aspect of the tantrums should go in your column.

Tantrums usually come as a reaction to something you have done. That “something” could be getting involved in something that really is your child’s item, such as homework; or getting involved in something that is on your list, like misusing your belongings. Whatever initiates the tantrum, there is usually a deeper, underlying cause.

Young children throw tantrums out of frustration. They really do not know how to express themselves in a better fashion. Teenagers can communicate. The reason an older child or teen throws a tantrum is because somewhere along the way he learned that if he can do it long enough or loud enough, he might get his way. By giving in on occasion, parents have taught their child that tantrums can work. That is why they use them. If you have trained your child to use tantrums to get what he wants, you are going to have to retrain him.

His or Her Room Is a Mess

Mothers especially hate this. Yet if your neighbor’s child had a messy room, this would not really bother you. Therefore, this is your child's problem and belongs in your child's column.

An exception might be if your child’s mess is inviting ants or mice into the house or if your child leaves the door open so you have to look at it. Then that aspect of the problem might go in your column. But if the door is closed you should treat your child’s room the same way you would view any other sewer; that is, as long as the lid is on, you ignore it.

Chooses Bad Friends

I don’t want to minimize the difficulty of this problem. This a major concern for many parents and it is one of the most common concerns parents have. However there is a very basic principle I want to introduce to you here. That is, you cannot take away from your child something you can’t replace. You can’t replace your child’s friends. This really belongs in your child’s column. First, it really does not affect you directly, and secondly, there is really nothing you can do about it.

Some components of this problem that might affect you are if these friends start to steal from you or if they come into your home against your wishes.

If you want more information on how to handle this problem, please go to:
<http://addadhdadvances.com/badfriends.html>.

Child Runs Away

The first time a child runs away is a very trying time for the parents. It is a painful situation. However, we cannot really say that it is the child causing this pain. Rather it comes from the worry and frustration we feel, which is something that we as parents do to ourselves. In most run away situations, both the parent and the child view the event as something the child is doing to the parent; however this is really a matter of perception. If you start to view your teenager as someone who is responsible for his own life, then you can view running away as a choice that your child makes that affects his life.

All the problems associated with running away really are his problems. That is, falling behind in school, having to fend for himself, spending a few nights without a comfortable place to sleep, foraging for food; these are all things that only affect your child. Even though such behavior is unfair to you and causes you pain, running away belongs in your child's column.

The only things that might affect you are if your child leaves you legally or financially responsible for any damage that he may do.

Drives Around With Irresponsible Friends

This can be a very serious problem. There is a real concern for your child's life and health. This type of behavior may have serious consequences for your child's future. However, like bad friends, this is something that you can do nothing about. If you forbade this, your child could easily do this behind your back. You really have no control over this aspect of your child's life. Therefore, this item belongs in your child's list.

Cigarettes, Alcohol and Drugs

These activities may have harmful effects on health and may also be illegal. They certainly have consequences for your child. However, except for some of the side issues, this behavior does not directly affect you. Therefore, they go in your child's column.

The aspects of these behaviors that may affect you are if your teen comes home drunk or stoned, if he keeps illegal drugs in the house making you in violation of the law or if police involvement requires that you go to court.

Sexual Activity

This is one of those things that can have serious life long consequences for your child. There is the issue of pregnancy, which for your son means eighteen years of child support and for your young daughter means the choice between single motherhood, putting up the child for adoption, or abortion. There is also the possibility of venereal disease, of which herpes or venereal warts can cause life long problems, and of AIDS which can be fatal. These are all very serious issues and making the wrong choices can have serious consequences for your teen. But other than being called a grandparent, what your child does only minimally affects you. The decision of whether to have the baby, raise the child or give it up for adoption all falls on the mother. You do not become legally or financially responsible in any way for the baby. In fact, in most states once your teen becomes a parent she is considered a legal adult and you are no longer responsible for her either.

Also, there is nothing you are going to be able to do to stop it. If you chose this path for yourself when you were growing up, your parents were not able to stop you. Your grandparents were not able to stop them, and your children are not going to be able to stop your grandchildren. For these reasons, premarital sex is something that definitely belongs in your child's column. The aspects that do affect you are if your child has sex in the house or if she expects you to raise the child.

