

Parent's Tool Kit For Teens

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Foreword

Parenting is tough these days. If you are like most parents, your time is tight, your stress is high, you want practical techniques to better deal with your teenager, and you can't afford to get bogged down in lengthy or vague parenting literature. With this handbook, you are well on your way to positively influencing the behavior of your teenage children and developing a closer, stronger relationship with them. *Parent's Tool Kit—Teenager Edition* quickly teaches you seven tools to promote positive and socially appropriate behaviors, and effectively manage and decrease problem behaviors. The guide uses numerous examples and takes you step-by-step through each technique, and also highlights common mistakes and improper uses of each technique.

All of the concepts reviewed in this book are based on behavioral theory and learning principles, and have a proven track record of influencing behavior. They are not simply tricks that one parent tried with his child that worked. Since these tools are presented to you in "parent-friendly" language, you don't have to decipher complex psychological wording to understand them.

Your parenting tools will always work more effectively if used consistently by all of the people interacting with your teen. For instance, if you and your spouse or partner review the tools together and use them in a similar fashion, your child will learn and improve behavior more quickly. Likewise, it is important to communicate with teachers, grandparents, coaches, etc., so that you all use the tools consistently, as a team.

Because the goal of *Parent's Tool Kit—Teenager Edition* is to help you facilitate improved adolescent behavior AND build family relationships, the tools this book promotes are based on the following philosophies:

- Parenting is a learning experience, so parents will not always be perfect, and must use trial and error to discover which techniques work best with their teen, and when
- Kids are constantly learning, and so they too cannot be expected to be perfect or to immediately act the way parents want
- Parents have the right to use authority, set rules and limits, and decide what behavior is acceptable or not.
- No parent has the ability to truly control their teen, so control is not the goal of these tools; rather, a parent's aim is to **influence** teenagers and **teach them self-control**
- Kids are people too, and regardless of their age, deserve to be treated with respect

Thank you again for taking the time to read *Parent's Tool Kit—Teenager Edition*.

Before getting started, read this important parenting alert

Many parents have voiced a desire to know what NOT to do with their children before trying new parenting tools. Thus, I will take this opportunity to alert you to what I consider the three most common threats to positive parenting of teenagers:

- **Extortion**
- **Bribery**
- **Trained non-compliance**

Extortion refers to demanding a reward or privilege, with some form of threat stated or implied if the reward or privilege is not granted. Adolescents often try to exert power or intimidate their parents to get what they want. Extortion may range from throwing a lengthy tantrum until parents give in to the demand, to threatening violence or self-harm to get their way. Some teens even threaten non-compliance of necessary responsibilities or tasks, such as homework, until their parents meet their demands. Threats may also be vague, such as, “You better let me go to the movies, or you’ll be sorry!”

Extortion is a serious behavior that can jeopardize family relationships, moral development, and a child’s entire future, because the Real World does not tolerate this conduct. Adolescents who practice extortion typically started young, using it in less severe forms, and gradually escalated over time. Parents may feel that it is too late or too difficult to address this behavior in teenagers. However, failure to address extortion only leads to greater power imbalances, greater suffering, and increased jeopardy for kids’ futures. This book empowers parents to confront extortion on all levels and never give in to it. See ***Rewarding—Common Mistakes Parents Make*** for specific techniques.

Bribery is a strategy common to teenagers and parents. The teen version of bribery is asking for an up-front payment for services. In other words, they say, “Give me this, and I’ll do what you want.” Thus,

it is based on manipulation of parents rather than intimidation or threats. Teens who successfully use bribery lose all motivation to carry out the tasks they have promised, and generally learn to get their needs met through “smooth talking” rather than through hard work and earned privileges. Clearly, this is a dangerous pattern of behavior that can lead to failures in various developmental tasks, as well as low self-esteem and considerable suffering for all involved. Parents need to recognize this behavior at its early stages. Generally, whenever children are trying to dictate the terms of a reward or privilege, it borders on bribery.

Parents use bribery in a different fashion, saying more or less, “We’re going to reward you for something you haven’t done yet so you will appreciate us and work harder.” When other techniques have failed, parents may offer up-front rewards to influence (bribe) their teenager to do what they want. This act of desperation rarely produces any sustained results, and generally invites more bribery or extortion from the teen. Again, this book will provide healthier alternatives to these parenting pitfalls.

Trained non-compliance—the process in which teens learn to refuse parental directions—occurs two ways. First, children train their parents to allow them to escape responsibilities, usually through a veiled form of extortion. They make such a fuss when asked to do something that parents are deterred from enforcing follow-through with the task. Or, kids convince parents they are helpless, and that enforcing compliance will damage them. Over time, parents are trained to accept non-compliance or stop demanding any work or responsibility from their child. In this process, the teen is also trained, gaining great satisfaction through escape of responsibility and following directions. This book will discuss in detail how to recognize and prevent this destructive training process (see ***Freeing***).

Parenting Fundamentals

This chart highlights seven tools you can use with your teenage children to help them develop socially desirable behaviors. Punishment and fining are mentioned here, but this guide recommends against using these techniques. All of these tools may be effective under certain circumstances, but some may also be ineffective under the same circumstances, depending on the child involved. Parents are advised to read these techniques carefully and understand them before putting them into practice. If you have any doubts or questions about a parenting tool, please consult a behavior specialist before using it. To address serious behavioral problems or to implement sophisticated behavior plans, professional consultation is likewise recommended.

