

## 7

## How Your Child Will React to Responsibility

Most teenagers say that the thing they want the most is more freedom to run their own lives. So now you are giving your teenager that opportunity, to take control and be responsible for many of the major decisions that affect his life, your teenager should be happy, right?

Well, occasionally that does happen. Once in a while we find a teenager that, once he finally realizes that his parents are serious about giving him the responsibility he has been fighting for, will be very happy. But, most of the time, teenagers respond in an entirely different way. A lot of times, teenagers respond by looking quite sad and worried. They say things like, “You don’t really care about me” or “You’re just saying that, but you really won’t let me do what I want.” Some of them become quite concerned and say, “I’m not sure I’m ready to make my own decisions” and “Please keep checking up on me.”

So what should you expect your teenager to do with this new freedom?

Often, the initial response is to behave even worse than before. **You should expect this and be ready for it.** Teens tend to react this way for two reasons. One reason is to test you to see if you are really serious and mean it when you say you are giving them control. However, the main reason is that there is a very big part of them that wants you, the parent, to take back control and be the one responsible.

### ***Escaping From Responsibility***

It is much easier being the victim of a domineering parent than it is to be responsible for taking care of oneself. A big part of every teenager wants his independence and to be in control of his life, but there is another part of him, the young child in him, which is afraid of freedom. This part of your teenager wants to runaway from responsibility. He wants you to handle all the problems, make all the decisions and take care of all the consequences.

As I mentioned before, shunning responsibility is more than just a teenager thing. Many times most adults would prefer not having to take responsibility for their decisions and actions. As quoted earlier:

“Most people today walk around with their umbilical cord in their hand, looking for some place to plug it in.”

However, a mature adult needs to take responsibility for his actions and make meaningful decisions that affect his life. This is an important skill that must be learned and it should be learned in the teenage years. You will be doing your child a great service if you help him or her to develop that skill.

## A Word About Teenage Rebellion

Now that we have more of a picture of what is going on inside teenagers, we can begin to understand a bit about teenage rebellion.

When a child is born he does not realize that there is a difference between him and his environment. Over the course of the first year of his life he begins to learn that his mother is not the same person as he is. He begins to understand that he controls his hands and his feet and they do what he wants them to do. However, his mother's hands and feet do not do what he wants them to do.

Early in his childhood, your child realized that you and he are different people. He also realized that you each control different parts of the world. Gradually your child realizes that he does not have as much control over his world as he originally thought. Part of the reason for the terrible twos is that at that age a child realizes that he is not in control of his world. For the most part his parents control his world. Your two year old eventually comes to terms with this realization and throughout his childhood he learns from you a great many things including ways of viewing the world. Up until the age of twelve, your child's ideas and world views are mostly yours. However, when a child becomes a teenager he develops the ability to reason abstractly and this changes the way he begins to look at the world. He is now ready to formulate his own ideas and opinions about the world around him.

It is as a teenager that your child first becomes aware that he is his own person and can formulate opinions and make choices that are not identical to yours. He is beginning to develop his own identity. But to accomplish this, your teenager must make some decisions that are not in line with your own; otherwise he will just be a carbon copy of you. By necessity then, your child is going to have to reject a number of your ideas and beliefs just so that he can realize that he can formulate his own. **He has to do this for his own normal development.** It is not a personal rejection and for the most part it will not be a permanent rejection of your values. He just needs to make this rejection to establish himself as a person who is independent of you. When your teenager will be older and it will be well established within him that he is his own person, he will come back and accept most, if not all of your values. **But he will do this by his own choice because he agrees with you and thinks these values are correct.**

You can rest assured that deep down and in spite of whatever your child says or does, he has most of the values that you have. However, your child needs to develop his own independence. That means that your teenager cannot think something nor do something, even if he thinks it is right, for the simple reason that you are insisting that it is right. For that reason, a typical adolescent will do the opposite of what you say or think in order to feel and express his independence. **They don't understand that to do something just to be defiant is just another way of showing dependence.** We discussed this "Adolescent Drive for Independence" earlier.

So as your child becomes an adolescent, there is an inner pressure to become an independent person. But this independence is a scary thing. There is a strong urge to be taken care of and not have to face the responsibility for one's own decisions. This is all part of the desire not to grow up, that we discussed before.

### **What Usually Happens**

What actually happens is that your teenager is going to fluctuate between trying to be a responsible decision maker, which his "Adolescent Drive for Independence" demands of him, and which is exciting but frightening, and between the drive to be a secure but dependant small child. And **he will be fluctuating a lot.**

So here is the basic pattern:

1. Your teenager will make a decision about something independent of or in opposition of you.
2. He will begin to feel panicked by the responsibility of the consequences of his own decision.
3. He will do something inappropriate to get you to react so that you will take the decision away from him.
4. You will respond by ordering him how to behave, taking away the decision from him.
5. He will blame you for controlling his life.

