

PARENTING TEENS



JAMES C. DOBSON, PH.D.

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By James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

For three decades Dr. James Dobson has been America's leading authority and advocate for the family. Taken from the bestseller *Dr. Dobson's Handbook of Family Advice*, this Special Report is full of helpful information for families at all stages. Let's read along now as Dr. Dobson discusses Parenting Teens:

Kids Are like Kites

The task of letting our children go can be a tough one for parents. It was described by the late Erma Bombeck as being rather like flying a kite in this manner: Mom and Dad run down the road hoping to catch a breeze.

Eventually, and with much effort, they manage to hoist the kite a few feet in the air. Just when they think it is safely under way, great danger looms. It dives toward electrical lines and twirls perilously near the trees. It is a scary moment. Then, unexpectedly, a gust of wind catches the kite and carries it upward. Mom and Dad begin feeding line as rapidly as they can.

The kite then becomes difficult to hold. Parents reach the end of their line and begin to wonder what to do next. The little craft demands more freedom. It rises higher and higher. Dad stands on tiptoe to accommodate the tug. It is now grasped tenuously between his index finger and thumb, held upward toward the sky. Then comes the moment of release. The string slips through Dad's fingers, and the kite soars majestically into God's beautiful sky.

The kite is now a mere pinpoint of color in the sky. The parents are proud of what they've done—but sad to realize that their job is finished. It was a labor of love. But where did the years go?

Parenting is an exhilarating and terrifying experience and one that was ordained from the beginning. But with the ultimate release, the parents' task is finished. The kite is free, and so, for the first time in twenty years, are they.

Choosing Your Battles with Care

One of the most delicate aspects of raising a teenager is figuring out what's worth a showdown and what isn't. I remember talking to a waitress, a single mother, in a restaurant a few years ago. When she found out I was a psychologist, she began

telling me about her twelve-year-old daughter.

“We’ve fought tooth and nail this whole year,” she said. “It’s been awful! We go at it every night—usually over the same issue.”

“What do you argue about? I asked. The mother spelled it out. “Well, she’s still a little girl, but she wants to shave her legs. I feel she’s too young, but she gets so angry she won’t even talk to me. What do you think I should do?”

“Lady,” I said, “go buy your daughter a razor.” That twelve-year-old girl would soon be paddling into a time of life that would rock her canoe good and hard. Her mom, as a single mother, would be trying desperately to keep this rebellious teenager from getting into drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. Truly, there would be many ravenous alligators in her river within a year or two. In that setting it seemed unwise to make a big deal over what was essentially a nonissue.

I’ve seen other parents fight enormous battles over what were really inconsequential matters. It is a great mistake. I urge you not to damage your relationship with your kids over behavior that has no great moral or social significance. There’ll be plenty of real issues that will require you to stand like a rock. Save your big guns for those crucial confrontations, and pretend not to notice that which is trivial.

Compensatory Skills

It’s not easy getting through adolescence today, and the effective parent must learn early how to brace his or her kids before those turbulent years arrive.

Perhaps the most painful aspect of growing up is related to the assault on self-esteem that is almost universal in today’s teen society. Young people typically feel like fools and failures before they’ve even had a chance to get started in life. So how can parents prepare their younger children for the teenage years to come? Is there any way to make that passage to adulthood any easier and safer?

Well, one important approach is to teach boys and girls valuable skills with which to provide a centerpiece in their self-identity in years to come. They can benefit from learning about basketball, tennis, electronics, art, music, or even raising rabbits for fun and profit. It’s not so much what you teach your child. The key is that he or she learn something with which to compensate when the whole world seems to be saying, “Who are you, and what is your significance as a human being?”

The teenager who has no answer to those questions is left unprotected at a very

vulnerable time of life. Developing and honing skills with which to compensate may be one of the most valuable contributions parents can make during the elementary school years. It may even be worth requiring your carefree kid to take lessons, practice, compete, and learn something he or she will not fully appreciate for a few more years.

The Attack of the Killer Hormones

What is the process by which a happy, cooperative, twelve-year-old boy or girl suddenly turns into a sullen, depressed thirteen-year-old? It happens in almost every family. There are two powerful forces that account for some of the adolescent behavior that drives parents crazy.