Giving Something	Taking Away Something	Changing the Environment	Teaching	Doing Nothing
Rewarding Giving something meaningful to a child following a behavior (by design or by chance), resulting in the promotion of that behavior	Freeing Removing a painful or unwanted circumstance, resulting in the promotion of a behavior	Environment Control Changing a child's environment to influence behavioral changes	Instruction Using explanations, prompts, corrections, and commands to promote a behavior	Ignoring Decreasing attention given to a behavior (or providing a neutral emotional expression) to decrease or eliminate that behavior
Punishing* Giving something painful or unpleasant to discourage a behavior *(not recommended)	Fining* Taking away something meaningful to discourage a behavior	-----	Modeling "Teaching by example," or demonstrating a behavior, consciously or not, resulting in the promotion of that behavior	Natural Consequences Not interfering with the consequences that normally follow a behavior, or giving "real world" consequences to discourage a behavior

Rewarding

Also known as positive reinforcement, rewarding is a powerful tool that influences behavior. Rewarding means **giving something pleasant or wanted to a child when he or she behaves in a desired way, so that the behavior is repeated and becomes a habit.** A reward, simply defined, is something your teenager wants. In this model, they are categorized as Basic Rewards and Love Rewards. **Basic Rewards** include tangible items, activities, or privileges that by definition are wanted by the child.

When a parent gives a teenager a Basic Reward, the implied message is, "You did a good job, and I appreciate it. Keep it up."

Examples of Basic Rewards include new clothes, television time, and money (see **Basic Rewards List**, next page for more examples). Every adolescent has his or her own preferences. Recognizing what your teenager likes is a critical step prior to successful rewarding.

Example: Andrea (15) studies very hard for a test and receives an "A". Her parents take her out to dinner at her favorite restaurant and let her order anything on the menu. She remains motivated to study.
(The reward recognizes individual preferences.)

Example: To reward Josh (17) for getting straight A's, his parents buy him a summer travel package to Europe. He wants to be home so he can spend time with his girlfriend before she leaves for college. He loses motivation to study.
(To Josh, travel is not a reward, because it takes him away from what he wants—time with his girlfriend. Thus, his parents discourage his behavior rather than promote it.)

Example: Monroe (16) comes home before curfew every night for six months. His parents extend his curfew one hour.
(The parents reward him for a pattern of successful behavior.)

Example: Parveen (14) loves television. Once she finishes her homework and chores, her parents allow her to watch as long as she wants until bedtime (about 1-2 hrs.).
(Her parents make T.V. a reward for homework/chore completion, not an entitlement for whenever she wants it.)

Love Rewards reinforce behavior through the quality of the parent-child relationship. Examples include verbal praise, affection, attention, laughter, approval, pleasant facial expressions, saying "Thank you," leaving affectionate notes, and offering 1:1 time with a parent (playing games, going for walks, etc.).

Love Rewards are fundamental human needs, can be used often, and strengthen the influence of Basic Rewards. In addition to saying, "You did a good job," they convey the message, "You're a good, loveable kid." For Love Rewards to be effective, the person giving the reward must be significant to the child, or the reward may be rejected.

Keep in mind that teenagers can be sensitive to the manner in which parents give Love Rewards. For example, an adolescent male may appreciate parental affection, but not publicly, and especially not in front of friends. Furthermore, parents must deliver Love Rewards in an age-appropriate fashion. A teenager may feel rewarded hearing "Good job" or "Right on!" However, if a parent says, "GREAT, THAT'S SO WONDERFUL, I'M SO PROUD OF MY BABY!" the teen may feel resentful and punished, not rewarded, because the language is not age-appropriate. Parents can observe their teen's reactions to language to learn the types of words and expressions that are accepted and interpreted as rewarding, and those that are not.

Does rewarding teens actually punish them?

Some professionals believe that if parents praise or reward teens for desired behavior, these children will become dependent on rewards; will not sustain desired behaviors unless the rewards come constantly; and will suffer a loss of self-esteem as a result of this dependency. Some parents also disagree with the idea of rewarding, and believe that kids should carry out responsibilities and behave to a high standard with no expectation of reward or recognition. This author disagrees with these points of view, and suggests that parents reward children many times every day, both deliberately and inadvertently, often in very subtle ways. Thus, the idea is not to avoid rewarding children, but to increase awareness of rewarding practices. Ultimately, parents want to reward their teenager in a proper and consistent manner that reinforces socially appropriate behaviors instead of undesirable ones, and that avoids the syndromes of extortion, bribery, and trained non-compliance. Parents who deny the need to reward children are fighting against basic human learning—a losing battle. That is, if a child receives no payoff (either Basic or Love Reward) after a behavior, then that kid has no motivation to repeat that behavior.

Basic Rewards List

(Examples only—consult your teenager to complete the list)

Stuff

New clothes or shoes
VCR/DVD player
Computer
Television
Stereo/ MP3 player
Music C.D.'s or song downloads
Videos/ DVD's
Rented movies or video games
Books/ Comic books
Games/ Video games
Electronics
Telephone/ cell phone
Car
Go-cart (where legal)
Skateboard
In-line skates
Skating accessories
Surfboard/ Surfing accessories
Boat
Sports equipment
Ski equipment
Musical instruments/ accessories
Astronomy equipment
Scuba equipment
Outdoor/ Camping equipment
Posters
Puzzles
Art or drawing supplies
Pets
Trading cards (baseball, anime)
Cosmetics
Tools (age appropriate)
Hobby supplies (e.g. models)
Money
Credit (toward larger rewards)
Your kid's choice _____

Outings

Park
Beach
Movies
Restaurant
Concerts
Miniature golf
Arcade
Zoo
Theme park
Sporting events
Museum
Library
Your kid's choice _____

Classes

Tennis
Dance
Art/Music/Acting
Martial arts
Yoga
Gymnastics
Exercise/ Step/ Personal Training
Cooking
Woodworking/Building
Computer
Your kid's choice _____

Activities

Organized sports
Fishing
Surfing
Bowling
Skating/ Skateboarding
Swimming
Skiing
Boating
Golf
Makeovers
Your kid's choice _____

