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# How to Help Your Teen Develop the Ability to Make Decisions

### ***Encouraging Your Child to Develop His Decision Making Ability***

There are three steps you should take to begin to encourage your teenager to develop his decision making ability:

1. Encourage your teenager to make meaningful choices.
2. Learn to appreciate and enjoy the decisions that your teen makes.
3. Change some of the ways you are thinking about your child.

### **Encourage Your Teenager to Make Meaningful Choices**

We began talking about before. We discussed the idea of giving over responsibility for the decisions that affect your child's life but don't really affect yours. This, in effect, is the beginning of transferring the responsibility of making meaningful choices and placing it in the hands of your teenager.

I have so far explained that not only is it more practical that your teen is responsible and controls certain aspects of his own life, since they are out of your hands anyway, but also that it is essential for his normal and proper development. This is how he or she will learn to become a responsible adult. Learning to make meaningful choices is a skill that is necessary for adult life. When you encourage your teenager to do this, you transmit to your child that you have confidence in his ability to make decisions. This will help build up your teenager's sense of self-esteem at an age where self-esteem is at an all time low.

### ***The Importance of Caring for Yourself***

One way to teach your teenager to make meaningful choices is by being a good role model. You teach your child how to make good decisions by showing him how you make your own decisions.

This is one reason why it is your parental obligation to be happy and care for your own personal needs. When your teenager sees you choose to take time to care for your own inner self and that you make this a priority, then he will learn to do so as well. Most people feel guilty about making this a priority, but it really is an important aspect of being a parent. You cannot expect your child to grow into an emotionally healthy and happy adult who looks after his own needs if you disregard what you need for yourself. We discussed that to live a life of sacrifice where you nullify your own needs is not fair to you. It is also not healthy; not for you... nor for your child.

**I am again emphasizing that to nullify or ignore your own needs is a destructive role model for your children.** It doesn't do any good for anybody. If you feel that it is your job as a parent to self-sacrifice and you ignore your needs for the sake of your child, then I strongly suggest you reconsider. It is very likely you are doing more harm to yourself and your child that you realize.

### **Learn to Appreciate and Enjoy the Decisions That Your Teenager Makes**

A child's inner self grows and develops when he is in contact with people who enjoy and value how he operates. You can give this gift to your teenager by observing and appreciating the choices he makes.

It may take a while before you can truly enjoy even some of the incorrect or upsetting things that your teenager does. However, if you no longer feel that it is your responsibility to make sure that everything goes smoothly for him, soon you will begin to enjoy his thinking process even when he arrives at faulty conclusions. If you imagine it is your neighbor's kid making some of these decisions, you may begin to see the humor and irony in many things that your child does.

You should really try to appreciate and enjoy your teenager's decisions. If you learn to look at what he does with out feeling responsible to change or to correct these decisions, you will be frequently surprised by how your teenager behaves.

One of the rewards of parenting is the joy you feel as you watch your child's uniqueness unfold before your eyes. Like the other stages in your child's life, it may be easy or it may be hard, but the one thing that the teenage years won't be is permanent. Eventually your child is going to be an adult. If you don't learn to appreciate the stage of development your teenager is in right now, you will never have the chance again.

Begin to enjoy watching your teenager's decision making process. Your child will make mistakes; that is part of growing up. However, when you give your child the power to make his own decisions and you relieve yourself of the responsibility of your child's actions, you will really begin to enjoy watching your child mature. Your child will surprise you with the decisions that he or she makes, and you will enjoy observing the uniqueness of your teenager unfold and develop.

Know that your teenager will make mistakes. **At times you will see your child making mistakes and you will know that he is heading for painful consequences.** It might be difficult for you to keep quiet when you see this happening; however, **you must resist the temptation to take control.** The most you should do is express your reservations about the decision and let what will happen, happen.

## Change Your Way of Thinking

The third step you must take to really help your teenager develop his decision making ability is to begin to think of your teenager in a positive way. **This step is vitally important.** A person's beliefs interact with and affect the outcome of his actions. When we believe something, we inevitably do things that will make our belief come true. Thus, if you believe that your teenager is good, competent and capable of making important decisions properly, you will begin to interact with your child in such a way that he will begin to live up to your expectations. However, if you view your child as bad, immature, incapable, dishonest, or helpless, you will again influence your teenager in such a way that he will fulfill your expectations.

Your way of thinking can really make all the difference. Even if you don't verbally express your feelings, your child will pick up on what you think of him and begin to act accordingly. Therefore, perhaps **the greatest thing you can do for your teenager to get him to become the responsible adult you want him to become is to begin thinking of him that way.** You may be wondering, "How can I view my teenager as a competent adult when I see him bungling so many things?" The truth is that most decisions a person makes have both good and bad ramifications. The more mature a person becomes, the more he focuses on the long term result of his decisions. Teenagers lack this maturity. They tend to focus on the here and now, and put much less emphasis on what will be in the future. Adults tend to focus more on the long term. This difference of focus is one of the primary causes of conflicts between parents and their teenagers. The result is that even if a decision your teenager makes is good for him immediately, you will see it as a mistake because of the long term consequences. You will see things that he or she won't consider.