The first is linked to the peer pressures that are common at that time. Much has been written about those influences. But there is a second, and I think more important, source of disruption of those years. It is related to the hormonal changes that not only transform the physical body, which we can see, but also revolutionize how kids think. For some (but not all) adolescents, human chemistry is in a state of imbalance for a few years, causing agitation, violent outbursts, depression, and flightiness. This upheaval can motivate a boy or girl to do things that make absolutely no sense to the adults who are watching anxiously on the sidelines. The hormonal firestorm operates much like pre-menstrual tension or menopause in women, destabilizing the self-concept and creating a sense of foreboding.

Parents often despair during the irrationality of this period. Everything they've tried to teach their sons and daughters seems to have misfired for a couple of years. Self-discipline, cleanliness, respect for authority, and common courtesy may give way to risk taking and all-around goofiness.

If that's where your child is today, I have good news for you. Better days are coming. That wacko kid will soon become a tower of strength and good judgment—if he doesn't do something destructive before his hormones settle down once more.

Teens Before Their Time

Is your mailbox stuffed with catalogs full of trendy designer clothes for every member of the family? Ours is. The other day I saw a pair of high-tech padded running shoes that cost nearly fifty dollars, and they were designed for toddlers who are barely able to walk. More and more, we see adolescent clothes, attitudes, and values being marketed to younger and younger children. Those perfectly beautiful fashion dolls and the dating culture they inspire are aimed primarily at the elementary school-age

market. Teenage stars, too, are promoted to the preteen set, which responds with appropriate crushes and fan mail. And rock and rap music, with adolescent and adult themes, is finding eager listeners among the very young.

This adolescent obsession can place our children on a very unnatural timetable, likely to reach the peak of sexual interest several years before it's due. That has obvious implications for their social and emotional health. I believe it is desirable to postpone the adolescent experience until it is summoned by the happy hormones. Therefore, I strongly recommend that parents screen the influences to which their children are exposed, keeping activities appropriate for each age. While we can't isolate our kids from the world as it is, we don't have to turn our babies into teenyboppers.

Who's at Fault When Kids Go Bad?

Whose fault is it when a teenager gets into trouble? Who gets the blame when he or she skips school or sprays graffiti on a bridge or begins to experiment with drugs? Whom do we accuse?

In the eyes of culture, parents are inevitably responsible for the misbehavior of their teenagers, and certainly, many deserve that criticism. Some are alcoholics or child abusers, or they have otherwise damaged their kids through their own blunders. But it's time we admitted that the sons and daughters of some very loving, caring parents can go wrong, too.

Only in this century have we blamed all misbehavior of teenagers on their parents. In years past, if a kid went bad, he was a bad kid. Now it's inevitably the fault of his dear old mom and dad, who must have bungled his childhood in some way. Well, maybe, and maybe not. Adolescents are old enough to make irresponsible choices of their own, and some do stupid things despite the love and care they receive at home.

I would not seek to exonerate parents who have shortchanged their kids and treated them badly. But someone should speak on behalf of those good-as-gold moms and dads who did the best they could for their rebellious children. They deserve a pat on the back, not a slap in the face.

Getting Past the Negative Ions

Sometimes raising teenagers can be like sending an astronaut into space. Early space probes launched from Cape Canaveral in the 1960s created anxiety for the safety of the astronaut. It was especially intense when the spacecraft was reentering the earth's atmosphere. At the most dangerous part of the journey, negative ions

would accumulate around the heat shield and interfere with radio contact for about seven minutes. Finally, the reassuring voice of Chris Kraft would break in and say, “We’ve made contact with Colonel Glenn again. Everything is A-OK.”

In a very real sense, adolescence can be like that spacecraft. After the training of childhood, a thirteen-year-old is blasted into space with a flurry. Something like “negative ions” begins to interfere with communication just as the adults want to be assured of the child’s safety. Why won’t he talk to them? Why has he or she disappeared behind a wall of silence? It is a terrifying time.