Privileges (most no cost)

Use of computer or internet
Television time
Television in bedroom
Stereo time
Staying up late
Visiting a friend's house
Having a friend as a guest
Sleepovers (home & away)
Going out to eat
Having a food budget
Having food delivered
Going to the mall
Going shopping
Telephone privileges
Having own telephone line
Cellular minutes
Driving privileges
Access to parents' equipment, items, etc.
Setting one's own schedule for chores, homework, etc.
Dating privileges
Privacy
Having one's own room
Free time
Dinner requests
Your kid's choice _____

Rewarding

Four Steps to Success

Step 1: Identify the Basic Rewards

Knowing what your teen likes and wants gives you the power to deliver rewards that actually influence behavior. These Basic Rewards are more meaningful when you approach your teen and explore her likes and dislikes, rather than waiting for her to ask you. Once kids start approaching parents asking for certain rewards, the parents are already losing influence and are leaving the door open for potential bribery. Furthermore, when parents sit down with kids to develop an expanded list of rewards, it sends them two important messages: 1) Your needs are important to me, and I am paying attention to them; and 2) Your behavior is important to me, and acting the right way will help you get your needs met.

Step 2: Identify Desirable Behaviors

Kids don't automatically know what to do, and therefore constantly test their environment and their parents to learn how to behave. Being an empowered, proactive parent means developing behavior standards for your teen. This does not mean attempting to control your children or infringe on their rights as individuals. Rather, it involves setting behavioral criteria based on reasonable values and encouraging your children to follow them (and ultimately, it is their choice whether or not to follow these standards). It is not the goal of this handbook to direct parents to teach their children to behave a certain way. However, most parents will agree that it is necessary to teach and reinforce the following basic social behaviors to teenagers:

- ✓ Being honest and truthful
- ✓ Being helpful or doing things for others
- ✓ Taking responsibility for one's behavior
- ✓ Attending school, on time
- ✓ Completing studies and homework on time
- ✓ Speaking in a respectful manner to parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and peers
- ✓ Carrying out chores or responsibilities at home
- ✓ Spending time with family, including required activities (church, dinner, holidays) without protest
- ✓ Communicating clearly with parents about activities, whereabouts, plans, etc.
- ✓ Being accountable for their whereabouts, i.e. being in the appropriate place at the appropriate time
- ✓ Returning home at an agreed-upon hour
- ✓ Practicing self-care, including diet and exercise

Undoubtedly, parents will want to add to this list. It is essential that they inform their teen about the specific behaviors they want to see, and that the teen understands what is expected. For suggestions on how to teach or explain behaviors to a child, see the *Instruction* section.

Step 3: Identify Undesirable Behaviors

Just as most parents expect certain basic behaviors, they also will not tolerate certain behaviors. Throughout the last 15 years, parents in family therapy with this author have universally identified certain behaviors as undesirable:

- School truancy, tardiness, and disruption
- Failure to study/ complete homework on time
- Laziness, poor effort, or having a "helpless" attitude
- Talking back to or nagging parents or teachers
- Defiance of rules, commands, or responsibilities
- Yelling and foul language
- Aggression, threats, intimidation, extortion, bribery
- Lying, manipulation, or stealing from family
- Isolating from family
- Lack of accountability for whereabouts or actions
- Curfew violations
- Associating with peers known to have problems
 - Any of the above-mentioned behaviors
 - Drug or alcohol use, smoking
 - Destroying property, slamming doors, throwing items, tagging/ graffiti
 - Harassing peers
 - Poor hygiene and personal habits
 - Legal violations (including traffic)
 - Unsafe or inappropriate sexual behavior

Parents want to avoid rewarding or even tolerating any of these behaviors. However, they can *reward the absence or decline of problem behaviors*.

Example: Jose (13) is sent to the Principal's office 3-4 times a week for various infractions. If he is sent only once a week, his parents add \$2 to his allowance. If he avoids school discipline completely, they add \$5. (This rewards a decline in frequency or absence of problem behavior, with greater rewards for greater progress.)

Example: Every time her sister provokes her, Melissa (14) hits her. One time when provoked, Melissa yells at her instead. Her mother says, "I'm proud of you for not hitting" and sits down to watch a video with her. (This rewards a decline in severity of behavior.)

Rewarding

Four Steps to Success (Continued)

Step 4: Deliver the reward

So, what do you do when your teen finally does what you want? You reward her to promote that behavior and improve the chances that she will repeat it. Initially, reward your teen every time he or she displays a desired behavior, *as soon as possible* after the behavior is completed. Love Rewards, such as verbal praise and affection, should be used first, and in most cases will be sufficient; if not, you may later add an identified, meaningful, Basic Reward. Timing is critical! The sooner a reward follows a behavior, the greater its influence. A reward received too late may not promote a behavior, but may confuse a child, promote other behaviors, or encourage bribery.

Example: Harvey buys Raymond (13) a new video game to reward him for an "A" on a test last week. Raymond is grateful, but does not connect the reward with studying, and gains no more motivation to study. He then begins asking his father to buy him games on a regular basis. (Delivered too late, the reward did not reinforce the behavior and sparked Raymond's bribery.)

In addition to timely delivery of rewards, random or unexpected rewards can have a strong influence on adolescents and their tendency to repeat desirable behaviors. This is often the most effective way to give Basic Rewards. Since the teen does not know the reward is coming, he values it more. Or, he continues to produce good behavior, knowing in the back of his mind that a reward could come at any time. Parents who do not allow their children to specifically request or demand rewards are better able to carry out this random rewarding.

Example: Cassandra (18) has been studying hard all week and taking finals. On the night before the last exam, her parents praise her for her efforts and surprise her with a delivery of Thai food (her favorite). After dinner, she studies extra hard for her last exam. (Her parents randomly reinforced her studying with praise and a meaningful, basic reward.)