Now that he is no longer in control, he can cry out that you are controlling him, resent you, fight with you, call you names and blame you for squelching his freedom. He can also now do what he wants, knowing that you are going to take the responsibility for it and get him out of any problems that he gets himself into.

Even though this sounds like the ideal solution for your teenager, most teenagers are still very uncomfortable when they do this. The reason is that deep down your child knows it is time to grow up. He knows he must learn to take responsibility for what he does; however, taking responsibility can be very frightening. For this reason, he may go back and forth, at times trying to break away and then when things get too scary he retreats by antagonizing you into action. This becomes a repetitive cycle that governs the relationship many parents have with their teenagers throughout the teenage years. It can be very uncomfortable and unpleasant for everybody.

**Keep in mind that most teenagers are very well aware what types of things bother their parents.** When they were younger they did their best to avoid these things. However, now that they need to provoke you to take back control when it gets too much for them, they use this knowledge to do that. Teenagers need this dynamic to give them the illusion that they are really in control. It allows them the freedom to run for safety when the responsibility of being in control gets too scary.

One of the ways they maintain this image is by playing the role of the desperate, brow-beaten, misunderstood victim. For some reason, the misunderstood victim has sort of become a glamorous folk hero in our society, so this is quite an appealing role for teenagers to portray.

Now, no person can really be a misunderstood victim for long without there being a cruel, more powerful oppressor in the picture. The image just won't work otherwise. So your child needs a strong and powerful figure to play the role of this cruel, callous, dominating oppressor. Fortunately, there is already someone in his life who is tailor made to play this role. This is the same person who has been telling him what to do all of his life and is also willing to keep it up, providing that person is provoked properly. **You, the parent, are a perfect fit for this role.**

### **Breaking This Pattern**

I just want to make it perfectly clear that **your teenager has no idea that this is what is happening.** He is completely unaware that he is struggling for independence and is at the same time afraid of it. Teenagers have an unbelievable ability to deny the obvious, and **if you approach him with this explanation he is really going to think you lost your mind.** However, this is a very common pattern in many households and it is responsible for a lot of the battles that you may be having with your teenager, particularly the ones that make no sense.

It could be that you can see what I am saying and how it describes what is going on in your home. It could be what I am saying sounds a bit off the wall. At this point many parents are quite skeptical. What I am going to do now is show you how you can use this understanding to your advantage. If you are a bit skeptical, please reserve judgment until you try to execute what I say. If it doesn't work you are no worse off than you are right now, and if it does work, you will have a great deal of success reducing or eliminating senseless battles in your home. Plus, you will put your teenager on the proper path to grow up.

**So the overall plan is to get your child to take responsibility for the things that he does, particularly those things that affects his life and not yours.** We have discussed how to begin to approach this already.

### **What to Expect From Your Teenager**

When you give over responsibility to your child you can expect an initial flare-up of difficult behavior. This will be an attempt to get you to take back the responsibility. It also might be an attempt to test your resolve.

Remember, part of your teenager's role is to play the beaten down underdog. **He can't continue in the role if you are being eminently reasonable.** Therefore, **he is going to do what he can to show that you are not really serious, adding hypocrisy to your list of sins.**

The first thing I ask you to do is **be mentally prepared for this testing**, which means to **be prepared for flare-ups of negative and testing behavior**. If you are **prepared** and **expect** these flare-ups, it will **significantly lessen their intensity** and you will be much more **relaxed** when dealing with them.

Note, the more sincere you are about giving control to your child to make significant decisions, the less intense and less frequent these behavioral flare-ups will be. **Once your child sees clearly that you mean it when you say that you want him to start taking on more responsibility, he will buckle down and begin to do so.**

### **Reacting to Flare-ups of Bad Behavior**

Your initial reaction to behavioral flare-ups is probably going to be disappointment or anger. **Try to catch yourself**. Once you give in to these negative emotions, you will again step into the role of the villain and further reinforce this negative pattern.

Your child is not doing anything to you by his behavior. In many cases, **it will be an attempt just to get you to take back control**. You might even interpret your teen's defiant behavior as a sign of trust and dependence on you. Remember, I said before that **teens are full of contradictions**.

If you still find it hard not feeling angry or frustrated by your teen's actions, just imagine if it was the neighbor's kid doing what your child is doing. If it wouldn't bother you when the neighbor's kid does it, then that means the behavior has nothing to do with you and doesn't really affect you at all. Therefore, you should not let it bother you when your child does whatever he is doing.

The main thing to remember is to **stand firm in your resolve to give over responsibility to your teenager**. You may slip up on occasion and give negative attention to your child as a result of his behavior. However, if you make a firm resolve that you really want to change the pattern of negative interactions in your home, **you will eventually be successful**.

Here is what you should do:

#### ***Remain Friendly and Courteous to Your Child at All Times***

When your child did things wrong in the past you may have been used to reacting with negative attention. **That** is the pattern your teenager will try to elicit from you, because it is comfortable and familiar.