Sneaks Out of the House or Stays Out Late at Night

This affects your life insofar that you may worry about your child, but this really belongs in your child's column.

Things that belong on your list are if he disturbs you coming in late at night, if he breaks into the house to get in or if he leaves the house vulnerable to burglars.

Dresses in Overly Revealing Fashion or in Dirty Clothing

This does not really affect your life at all. Also, except when your child is with you, there is very little you can do about the way he or she dresses. This clearly belongs in your child's column.

The aspect of this problem that may belong to you is if your child expects you to be seen with them in public when he or she is dressed like a bum or a prostitute.

Illegal Activities

This may include driving without a license, driving under age, stealing a car and going joy riding, shop lifting and so on. These activities affect your child's life in many ways. Your child is violating the rights of others. Your child also might soon learn something about the legal system. If your teenager is engaged in these activities, there is not a lot you can do to stop him. Hopefully, the police will intervene and demonstrate to your child that violating the law can have very unpleasant consequences. At that point, if you have placed this problem in your teen's column, he or she will do a lot of growing up.

Some parents are afraid to let the authorities deal with their children. They are worried that an arrest will be permanently damaging to their child's life. This is not usually the case. Most juvenile authorities are really there to help your child. Often any record that is incurred by a minor will be erased when he reaches eighteen. However, even if your child does get a permanent mark on his or her record, it is far better to have an encounter with the law while still a minor than to face the same charges a few years later as an adult. In fact, if your child is experimenting with illegal activities, the only thing that may change his or her direction is an encounter with the law without being bailed out by you. For these reasons, criminal activities belong in your child's column.

Aspects that you may need to deal with include having your things stolen or damaged, having to go to court with your child, having to pay for damage your child does or having to pay for court fees.

Doesn't Do Schoolwork or Failing in School

This is clearly something that affects your child's life. How well your child does in school will affect his future choices and opportunities. It will affect job opportunities, though not as much as people think, and it will affect with whom your child will mingle. If your child is not taking school seriously, I am sure that this worries you. But you have finished Junior High and High school already. What goes on in school has nothing to do

with you. Success and failure in school belongs in your child's column. You cannot make your child go to school and you cannot make your child perform well there. In most cases you cannot even get your child to do homework. This is a decision that your child must make and it is a decision that will affect his or her life, but not yours. This is not to say that you should abandon your child if he needs help in school and wants to perform, but is having trouble. In such a case you should do whatever you can to help your teenager. We are talking about a child who decides that school is not important for him.

Some aspects that might affect you are having your child hang around the house all day and getting truancy calls or messages from the school. Also, your basic arrangement with your child is that you are willing to give support while your child prepares himself to meet the future; this usually means school. If your child decides that school is not the place for him, then you have the right to insist that he go further with his life and get a job to start contributing to his support.

Summary

This should give you an idea of how you should divide up the things that your child does into items that go into your column and items that go into his column. I have gone through sixteen different behaviors that teens do that really disturb their parents. One thing I hoped to show is there are a lot of things that your teen may do that bother you tremendously, but these things really do not affect you that much.

There's another whole category of behavior that, for the moment, we are going to ignore. These are things that your teen says or the attitudes that he or she expresses. This includes lying, calling you names, moping all day long and similar behaviors. If you don't take what your child says too seriously, and for the most part you shouldn't, these items really belong in your child's column. However, the approach we are going to discuss now doesn't apply so well to these types of problems, so I am going to put them off and deal with them a bit later in the program.

Step 3

Now that you have divided all of those actions your child does that bother you, we are ready to proceed.

With your list in hand, we are now going to give over the responsibility for your teenager's column to your teen. By the end of this procedure, you will no longer have primary responsibility for those things on your teen's list; rather they will be up to your teenager to manage.

This approach may seem somewhat radical or irresponsible to some parents, but in my opinion it is the only approach that makes sense. For the most part, the items in your child's column have very little to do with you, but more importantly they are mostly things that you have no control over anyway. That means these behaviors are already in your child's hands to decide whether to do them or not. The only thing is that since you

are showing your teenager that you feel that you are responsible to control or direct their behavior, then you are communicating to your child that he does not have to take responsibility, you are doing the job for them. Therefore, your teen can basically do what he wants and it's not his problem, it is yours. What we are about to do is to change all of that. Since your child is in control of these decisions and these actions, and there is not much you can do about it anyway, we are going to make your child responsible for these actions, also. That will take the burden of a lot of no win situations off of your shoulders and place the burden of responsibility of these actions on your teen.