However, there is an even longer term ramification of your teenager's decisions that most parents seem to overlook; that is the learning process that goes along with making decisions. When your teenager is allowed to make his own decisions he learns from the process. He learns when he chooses correctly and he learns even more when he chooses incorrectly. Probably the most important thing that he learns is how to take all the short term and long term outcomes of a decision into account and weigh them when making a decision. When you and your teenager get into conflicts over the decision making, two things happen that are bad for your child. First, if you coerce your teenager to obey you, you deprive your child of the learning experience of making decisions and failing. But more than that, even when your teenager does what he wants, since your teenager is so involved in the conflict and power struggle, he often fails to pay attention to the results of his decisions and, as a result, frequently fails to learn anything. So when you try to control your teenager's decisions, not only are you setting yourself up for constant battles, but also you are robbing your child of the learning experience that he should be having. Therefore it is vital that you treat your teenager as a responsible adult if you want him ever to become one.

Therefore, in order to really help your teenager mature into the person that he can become you must:

- **Encourage your teenager to make meaningful decisions.**
- Give him the latitude and space to make these decisions.
- **Enjoy and appreciate the way he approaches and solves problems.**
- Believe that he or she is capable of making good decisions.
- **Understand that the mistakes he makes are from lack of experience and these mistakes will help him or her to improve in the future.**
- Don't let your child's decisions and mistakes become a point of conflict.
- **Look at your teenager as a good, honest, competent and maturing individual.**

### ***Some Common Concerns About Letting Your Teen Make Decisions***

I have been making the case to encourage you to give up taking responsibility for many of the things your teenager does and placing the responsibility for these decisions in the hands of your teenager. The main reasons I feel this is good for you and your child is:

- It will encourage your teenager to be more responsible.
- It will make you a lot happier.
- It will reduce your anxiety level.
- It will cut down a lot of the causes of conflict between you and your teenager.
- It will help you to fulfill your responsibility to prepare your teenager for adult life.
- It is really the only practical approach, since you cannot control much of what your teenager does anyway.

However, at this point, if you are like most parents, you probably have some reservations about turning over responsibility to your teenager. You are probably worried that:

- Your child won't think you care.
- It will be dangerous to let your child make decisions.
- Your teenager is not old enough yet.
- Your teenager hasn't demonstrated that he or she is responsible enough to take responsibility yet.
- Your teenager will take advantage of you and will walk all over you.
- Your teenager will make bad decisions and won't fit into society.

I would like to address these concerns.

- **Your child won't think you care.**
- **Your teenager will take advantage of you and walk all over you.**
- **Your teenager will make bad decisions and won't fit into society.**

First, I am not talking about letting your child walk all over you. I am not suggesting that you allow your child to turn against socially accepted norms. And yes, you should care about your teenager's decisions and express that you care. However, you can be genuinely concerned and care about what your teenager chooses to do without taking over and controlling those decisions.

- **It will be dangerous to let your child make decisions.**

Yes, the world we live in is a dangerous place. Yes, people get mugged and killed every day. And yes, every day women get raped. So how can you let your teenager make his or her own decisions and be exposed to these risks?

The truth is that these dangers are an even **bigger** reason to get your child to behave in a responsible fashion as soon as possible. The only real protection your teenager has is the knowledge that there are real dangers in the world and the understanding that it is up to him to take care of himself. If your teenager feels that it is your job to watch out for him rather than his responsibility, he is much more apt to live a carefree life of ignoring potential dangers. And why not? You have made it your job to keep him or her safe. It is only when your child realizes that he is ultimately responsible to take care of himself and keep himself out of danger that he will begin to focus on that task. If your teenager feels that you are always in the background ready to pick up the pieces and fix the mistakes that he makes, he will not feel he has to be too careful. But this is really a false sense of security; you can not protect your child from everything nor can you always be there.

Thus the only real protection you can give your child is the understanding that he must watch out for himself, as well as the skills that are needed for him to make these appropriate decisions to keep himself out of harm. This is his real security.

- **Your teenager has shown you that he is too irresponsible to be responsible for himself.**
- **Your teenager is not old enough yet.**

At this point many parents feel that they should not give over responsibility to their teenagers until the teen shows that he is capable of handling the responsibility. But this way of looking at things is often incorrect.

People do not get more responsible just by getting older. They become more responsible by exercising responsibility and learning from their mistakes. Your teenager will learn responsibility best by taking charge of important decisions and knowing that he will take the consequences of those decisions. By protecting your teenager from the dangers in the world, you actually may be preventing your child from learning how to guard himself from them. This in the end will make it much more likely that your teenager risks falling prey to those things that you are trying to protect him from.

When teenagers are given the trust and the responsibility to direct their lives, the ability to do this seems to appear even in the most unlikely children. **Usually the ability a child has to make proper decisions for himself is directly related to the amount of faith his parents have in the child to make those decisions.**

### ***Giving Over Responsibility***

Again if you find the process difficult, and we have discussed some of the reasons why that might be, **please start slowly.**

Pick the items on your teenager's column that have no long term consequences and start there first. Pick the biggest items that you can give away without causing yourself too much anxiety. As you begin to see the positive results, which you can measure by how much more responsible your child is acting and the reduced tension and conflict in your house, you will be more apt to give more away.

Keep in mind, your teenager is soon going to be leaving your home for good and be on his own. Wouldn't it be better for your child if he or she was prepared for the world by knowing how to make safe, appropriate decisions? This is a very important life skill and it is something that you can and should give to your teenager to prepare him or her for adult life.