Parents can also get "reward value" from everyday entitlements. For instance, parents planning a family dinner out (because they don't feel like cooking) can connect going out to dinner with desirable behavior, i.e., "You've worked hard today, so we're going out."

Some teenagers like big rewards, such as cars, trips, and computers. Although parents cannot provide these rewards regularly, they can set up a credit system in which their teen earns points toward such a reward for everyday, desirable behaviors.

Example: Miriam (15) wants a new basketball hoop/backboard worth \$250. Her parents tell her she needs 25 credits to earn it. For every test or paper in which she earns a B+ or better, she gets one credit. (With this incentive system, Miriam works toward a goal, earning what she wants in 3-4 months with measurable achievements.)

If your teenager maintains behaviors with Love Rewards only (e.g. praise), keep using them. Save the Basic Rewards for other behaviors that your teen is having more difficulty mastering. If you must use a Basic Reward to promote a behavior, always combine it with a Love Reward (praise, affection, etc.). Eventually, you may decrease and ultimately discontinue the Basic Reward once the behavior has become commonplace. However, it is important to keep praising desired behaviors, or your teen may not continue to perform those behaviors consistently.

Successful Rewarding Summarized

Parents identify the behaviors they want to see, and don't want to see, from their kids. They make an effort to find out the items, activities, or privileges their child most likes. When their child displays desired behaviors or decreases/eliminates undesirable behaviors, the parents praise the child, give her affection, thank her, etc. If appropriate, they also offer a Basic Reward (something she wants) to further reinforce the behavior, or they may offer her credit toward redeeming that reward (for example, if it is very expensive). If Love Rewards are effective in promoting desired behaviors, parents may continue using them without Basic Rewards. When Basic Rewards are needed, always combine them with Love Rewards, using them long enough to make the behavior a habit, then decreasing them gradually. Parents may also deliver Basic Rewards randomly or intermittently to increase the strength of their influence.

Rewarding Common Mistakes Parents Make

Rewarding undesirable behaviors to get a teen off your back

Although parental patience may wear thin, it is much easier to endure an undesirable behavior in the short term than to reinforce it and deal with it indefinitely. This is one way that parents give in to extortion.

Example: Daniel (12) nags his father incessantly to go to a theme park. His father tells him no initially, but eventually loses patience and says yes so Daniel will stop nagging.
(This reinforces nagging and persistence, which will occur with greater strength and frequency.)

Laughing at undesirable behaviors

Laughing can be a form of Love Reward and often reinforces behavior. Although parents at times may be tempted to chuckle at inappropriate behavior, they must keep in mind that teens may use these behaviors in the wrong context.

Example: Carla (14) belches at the dinner table. Her mother cracks up, and Carla laughs with her.
(Laughter increases the chance Carla will repeat this, and rewards conduct that may hurt Carla socially.)

Rewarding a child for a behavior before it occurs (Bribery)

This will not teach a teenager to sustain a behavior, and leaves parents feeling frustrated, hurt, and disappointed when a teen fails to continue to perform. To avoid bribery, simply delay the reward until the desired behavior is achieved, regardless of the child's persistence or complaints.

Example: Martha buys Air Jordan shoes for her sons (15 and 13), telling them to be good. They behave well temporarily, but the next day act defiantly and disrespectfully, resuming their previous pattern of verbal abuse toward her.
(Buying them shoes does not promote improved behavior, but teaches the boys to demand rewards.)

Example: Herman (17) promises to complete all homework and not ditch school if his parents buy him a car. Within one week of receiving the car, he is truant. Now he breaks his curfew. He promises his parents he won't exceed curfew if they let him quit school.
(When the parents give in to bribery, teens do not deliver on promises of improved behavior, and then raise the stakes.)

Rewarding a teen when he or she demands a reward (Extortion)

This will not sustain a behavior in a teenager; teaches her to be manipulative, demanding, and intimidating; and trains her to act in a desirable way only for Basic Rewards delivered in advance.

Example: Claire (18) says to her father, "I'll break your computer if you don't let me use the internet!"

Parents must hold steady and never give in to threats, no matter how serious, because these will only get worse over time if demands are met. For severe extortion cases, professional intervention (therapy, hospitalization, residential placement, law enforcement) may be warranted. Rather than giving in, parents can delay all rewards and privileges until the extortion stops. Parents can also confront extortion using a strong, authoritative re-direction.

Example: Claire's father responds, "I don't want to EVER hear you talk like that! I'm the parent, you are not my boss, and I am not raising a thug!"

Or, they can ignore extortion, keeping a neutral expression, while continuing to delay rewards.

Example: Claire's father responds, "Yeah, whatever. Do what you have to do. But touch my computer, and you definitely won't have internet access—ever."

Either of these techniques may work, depending on the individuals involved, the family communication style, and the strength of the parents.

Using only Basic Rewards, but no Love Rewards

This keeps children focused only on Basic Rewards, does not help them develop an inner sense of satisfaction for behaving well, and may engender anger and manipulative qualities.

Giving attention reactively, not proactively

Again, attention is a Love Reward that a child seeks throughout development. If a child does not receive sufficient attention to meet his needs, he may seek it through negative ways.

Example: Mario (15) wants to spend more time with his father, who works 60 hours a week, but does not know how to tell him. He repeatedly breaks house rules and gets in trouble at school. Each time, his father gives him a harsh, lengthy lecture.
(Mario learns that acting out gets his father's attention. Although punitive, he prefers this to no attention at all.)

Freeing

Also known as negative reinforcement, freeing refers to **removing a painful circumstance in a way that promotes a behavior**. Like rewarding, this tool must be used carefully, as it can promote both wanted and unwanted behaviors.

