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Redefining Your Relationship With Your Teenager

We discussed how to handle those things that your teenager does that really do not affect you in any significant way. It is now time to deal with those things that your teen does that **do** affect your life.

First I shall give you a basic overall picture of how we are going to approach these items. Afterwards we are going to discuss, in some detail, how to deal with specific problems.

Your Column

You already have a plan to deal with and relinquish responsibility for those things that do not affect you. This is the best and probably the only really effective way to deal with these items. These are things over which you have very little control, so it is senseless to continually place yourself in conflicts that you have no real chance of winning.

Another reason you must begin to give over control of those things that only affect your teenager to your child is that it is **essential you do so for the next part of the program to work**. In other words, **you need at least to have made a significant start on what we have discussed already before you start to execute this part of the program**. In this part of the program we are going to **eliminate** those behaviors your teen does that are really making your life miserable.

Let's now review some of the items we discussed that belong, at least in part, in your column.

Your teenager:

- Lies.
- Does not clean up after himself.
- Leaves the bathroom messy.
- Leaves the kitchen a mess.
- Leaves dirty dishes around the house.
- Uses your clothing without asking.
- Gives your things away to friends.
- Leaves your things outside where they can be stolen or ruined.
- Runs up a large long distance phone bill.
- Has a bad attitude.
- Is defiant.
- Is argumentative.
- Is moody.
- Brings friends over when you are not home.
- Steals from you.

- Won't do chores.
- Threatens you.
- Says she hates you.
- Lies about you.
- Tells others you mistreat her.
- Uses bad language.
- Curses at you.
- Is rude to you.
- Is manipulative.
- Is disrespectful.
- Refuses to obey rules.
- Doesn't respect authority.
- Doesn't accept responsibility.
- Breaks things when angry.
- Is self-centered.
- Is constant whining.
- Always blames others.
- Won't do things with the family.
- Fights with siblings.
- Yells.
- Demands money.
- Stores illegal drugs in the house.
- Shoplifts.
- Is destroying your marriage.

When looking at this list, a casual observer might wonder why anyone would put up with these behaviors. However, most parents don't know **how to stop** putting up with them. What we are going to discuss in this part of the program is how you can successfully stop putting up with those things that your child may be doing to you.

Why These Things Bother You

Before we go further, it is important that we get some clarity about exactly why these things bother you. A lot of these items are not problems in and of themselves. In many cases you would be quite happy to do the extra work, clean up the messes, provide and replace things and so on, if you saw clearly that it was serving the task of effectively raising your child.

Most parents are quite willing to undergo some inconvenience to help their children grow up. However, when teens behave this way it is difficult to see this as part of growing up. The real reason many of the items bother parents is not because of what they are, but because of what they signify. They define your child as callous, inconsiderate and irresponsible. They define you as unimportant, a mere convenience and someone who is just in the way.

What may bother you is that when your teenager does these things, he is effectively saying that you do not really matter. He is saying:

“I don’t care about you.”

“You are merely a convenience.”

“Your feelings are not important.”

So here is something that may come as a surprise to you. If the items on this list include some of the things that are happening to you, then part of the reason they are happening is that you are **allowing** or even **encouraging** your child to treat you this way. Believe it or not, this has happened largely by your own choice. **You have allowed yourself to become your teenager’s doormat.**

This is actually good news for you. What it means is that since you are in a large way responsible for allowing your teenager to walk all over you, then it is also in your hands to put an end to the abuse. You have allowed your teenager to abuse you through your attitude toward yourself and your attitude toward your teen. We are about to **change these attitudes** and give you the **tools to stand up for yourself and take back control over what goes on in your home.**

Many parents fall victim to a negative attitude that eventually allows and even encourages their child’s disrespect and abuse. **This attitude develops because parents define their sense of worth and success as a parent by their child’s behavior and compliance.** As we discussed earlier, if you define a “good parent” as someone who gets his or her children to behave and perform in such a way to meet your expectations, then you are setting yourself a goal that is impossible to achieve. Your children will never fulfill your expectations, nor should they. Rather their job is to live up to their own talents and potential and fulfill their own realistic dreams and aspirations that they have for themselves.

First, we are going to establish the proper mind set you should have in order to deal with some of these difficult things your teenager may be doing. **Changing your attitude is the first giant step to ending the problems you are experiencing with your teenager.**

Your Overall Goal

You need to remember what your goals are for yourself and your child.

For yourself, you basically want to have **less stress** and less conflict in your life, and to be **happier**. For your child, **your goal is to see your teenager grow into a responsible caring adult.**

Believe it or not, your child probably has similar goals. He also wants to be happy and grow into a responsible caring adult. Most people want to be happy and have good and fair relationships with others. You want this type of relationship with your child and your child also wants this type of relationship with you.

However, too often when we have conflicting views with our teenagers we tend to lose sight of what we really want. In the heat of battle parents forget about what is really important to them and focus on things like who is going to win, proving they are right and showing their kid that they are the boss. They worry about what others think they should do, what friends, neighbors or family members will think and numerous other things that have **nothing** to do with their primary goals.

Therefore, one of the things I need to stress to you is that you **must** keep your ultimate goals in mind, particularly when you are struggling with your teenager. Do not get distracted by side issues of who is right or who is in control, or things like that. When you get distracted, all that usually happens is that this pushes you further away from what you ultimately want to achieve.

Remember, you are after a **happier situation for yourself** and a **decent, responsible child**. Focus on these goals, even in moments of stress and conflict. The result will be that your arguments will lose a lot of their significance to you and as a result you will be fighting with your teenager a lot less and these fights will not bother you as much.