Fortunately, in a few years, the first scratchy signals will begin to come through again, and contact will be reestablished. The negative environment will gradually dissipate and the “splashdown” during the early twenties can be a wonderful reunion for both generations.

Pachyderms and Teenagers

I once watched a documentary showing how Indian elephants are trained to serve their human masters, and I was struck by the parallel between these beautiful creatures and our fragile teenagers.

The training process for elephants begins shortly after capture with three days of total isolation. These pachyderms are remarkably social animals, and they react to their loneliness in the same way humans do. They grieve and fret and long for their peers. At the peak of their vulnerability, the elephants are brought to a nighttime ceremony of fire, where they are screamed at and intimidated for hours. By morning, half-crazed, the elephants have yielded; their wills have been broken. Forever after, they will be slaves to a new master.

We humans also have a great need for love and acceptance, especially during our adolescent years. And like elephants during the night of fire, teenagers are often subjected by their culture to a period of intense isolation and loneliness, which often leaves them feeling rejected, ridiculed, and ignored. Some quickly begin to lose their sense of independence. They become slaves to conformity and peer pressure.

Somehow we must teach our children, long before they are teenagers, that they need not follow the whims of adolescent society. They can lead, or they can follow. It’s better to lead.

The Launch

There is a period in every young adult's life between ages sixteen and twenty-six that can literally shape or break his or her future. I call it the "Critical Decade."

A person is transformed during those ten years from a kid who's still living at home and eating at the parents' table to a full-fledged adult who should be earning a living and taking complete charge of his or her life. Most of the decisions that will shape the next fifty years will be made during this era, including the choice of an occupation, the decision to marry or not to marry, and the establishment of values and principles by which life will be governed.

Some young adults move easily through the critical decade, but others have greater difficulty making decisions and getting on with life. They can't settle on a line of work, set reachable goals, channel their interests, or decide what to do next. So they sit around their parents' home and watch daytime television. Young people such as these remind me of a rocket on a launchpad. They are ready to blast through the stratosphere, but the engines just won't fire. For some, an explosion occurs that leaves debris all over the place.

There are ways to help sons and daughters get moving if they will accept the parents' help. Arrange visits to vocational counselors who can give interest inventories and occupational tests that can clarify goals. Take them on career visits, and introduce them to people working successfully in different professions. The countdown is coming. Your young adult will either blast off or blow up. You might help make the difference.

Predators in the Tall Grass

A few years ago my family and I visited the magnificent wild-animal preserve known as the Serengeti in Tanzania. It had rained all day, and we eventually came to a stretch of road that was almost impassable. We were faced with a choice between two muddy paths but had no idea which to take. If we went the wrong way and became stuck, we would have spent the night there without food, water, or bathroom facilities. At that point our seventeen-year-old son, Ryan, volunteered to help.

"I'll run ahead and look at the two roads," he said. "Then I'll wave to let you know which is best."

The missionary who was with us said, "Um, Ryan, I don't think that is a very good idea. You just don't know what might be out there in the tall grass."

Eventually we chose what looked like the better of the two paths. But when we reached the place where the two trails came together, a huge male lion was crouched in the grass off to one side. He rolled his big yellow eyes and dared us to take him on. Ryan looked at that lion and agreed that it might be best to stay in the car!

In a manner of speaking, our experience on the Serengeti illustrates the passage from late adolescence to young adulthood. The journey goes smoothly and safely for some individuals. But a surprisingly large number of teens encounter unexpected “mud holes” that trap and hold them at an immature stage of development. Still others are plagued by dangerous predators. Among these are an addiction to alcohol or drugs, marriage to the wrong person, failure to achieve a coveted dream, suicide, homicide, or other criminal offenses.

It is, alas, very easy to make a very big mistake when young. Given the predators lurking in the tall grass, it does behoove us parents to stay very close to our sons and daughters on their road to adulthood.

You Don't Trust Me

If there's a magic bullet that teenagers use to manipulate their folks, it's these four words: You don't trust me!

The instant a young person accuses us of being suspicious and imagining the worst, we start backpedaling. “No, dear, it's not that I don't trust you being out with your friends or taking the car, it's just that I...” and then we run out of words. We're on the defensive, and the discussion is over.