Examples that illustrate the power of freeing include:

- **Seat belt warning signals in cars.** You start the engine, and a loud bell rings until you buckle your seat belt. When you buckle it, the bell stops. The removal of the bell rewards your buckling behavior.
- **Time off work.** You work hard. Your boss gives you the day off, reinforcing your hard work.
- **Fast acting pain medication.** You have a migraine and take a pill that quickly relieves pain. Your drug-seeking is reinforced.

In other words, freeing rewards behavior through taking away something unwanted.

Example: George (14) must wash dishes after dinner. Tonight, he cooks the meal, and does a great job. To promote his cooking behavior, his parents tell him as soon as he finishes cooking that he will be relieved of dishwashing duty that night. (Freeing him from his chore reinforces the more difficult and desired behavior of cooking.)

Example: The Jones' listen to opera every Sunday night and insist that their teenage children listen with them, which they thoroughly dislike. The children have been fighting everyday, but are freed from "opera appreciation" for going an entire day without fighting. (Freeing them from the unwanted activity reinforces the decrease of unwanted behavior. Notice that the parents freed the kids after they achieved the desired behavior, not before, which would be another form of bribery.)

Parents need to be wary of freeing a child from too many obligations. Teenagers still need to learn to comply with responsibilities on a regular basis, and should be rewarded for complying with them more often than they are freed from them.

Parents will not often use freeing deliberately to promote desired behaviors, but will often inadvertently use it and reinforce unwanted behaviors. Thus, parents must understand the concept of freeing to know what not to do.

The most common misuse of freeing is **trained non-compliance**, in which parents free their teens from unwanted responsibilities, which only further strengthens their determination to avoid those responsibilities and refuse to comply. Typically, this first occurs when a child complains about an activity and refuses to participate. Parents try to make the teen comply, but ultimately allow him to escape the responsibility, thus freeing him and rewarding his non-compliance.

Example: Maria (16) refuses to go to school. Her parents struggle with her, but give up, and stop insisting that she go. She continues to stay home. (Maria is freed from the pain of school, and her non-compliance is rewarded.)

Upon closer examination, it is evident that this process involves a milder form of **extortion**. When the child complains about a responsibility or task, she is really saying, "I'm going to make you miserable if you make me do this, so let me out of it and I'll leave you alone. If you insist, I will only complain and whine louder. My technique is either to annoy you until you give in and free me from this painful task, or to make you think that I am helpless and that you are hurting me if you insist on my compliance."

In either case, parents must not free a teen from a responsibility or task once ordered, or they are essentially giving in to extortion, reinforcing resistance, and training the child to be increasingly defiant. If a teen refuses to comply, then parents must delay all rewards or privileges until he ultimately follows directions. If your adolescent employs the second technique—trying to convince you that she is helpless, vulnerable, or impaired to provoke your sympathy and guilt—don't buy it! Teenagers are far from helpless and can always learn to be responsible, even if they have suffered trauma, are treated for illnesses, or have emotional problems.

If parents feel excessive guilt when they demand something from their teenager, or do not feel strong enough to withstand a teen's protests and enforce compliance, then they are encouraged to seek professional counseling. Otherwise, trained non-compliance will likely continue, leading to prolonged suffering for the teen, parents, and any other siblings or family members living in the home.

Environment Control

"I talk to my son all the time. I even try to compliment him when I can, but he is out of control, and there's nothing I can do to control him. I'm at my wit's end!"

When parents feel this way, environment control—**making environmental changes to influence behavioral changes**—gives them options to deal with a teen's difficult behavior. A parent cannot control a child's will or actions, but can do much to control his or her physical environment, even away from home.

Environment control may include modification of schedules, structuring activities, introducing people into the child's space, and even altering the parent's own behavior.

Example: Don (16) hangs out with gang members after school and often gets in trouble. His parents enroll him in acting classes, which keep him busy from school dismissal until dinner. Then, he stays at home. (Due to introducing the new activity, Don no longer has the opportunity to get in trouble.)

Example: Charlene (13) comes home tired and irritable after gym class, and gets into conflicts with her father. On the three days she has class, her father invites her aunt, a very calming person, to join them for dinner. Charlene socializes with her aunt and no longer starts conflicts with her father. (The introduction of a new person creates extra attention and socializing opportunities, and changes the home atmosphere, which disrupts the previous pattern of parent-child interactions.)

Example: Elisa (14) whines whenever she is told to do something. Her mother's typical response is to raise her voice and speak forcefully. However, one time her mother decides to whine back, in very dramatic fashion, saying "No, I don't want to do it, you're killing me, nooooo!" Elisa reacts with irritability, but no longer whines. (Her mother's behavioral change captures Elisa's attention, gives her feedback about how she sounds, and helps her develop insight into her behavior, ultimately helping her to change it.)

Example: Fabiola (15) is very angry and irritable because she never sees her mother, due to a late work schedule. Her mother notices the problem and changes her schedule, which produces a noticeable change in Fabiola's mood. (In this case, changing the parent's schedule made the difference for the teen.)

Environment control may also involve adding, taking away, changing locations of, or blocking access to certain items.

Example: Rudy (18) fails to turn off the computer by 11 P.M., his deadline. At 11:01, his mother removes the power cord. He learns to shut down by the deadline. (Removing the "corrupting item" teaches Rudy to become more responsible, since he dislikes ending computer time in this manner.)

Example: Kyra (15) has a problem with alcohol and often takes samples from her parents' liquor supply. When they discover this, they remove all alcohol from the house and seek treatment for her. (Removing all alcohol is essential to Kyra's recovery.)

Example: Albert (17) plays basketball with friends at the park, but his parents don't trust the friends and worry about their influence on him. They buy a mobile basket so the boys play in front of their house. (Adding the basket improves their supervision.)