Negative attention is negative and it is emotionally charged. You may **break this pattern by being relaxed and low key with regard to the behavior**. In general, once you give over responsibility for a certain behavior you should pull your focus away from it.

When you do notice that your child is acting in a way that displeases you, **you should not react unless:**

- You haven't been able to drop it from your mind and you are still bothered by it, **or**
- Someone- your child, the school, the neighbors or the police bring this behavior to your attention.

***Do Not Try to Find Out What Your Child Is Doing***

When you are forced to notice that your child is not behaving properly, basically, you should react by focusing on yourself:

- How what is happening affects you.
- How you feel about it.
- Whether or not it gives you reason for concern.

You should **not**:

- Give orders.
- Demand a change in behavior.
- Give consequences if there is no improvement in behavior.

**How to Address Behavior Problems**

Here is the basic pattern of how to talk to your child about an undesirable behavior that you have already placed in his hands:

***Clarify What You are Talking About and How It Came to Your Attention***

“I got a call from your teacher today. He said you are failing math and that you never turn in your homework.”

***Explain How You Feel About the Situation***

“It worries me when I hear this.”

***Point Out the Potential Consequences***

“It seems that if you don't improve, you may have to repeat the year.”

You may even elaborate or exaggerate your worst fears so long as you maintain that it is your imagination:

“I imagine that you will flunk out of school and you won't be able to get a good job and you'll spend the rest of your life as the French fry person at McDonald's.”

***State What You Would Like Your Child to Do, but Acknowledge That It Is Up to Your Child to Make the Choice and That You Are Helpless***

“I would like you to finish high school and go on to college, but I realize that I can’t force you to do this.”

***Remind Your Teenager That if He or She Wants Help, You Are Willing to Give That Help; but Only Offer What Is Asked and Do Not Take Over the Responsibility to Fix the Problem***

“If there is anything I can do to help you with this, please let me know. I am quite willing to do what I can to help you if you would like this.”

***State Your Belief That Your Child Can Make the Right Decision About This Situation; This Is a Very Important Step***

“I trust you and I know you will figure out the best way to handle this problem.”

### **How to Deal With Outside Pressure**

There are going to be situations where some of the things your child might do will bring requests from the outside that you intervene.

For example, your neighbors might complain or your child might do something that gets the police involved. In effect, your child now has **society insisting that you take back responsibility from your child**. In such a situation, it is best to do as much as you can **to avoid** taking direct responsibility. You need to do what you must, but try not to scold, blame or question. Most of all, **do not feel guilty because your child did something wrong**. This is going to be hard to do. The best approach is to look ahead and plan in advance what could happen and try to work out how you would respond in the worst case scenario.

Do your best to keep your child responsible for his behavior. For example, when the neighbors call to complain, **put your child on the phone** and have him talk his way out of it. If there is an issue at school, try to **get the school officials to deal directly with your child**. If the police call and ask you to pick up your child from Juvenile Hall, do this at **your** convenience.

### **Extreme Cases**

There are times when some children do things that are extremely dangerous. What do you do if he or she uses drugs or alcohol excessively, makes a suicide attempt, or puts himself or others at serious risk of harm?

When things get serious, then I feel that **your child needs OUTSIDE control more than he needs the freedom of responsibility**.

Usually at this point, the amount of intervention necessary is more control than you, as a parent, are able to provide. At that point you will need to enlist the help of people who will be able to place more firm outside controls on your child; controls that he will not be able to break. Usually before you get to this point your child has already encountered some kind of authority, be it police or medical personnel. If your child gets so out of control that he or she is endangering himself or others, **then you need to enlist these outside people.**

**The principles I am describing here still apply to this type of teenager.** However, when there is the risk of serious physical harm, it is too difficult and dangerous for you to handle the situation by yourself or leave it in the hands of your teenager. You must involve outside **professional** help until the situation is brought under control.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, when you hand over responsibility to your child, you can expect anything from immediate improvement in all aspects of his behavior, and consequently your relationship, to flagrant flare-ups of misbehavior.

As I said before, **anything can happen** and often it will not be what you expect would happen. If you are ready for these negative reactions then they won't throw you if they should occur. If you **maintain your resolve and stick with it**, then you can expect within a **short period of time** a **significant** improvement in your child's **behavior, maturity level and your relationship.** You shall also be much happier and feel better about yourself as a parent and as a person.

The important thing is to **stick with it.** This approach is **extremely powerful and effective**, but often it does take time. You have to be **alert** for instances where you might be **falling back into the pattern of taking control.** Remember, **you are attempting to change a lifetime of interactions and to learn to do things a different way.** This takes time. It may be hard but this approach is the **best, most healthy way to restore peace** in your home, **improve your life** and get your **child to grow up** in a healthy manner.