This is how it works:

What you need to do now is to take your child's list and item by item you are going to give over the responsibility to your teen.

Here are the two steps:

- 1- First, you must trust that your child will make the right decisions for himself in these matters.
- 2- You must communicate to your child that he is now responsible for this item and you trust him to do the correct thing.

Trusting Your Child

From where you are sitting right now it might seem ridiculous to you to trust your child. Your teen is already doing things that show he is irresponsible. How are you supposed to trust him?

You are quite justified to think this way; however, most teenagers when given responsibility for their own actions do rise to the occasion. Placing in their hands responsibility for their actions and then expecting them to be worthy of that responsibility is enough to get most teens to behave in a more responsible adult fashion.

Whenever my oldest child wants to do something that is immature or just stupid and I see he is not going to listen to me, I just say to him, "Look, I am not going to tell you what to do. You're a smart boy. I am sure you will think about it and do the right thing." Boy, he hates that. He already knows what the right thing is; he just doesn't want to do it. Now the responsibility is on him. If he makes the correct choice, then he has lived up to expectations. If he does not, then on certain level he feels like he failed himself. This technique does not always get him to do what I want him to do, but on major issues he usually gives in. Also, it is a great way to separate the things that are really important to him and that he really wants to do from things that he is doing just to be defiant, obnoxious or rebellious.

Some parents find it very easy to give over responsibility to their teen. If you are one of these parents, then this one step will make your life significantly better. You are going to see a noticeable difference in the problems you are experiencing with your teenager very quickly. However, many parents find it quite difficult to relinquish responsibility for

their teenager's behavior to their teen. This approach represents a radical departure from the way they have been dealing with their teens until now, and it is often quite hard for some parents to make such a big change. If you are one of these parents, you will have to make this transition slowly, at your own pace. It will not work for you to give up these items too quickly or too reluctantly. If you let go too fast, you may do so without being able to give up the worry and resentment connected with these behaviors and you won't get a lot of the benefits this approach has to offer you. On the other hand, it is worth your while to push yourself a little bit. The sooner you give over the job of governing himself to your teenager, the sooner you will begin to see positive changes in your teen and the sooner you will start to reap the benefits and the relief of this approach.

To give over the responsibility slowly, go through your list and pick out the biggest item that you feel you can give up to your teen, without feeling a lot of worry or stress. If it is hard for you to decide, you might look for something that is a big nuisance to you but doesn't really present any danger to anyone. Once you have an item that you feel you can part with, without excessive stress, it is now time to approach your child.

Communicating Responsibility to Your Teen

The next step is to let your teenager know that you are relinquishing responsibility for this particular item and that you now trust his or her judgment.

For example, let's say that you don't like how much makeup your daughter is wearing. As we discussed earlier, this is an item that really has nothing to do with you. You also might choose something like this because if your daughter makes what you feel is the wrong choice, no permanent harm will come of it. Eventually she will grow out of this phase and the makeup will come off. However, there might still be some parts of this behavior that does affect you directly. First, she may be using your makeup, which can be expensive after a while. Also, you might be embarrassed to be seen with her in public. You should address both of these concerns.

Here is a typical statement that you can make:

“Jennifer, I have been very bothered by how much makeup you are wearing. But I have been thinking about it and I realize now that it is silly for me to try to control the way you dress. First of all, I can't control how you decide to dress, and besides, how you dress really has nothing to do with me. For now on I am going to stay out of this and I will trust your judgment to dress anyway you wish. I will offer my opinion if you ask, but basically it is your show from now on.”

Notice that the main thrust of this message is what "I" am thinking and what "I" have decided to do about it. You are saying nothing about how your daughter should behave or how she should feel. Also, you are not asking questions or asking her to explain her behavior. There are no questions and there are no accusations. You are just informing your daughter of your decision.