Furthermore, environment control offers options such as changing seating or sleeping arrangements, changing times of certain activities, or changing the structure of a room or living area to increase visibility and supervision.

Example: Sarah (15) and Virginia (13) argue severely in the car on the way two and from soccer practice. Since their mother does not yet feel assertive enough to intervene, she trades duties with their father, with whom the girls behave more appropriately. (Changing the family makeup during the commute disrupts the negative behavior pattern.)

Example: Audry (17) practices the violin all afternoon, then tries to do homework at night, but often falls asleep. Her mother sets a rule of no violin until homework is done. (The change in timing improves her motivation to complete homework, and also improves her performance.)

When all techniques fail, including professional help, environment control offers parents a last resort: changing one's living location.

Example: Diane has tried everything to keep her son (16) away from a group of peers that have a damaging influence on him, without success. She moves the family to Seattle, where they all attend family therapy. (Moving gives her son an opportunity to work on his issues away from the negative peer influences. Note: Moving, without additional support or intervention, is not an effective solution for teens with serious emotional problems.)

Modeling

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”—Swedish proverb

Modeling, or **teaching by example**, is the most powerful parenting process. Teens constantly look for behavioral models, although they may not admit or realize it, and often mimic adult behaviors. Through their daily behavior, attitudes, and expressions, parents are teaching their children by example whether they intend to or not.

Example: Ruben wants to teach his son (13) to respect women. He gets his attention, speaks to his wife courteously in his presence, and she thanks him. (His son observes the benefits of the behavior, and is likely to repeat it.)

Example: Jan (12) idolizes her mother. She sees her mother reading everyday. She becomes an avid reader. (The strong relationship with her mother increases the likelihood of Jan imitating her behavior.)

These lessons are much more powerful than talking with kids, because a parent’s behavior gives legitimacy to a teen—if my parent does that, it must be okay. Thus, if parents have a “do what I say, not what I do” approach to parenting, their teen will most likely follow the modeled behavior, not the instructed behavior.

Example: Clara (18) experiments with cigarettes. Her mother finds out and educates her about the dangers of smoking. Clara stops for a while, but when she observes her father smoking cigars, she resumes smoking and becomes addicted to nicotine. (Her father gives her legitimacy to smoke, and demonstrates the need for parents to model behavior consistently, as a team.)

Example: Tom frequently talks to his two boys (13 and 15) about the importance of respecting others, but yells at his wife and puts her down in their presence. Both boys develop problems talking back to teachers, and one becomes abusive to women as an adult. (Tom’s behavioral examples overshadow the lessons he tries to teach his sons.)

Changing to a “do what I do” plan is more likely to influence teens to act in desired ways. Although positive modeling does not guarantee that a teen will follow the demonstrated behavior, it improves the odds. Knowing this, parents can model proactively.

Proactive Modeling Methods

- ✓ Decide how you want your teen to act and plan precisely what behaviors you will demonstrate to him or her.
- ✓ Demonstrate behaviors that could be potentially difficult for a teen to learn. For boys, this might include modeling expression of feelings, sensitivity, and listening skills. Assertiveness, self-care, and body acceptance might be helpful to model for some girls.
- ✓ Choose times and settings to model these behaviors that will increase the likelihood of your teenager paying attention and being receptive to them (for example, when you know he or she will be in a good mood).
- ✓ Be aware of people that may be modeling undesirable behaviors to your teen, including negative role models of media, entertainment, and sports. If you cannot limit your child’s exposure to these persons, develop a strategy to model and teach corrective behaviors. You can also highlight the negative consequences of famous role models (e.g. drug overdoses, bankruptcies) if your teen appears to look up to them.
- ✓ Practice self-improvement. Taking stock of one’s own behavior, and looking at how it may be teaching a teen undesirable conduct, is a difficult task for parents. However, asking for feedback from friends, other parents, or professionals can help with this process. Although challenging, understanding and changing parental behavior can have a dramatic impact on teen behavior. At a minimum, parents can make efforts to be more aware of their behavior when their children are present, and assume that they will mimic every negative quality a parent might display. This suggests the need to limit yelling, arguing, criticism, complaining, foul language, alcohol use, or other behaviors or expressions that parents do not want their children to repeat. Kids are smart. Even if they do not directly witness their parents’ behavior, they may still learn about it and model after it.

Instruction

Most parents use instruction frequently. This means either **teaching a teenager how to do something, or commanding a child to carry out a behavior already mastered.** In the case of commands, parents assume that the teen knows what to do and does not require teaching. It is important to make sure this is true. Also, whenever parents give commands, they must be prepared to enforce follow-through to avoid freeing and training non-compliance. Thus, parents need to think carefully about what they command their teen to do, be confident he is willing and able to carry out the command, and be prepared to use authority if he refuses. Explaining the rationale for a command can be helpful to sophisticated teenagers. However, if teens question commands, empowered parents have the right to respond, "Because it is important to me that you do this."

Instruction involves explanations, prompts, and corrections to help a teen master a task.

Example: Janice wants to teach her daughter Lee (13) to paint her room. First, she explains the steps involved, including preparation and clean-up. Then, she shows her all the materials and demonstrates how to use them. Finally, she prompts Lee to paint, giving her feedback to help her paint accurately rather than waiting for her to make a mistake. (Janice actively explains the process, models the behavior, and prompts Lee to do the job correctly.)

Since it is easier for most teens to perform a task after observing it, modeling that task before instruction improves the chances that a teen will learn it correctly. Participating in an activity together can also help speed learning, as well as promote a stronger parent-child bond. Instruction works better when parents present tasks in simple steps, one behavior at a time. However, the parent must consider the age and developmental level of the child to avoid patronizing her or leaving her feeling like she is too young to understand.