Well, maybe it's time we recognized that trust is divisible. In other words, we can trust our children at some things but not at others. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition. This is the way the world of business works from day to day. Many of us are authorized, for example, to spend our company's money from certain accounts but not the whole corporate checkbook. I don't trust myself to attempt certain things like skydiving or bungee jumping, for another example.

So let's stop being suckered by our kids and boldly state that trust comes in stages. Some of it now and more later on.

Parents have the task of risking only what we can reasonably expect to be handled safely. To do more is not really trust; it's foolhardiness.

Talking to a Teen

There are some teenagers who sail right through the adolescent experience with hardly any evidence of turbulence. They make wonderful grades in school; they're a delight to their teachers and a treasure to their parents. But there are others, as we all know, who seem to declare war on the world and stay mad for the next ten years.

Mark Twain was referring to this second kind of kid when he wrote, "When a child turns 12, you should put him in a barrel, nail a lid down and feed him through a knot hole. When he turns 16, you should seal up the knot hole." There are times when parents have reason to feel that way, to be sure.

Erma Bombeck said she wasn't going to pay two thousand dollars to straighten the teeth of a kid who never smiled. Another mother talked about how her son had been a chatterbox throughout childhood, but when he became a teenager, his vocabulary consisted of only nine word-phrases. They were "I dunno," "Maybe," "I forget," "Huh?" "No!" "Nope,"

"Yeah," "Who—me?" and "He did it." Well, what are you going to do if your sweet, cuddly, cooperative pre-teenager turns into a sullen, silent adolescent? The answer is, you go right on loving him or her. What is going on inside that youngster, hormonally and emotionally, explains much of what you see on the outside. But it won't always be that way. Better days are coming. The smile and a rich vocabulary will return. I promise.

The Hallway of Doors

Imagine, if you will, a long dark hallway with a series of doors on either side. Written on each door is the name of an addiction, such as alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, hard drugs, gambling, pornography, and the like. Now, teenagers must walk down the hallway on this journey from childhood to adulthood.

The temptation is very great to open one or more of the doors along the way. They can hear the beat of the music and the raucous laughter of their friends echoing from inside. The pressure to join them can be enormous. And it is very difficult to convince a fun-loving adolescent that he or she should stay in the dark hallway, which seems so boring and embarrassing.

Unfortunately, for a certain percentage of individuals who open one or more of these dangerous doors, a tragedy begins to unfold. If a person is susceptible—and there's no way to know in advance—he or she only has to crack the door an inch or two and

a monster will run out and grab that young man or woman. Some will be held in its grip for the rest of their lives.

If you talk to an alcoholic about his or her addiction, you'll learn that it probably began casually—with no hint that life was about to take a radical and tragic turn. It all started with the opening of a door—probably during the teen years.

Sheep Led to Slaughter

I once saw a dramatic documentary film that featured a packing house where sheep were slaughtered. Huddled in pens were hundreds of nervous animals that seemed to sense danger in their unfamiliar surroundings. Then a gate was opened leading to a ramp and through a door to the right.

In order to get the sheep to walk up that ramp, the workers used what is known as a “Judas goat.” This is a goat that has been trained to lead the sheep into the slaughterhouse.

The goat confidently walked to the bottom of the ramp and looked back. Then he took a few more steps and stopped again. The sheep looked at each other skittishly and began moving toward the ramp. Eventually, they followed the confident goat to the top, where he went through another gate that closed behind him. This forced the sheep directly into the slaughterhouse. It was a dramatic illustration of herd behavior with deadly consequences.

There is a striking similarity between the sheep following the Judas goat and teenagers who succumb to peer pressure. Those who are more confident and rebellious often lead the timid into trouble. Some inject themselves with heroin or get involved with cocaine; others engage in dangerous sexual practices, drive while drinking, and engage in violent behavior. But why do they do such destructive things? Don't they care about their own lives and the future they are risking? Most of them do. But the pressure to conform—to follow the Judas goat—is even stronger than the need for security and well-being.

Adults have a similar problem. The prophet Isaiah observed it when he wrote, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray.”



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