Be Positive Toward Your Teenager

Another thing you need to develop is a **positive attitude toward your teenager**. Up until now you may have believed that your teenager behaves poorly toward you because he or she wants to attack you or is lazy, careless, irresponsible, dishonest or doesn't like you. We have already discussed some of the reasons your child behaves the way he does. Sometimes your teenager is completely unaware that he or she is doing anything to you. **Teens are incredibly unaware of many of the things they do.**

In many cases your teenager does things to get to you for a very specific need that he has. When your teenager acts out, very often it is because he has just done something to take one big step toward becoming an adult and is now terrified by the responsibility. **Bad behavior or creating conflicts with you is a technique teenagers use to get you to take back control from them so that you bear the responsibility for what happens instead of them.** Now that you understand this you do not have to take these episodes so seriously. You can see them for what they really are; **your teen's attempt to get out of a situation which he feels is a bit too much for him.**

What that means is that your child is not lazy, careless, irresponsible or dishonest; and your teenager probably does like you. He is just enlisting your aid to get him out of a situation that he finds quite uncomfortable. He is just a normal teenager who needs his parents help, but is unable to ask for it directly. He is acting out with **you** because he trusts you and feels deep down that you are there for him.

So your teenager really is a good, responsible and caring person. He also wants a fair, loving and cooperative relationship with you. Now that you realize this, you can see him that way. And when there is a point of conflict, you can ignore the facade that your child is throwing up and address the fair and reasonable teenager that is hidden inside.

When you view someone as fair, reasonable, responsible and caring, it is quite difficult for that other person to behave in a different way.

So basically there are two reasons to hold a positive picture of your teenager. The first is that it is probably both a true and accurate picture. The second reason is that by viewing your teenager in a positive way you will be encouraging, and in a certain way forcing, him to live up to your image of him. So even if this is not a true and accurate picture of your teen now, your positive attitude will make it so that in the future it will become one.

Maintain a Positive Attitude About Your Relationship

You are the parent and your teenager is the child. Believe it or not, this gives you a lot of leverage to influence what happens between you and your child. Children expect authority and expertise from their parents and they are easily influenced by what their parents say and do. Therefore, even though your child may seem to be behaving to the contrary, he gives a lot of weight to what you say and do. This gives you the ability to set the mood and atmosphere between you and your child.

How **you view** your situation and your relationship with your child is going to **influence** what happens. Not only will your attitude influence how you act, but also it will determine your child's actions and attitude.

If you feel that your relationship with your teenager is terrible, your teenager is probably going to feel the same way. However, if you view the battles you are having with your child as small insignificant turbulence in an otherwise warm and loving relationship, then two things will happen. First, your child will also begin to feel you have a good relationship, even though there is a bit of occasional tension. Second, your child is going to try to maintain the positive relationship that you are projecting that you have. On the other hand, if you project that your relationship with your child is nearly hopeless, then why should your teenager do anything to improve it?

Therefore, one of the most important things you can do to really improve your relationship with your teenager is to **view your relationship as a good one**. And you really don't have to fake this, because when you look beyond the difficulties you may be having, you probably have a good relationship with your child. Obviously you care about your teenager or else you would not be listening to this program. Most likely, your teenager also cares about you. You just can't see it through all the teenage behavior things that are going on.

The bottom line is that if you focus on the good parts of your relationship and start to discount the bad parts, you will be creating an atmosphere which will promote a big improvement in your relationship.

Reestablishing Equality in Your Relationship

If you are having difficulty with your teen, a basic problem that is most likely happening is that your relationship has shifted from one in which there is mutual respect, to one in which you are battling for control and domination.

When we discussed those things that belong in your child's column, I was asking you to give up some of the control you have been trying to impose upon your child. Now that we are discussing those behaviors that really **do** affect you, we are going to work on taking back control over these items.

First, what I would like you to do is to examine your relationship with your child. Which of the following ideas about your relationship with your teenager do you feel are true?

1. I am obligated to support and care for my child. He has no obligation toward me.
2. I have responsibility toward my child, but he or she has none toward me.
3. My child has the right to be supported, but has no obligation to return anything to me.
4. I have to put up with my child, because he's my child.
5. I will really be able to focus on my own needs once the kids grow up and leave home.

I hope you realize by now that none of these ideas are true. However, these beliefs are very commonly held by parents, particularly those parents who are having trouble with their teenagers.

The main problem with these ideas is that they define you as your child's servant, or worse, his **slave**. If you hold any of these ideas to be true, then you are projecting to your child that you have obligations toward your teenager, while he has none toward you.

If you have been projecting this image of your role to your teenager, is it any wonder why he might object when you don't fulfill your obligations toward him. After all you have tacitly agreed to take care of your child's needs, without receiving anything in return. That means that if he feels you are not doing a good enough job, he has the right to start complaining.

If your child is demanding and unreasonable, it is very likely that you are projecting a list of your obligations toward him which is very similar to the one I have mentioned. It is also likely that your list does not place any expectations on your child. If this describes your situation we are going to take the first step to ending it right now. I am going to ask you to adopt a new way of viewing your relationship with your child.

Here is a new list you should adopt:

1. My child is responsible to manage his own happiness. I am responsible to take care of my happiness.
2. It is my obligation to take care of my needs. I understand that I can only help those around me if I take care of myself first.
3. Both I and my child are human beings with both equal rights and equal obligations towards each other.
4. The best thing I can do for my child is to be a good role model. I can do that best by showing him that it is important to care for my own feelings, wants and needs, and to be a happy person.

The basic idea is that you want to create an atmosphere of equality and mutual respect. You can only do that if neither you nor your child is battling for control. We discussed earlier the idea of giving up on trying to control your child; you should be doing that already. Now we are discussing how to get your child to stop controlling you. The way we are going to do this is to have you stand up for your rights.