The next part of the statement is going to address your reservations with this decision. You are going to discuss the things that directly affect you. Here goes:

“However, Jennifer, makeup is expensive. I would request that you not use my makeup for now on. Also, since I am embarrassed when you dress up with too much makeup, I would like it if when you wish to go out in public with me that you would dress in a more conservative fashion so that I am not embarrassed.”

Again, notice that the main thrust of this message is what "I" want. You are not telling your daughter how to dress. You are just making it clear to her your conditions for being seen with you in public. You are letting your daughter make the choice. If she wishes for you to go with her somewhere, then she has to meet certain conditions. You are also making it clear that you are not willing to fund her choice. If she wishes to continue, she will need to allocate her own spending money. Again the message is short. You are not lecturing or demanding, just communicating a decision that you have made.

The basic format is:

1. I have been bothered by something.
2. I am letting you be in charge of it for now on.
3. I trust your judgment.
4. I am willing to offer my opinion if asked.
5. I would like you to respect my feelings when what you're doing concerns me.

Again, be clear and be short. You should practice what you are going to say until you are comfortable with it before you approach your teen.

Now it's show time. Find an appropriate time, when things are calm and deliver the message the way you have practiced it. Over the next few days or weeks as you are ready, start to give over responsibility for more and more of the items in your teenager's column to your teen. Again try to choose the biggest item you can choose, without feeling stress or worry. You are looking for the maximum gain with the minimum amount of stress. What you are going to find if you do this successfully is that you are going to be much more relaxed. You are no longer going to be worried about a lot of things that you have no control over anyway. You also might feel that there is a lot less tension with your teen.

Your Child's Initial Reaction

There's absolutely no way to predict how your child will react to your statement. Anything can happen. Your child may be thrilled. He may be upset. He might throw a tantrum or accuse you that you just don't care. He might just say okay or he might not react at all. There is no way to know how your child will respond. However, no matter what your child's reaction is, your response should be the same; ignore the reaction. Reiterate calmly and quietly your decision. Ask no questions. Don't get into discussions or debate. Make it short.

Your Initial Reaction

Parents have a lot of different reactions to this approach. Some feel immediate relief. Some feel that giving up responsibility is giving their teenager a license to run wild. Some feel that they themselves are not acting responsibly or doing their job as parents. All these reactions are normal and stem from a parent's true healthy concern for the welfare of the child.

I want to point out that we are discussing only items that are in your teen's column. For the most part these items don't really affect you directly in any big way. More importantly these are usually things that you have no real control over anyway. The truth is that in many cases you have no real choice. You have to give over responsibility and trust your child. Your teen is big enough now that he can do these things and there is nothing you can do to stop him.

I know that there are a number of people in the world who will advocate taking a stronger stand. They will show you techniques how to increase the level of consequences and coerce your child to obey you. I know that many parents are looking for this approach. My feeling is that such an approach is very short sighted. You may want to use a heavier hand today, but usually what happens is your teen is only going to get bigger and even if you are successful in getting him to buckle under now, your control over your teenager's choices and ultimately your teenager's behavior is going to lessen and eventually go away altogether. It is inevitable. What parents often do when they use force is that they raise the stakes and pave the way for future, more intense battles, which are often times on more substantive issues.

Another problem with using a stronger, high handed approach is that it is not really in line with your role as a parent. Your basic concern as a parent is to teach your child to become a healthy, well functioning, decision-making adult. Giving him responsibility for his actions teaches him to make his own choices and fulfills your job as a parent. Beating him into submission does not really accomplish anything.

In truth, giving over responsibility for your child's actions to your child is a process that you should have begun in the preteen years. Parents who teach their child to make age appropriate choices at a younger age do not have nearly as much difficulty when their children become teenagers. I would like to encourage you to try this approach with an open mind. You might find it a bit uncomfortable at first and we are soon going to discuss why that is. However, the reason you enrolled in this program is because you are not having success with what you are doing currently.

There is a famous quote that is attributed in various places to Benjamin Franklin or to Albert Einstein. Probably neither of them said it. It goes like this:

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.”

You have come this far already. You have recognized that what you are doing with your teenager is not working for you in a satisfactory manner. You recognize there is a problem and you have taken steps to solve that problem. You have invested in this program. It is really worth it for you to try to apply what I have been saying with an open mind. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.