Example: Hector is teaching his son Andres (16) to drive. First, he lets Andres observe him driving. Next, in his automatic, he lets him practice turning the steering wheel. He then lets him drive straight down the street, without turning, practicing using the gas and the brake. Then he lets Andres practice driving and turning. When Andres is competent driving the automatic, Hector teaches him to drive a stick shift.

(Hector demonstrates each basic step, then prompts Andres to practice and master it, before moving to more complicated steps. This is most appropriate for a task such as driving, which has a small margin for error.)

The following steps are likely to improve the frequency and accuracy of your teenager's response to instruction:

- ✓ Make sure you have your teenager's full attention before giving an instruction
- ✓ Avoid commanding language; generally, teens do not want to be "told" what to do (who does?). If a parent sends the message, "Here is what you do" rather than "Do this, do that," the child will likely respond with more willingness and effort
- ✓ Repeat the instruction, and prompt your teen to perform tasks the same way each time so a routine develops
- ✓ Watch your teen's responses closely, prompting him to perform the behavior correctly as he goes, rather than waiting for him to make a mistake and correcting it later
- ✓ Praise compliance, cooperation, effort, and attempts that come close to the behavioral response that you want. Encourage your teen to keep trying until she gets it right. If she complains about making mistakes, promote the idea of trial and error to improve future efforts
- ✓ Save your best praise for appropriate responses to instructions, and correct your child's mistakes in a gentle and supportive manner, focusing on positive actions and tips for improvement
- ✓ Once a behavior is mastered, decrease praise and save it for significant accomplishments

Example: Burt is teaching his daughter Mia (15) to hit a baseball, fast pitch. After demonstrating, observing her practice swings, and giving her improvement tips, he pitches to her repeatedly. When she misses badly, he either says nothing or "Keep trying." If she comes close or tips the ball, he says, "Good, nice swing," "You almost got that one," or "Way to stay with that pitch." When she hits a pitch, he cheers and says, "Nice hit!" (Burt explains the steps, models the behavior, provides encouragement, rewards/ praises Mia for coming close to the target behavior, and then gives emphatic praise when she does it correctly. Once Mia is an accomplished batter, Burt may only praise her when she makes a solid hit.)

Ignoring

Ignoring should not be taken literally. Rather, this technique involves **removing attention given to a behavior to decrease or eliminate it**. The assumption behind ignoring is that a teenager is acting a certain way to influence a parent, but the behavior does not necessarily demand a response. For instance, a teen may try to extract a reward from a parent, escape a consequence, or provoke angry or guilty feelings in a parent. With teenagers, these behaviors are primarily verbal, but may involve other tantrum-like behaviors such as posturing, slamming doors, etc.

When ignoring a behavior, you do not leave the room, begin a new activity, or totally shut your kid out from awareness. However, you must remove enough attention from her so that you are not engaging her or reinforcing her behavior. Ignoring is most powerful when a parent can maintain a neutral emotional expression, thus appearing “un-fazed.”

Ignoring should only be used under the following conditions:

- A teen uses words or behaviors for the purpose of getting his/ her way
- A teen uses words or behaviors to test a parent's reaction or to provoke a parent
- The language or behavior is undesirable enough so that it should be eliminated, but is not dangerous
- You can endure the behavior until it stops

Example: Jack (14) asks if he can go to the movies before he has finished his homework. His mother says no, citing the house rule that he must complete all homework before leaving the house. Jack throws a book on the floor, huffs back to his room, and slams the door. His mother does not respond. 20 minutes later, he exits his room, calm. (Jack threw a tantrum in hopes of influencing his mother to give him a reward/ privilege before earning it. Without some response or reinforcement from his mother, he stops this behavior.)

Example: Jackie (15) is angry with her father because he did not allow her to sleep over a friend's house. She calls him a “nerd” and makes other provocative comments, such as “You must have never wanted to have fun when you were my age!” He ignores her. Eventually she stops, and later tells him directly that she feels disappointed about not being allowed to go. (Her father's lack of response forces her to use more direct and appropriate emotional expression).

Common Misuses of Ignoring

Ignoring a teenager's attempts for attention

Ignoring should not be used if a teen is engaging in typical attention-seeking behavior, even if it is negative. Again, this deprives a teen of a healthy developmental need and hurts your relationship with him. If a teen is seeking attention in an inappropriate manner, then a parent's first priority is to teach positive attention-seeking behavior, rather than ignoring the negative behavior.

Ignoring aggression

Ignoring should not be used for dangerous behaviors (e.g. fighting, suicidal threats, promiscuity), as teens typically use these behaviors to get attention, and ignoring them may result in harmful consequences.

Partial Ignoring

If you initially ignore a behavior, but then give attention to it before it stops, you are rewarding a teenager's persistence in that behavior—she learns that if she practices the behavior long enough, she will get her way.

Unsuccessful ignoring

If ignoring obviously does not work or increases your child's anger or agitation, try another tool and do not repeat the ignoring technique in similar situations. However, ignoring may still be effective in other situations at a later time.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences involve **allowing a teen to experience consequences that normally occur following a behavior.** This challenging but humane technique teaches teenagers the limits of their behavior, which also helps prepare them to act appropriately in situations such as school, relationships, employment, and other community interactions. Use of natural consequences allows kids to truly learn from their mistakes. Furthermore, when parents use natural consequences, they do not have to invent new consequences or punishments (which may not be relevant to the teen's behavior) to teach their kid a lesson.

Parents must continually educate teenagers about potential consequences of their behavior so that they are never surprised when their behavior brings about a negative result. Thus, once informed, if a child behaves irresponsibly, his parents do not protect him from the consequence or try to fix things for him. In cases of teens with significant learning or attention problems, parents must use modeling/ instruction and work proactively to ensure that their kids understand potential consequences of actions, since they often lack the ability to anticipate consequences.

Example: Armand (15) gets kicked off the school football team for fighting. He asks his parents to talk to the coach and convince him to change his mind. They decline, and explain to Armand that when he fights, this is the type of result he can expect. (Using the natural consequence, Armand's parents do not have to create new consequences to address his fighting behavior, since his coach addressed it properly—at the point where the behavior occurred.)

Example: Contrary to her parents' instructions, Cathy (14) does not put away the pieces of a new board game they bought for her. Her 3-year-old sister finds the game and plays with it, and several pieces are lost. Cathy asks them to replace the game, but they decline. (Her parents expect her to take care of her possessions. Since Cathy fails to do this, and fails to listen to her parents' feedback, they do not rescue her from the natural consequences. Thus, Cathy associates loss with her failure to be responsible and listen.)

Natural Consequences may also involve giving a teenager a "real world" consequence for a behavior. Thus, whatever outcome teens would normally encounter following a certain behavior in their social environment, a parent can give them. This tool is especially helpful for teenagers with drug and alcohol problems.

Example: Ray (13) repeatedly cheats during a game at home with his family. His parents try other techniques and warn him repeatedly, but he continues, so they eject him from the game. (Ejection is the "real world" response to cheating.)

Example: Veronica (16) arrives home drunk, after driving. Her mother takes the keys, cancels the insurance, and suspends Veronica's driving privileges until she has participated in alcohol abuse rehabilitation for 6 months. (Her mother's actions are similar to a judge's sentence and are the best motivation for Veronica to get help.)

Other examples of natural consequences

Behavior: teen nags parents to get something

Consequence: teen does not get wanted item or privilege until asks appropriately (without nagging) and complies with parents' demands

Behavior: teen fails to organize personal items, games, or toys, leaving them in a common area

Consequence: items are put in storage for several days and must be earned back

Behavior: teen tantrums or tries to extort parents to get something

Consequence: teen does not get wanted item or privilege until calms down and earns it

Behavior: teen fails to complete chores or homework

Consequence: no privileges until completed

Behavior: teen breaks or steals something

Consequence: teen pays to replace damaged or stolen item (and must work to earn \$\$ to pay)

Behavior: teen refuses to pay for above item

Consequence: no new items until debts paid

Don't give in to guilt

Using natural consequences may leave you feeling guilty, thinking that you have failed as a parent or that you have hurt your child, especially if she complains, protests, or plays on your guilt. Be prepared for this feeling and try to remain objective without giving in to the protests. Remember, consequences for problem behaviors are "natural" and teach teenagers the lessons they need to survive in the real world, where no one is going to give them a break. When you use natural consequences, you are doing your teen a big favor, not hurting her.

Punishment & Fining

Tools to Avoid

People use the word “punish” in a variety of contexts, but punishment is defined clinically as **giving an unpleasant or painful consequence in response to a behavior to discourage that behavior.**

Example: Maurice goes to traffic court for a moving violation. The judge orders traffic school. (Traffic school—a long, boring lecture—is a punishment designed to discourage bad driving.)

Forms of Punishment

- Pain or discomfort (typically in the form of striking, but may include infliction of emotional pain, such as verbal abuse and yelling)
- Work (extra chores, excessive physical exercise)
- Public humiliation, excessive isolation, or excessive physical restraint

Fining, another aversive technique, refers to **taking away something meaningful to discourage a behavior**—like rewarding in reverse. The legal system frequently uses this technique to discourage illegal behavior; parents’ use of fining is no different.

Example: Maurice is stopped for speeding, and the traffic officer gives him a ticket. He pays the ticket. (The state takes away money to discourage bad driving.)

Why do we use punishment and fining?

- These techniques tend to have the immediate effect of stopping a problem behavior—for the short term. They appear to work.
- We learned from our parents because they used the techniques on us, and according to our memory, they worked.

The problems with punishment and fining¹

- They can cause a teenager to avoid the parent giving the punishment and damage the relationship between the teen and that parent.
- They can cause anger and aggression, as well as excessive shyness, self-esteem problems, and a persistent sense of being “bad.” Physical punishment can traumatize children and, based on modeling principles, teaches them that hitting can help them get their needs met.

¹ From Donnellan, A. and LaVigna, G. (1988). *Progress without punishment*. New York: Teachers College Press.

More problems with punishment and fining

- They do not teach alternative behaviors and may discourage desired behaviors in a child.

Example: Marion (15) tries to persuade her mother to let her go to a concert with friends. Mom becomes frustrated with Marion’s insistence, and sends her to her room, removing T.V. privileges for the evening. (Marion needs to learn more appropriate and diplomatic negotiation skills, including the limits of her persuasion. However, her mother’s punishment/ fine do not provide her with this opportunity.)

- Teenagers learn to avoid getting caught— they avoid a problem behavior with certain people or in certain environments, but continue the behavior when they believe they will not be caught. In other words, punishment teaches children to get around the rules rather than to follow them.
- They don’t work over time. Research shows that behavioral effects of punishment wear off after a short time, and must be repeated frequently to sustain decreases of problem behaviors.

Example: Bill (18) gets drunk and becomes very sick. Later, he swears he will never binge drink again. Two weeks later, he drinks a 12-pack. (The alcohol essentially delivered a punishment to Bill, but after a short period of time, the effect of this punishment wears off and the lesson is not retained.)

Uses of Punishment and Fining

- Don’t use punishment. It won’t help your relationship with your children.
- Use fining only as a last result, only with severe behaviors, and only after other tools have been tried repeatedly and failed.
- Use fining as a natural consequence. The child may lose something, but it is realistic to how the world works (see **Natural Consequences**).
- Rather than giving rewards and taking them away, set up a system so that when a child misbehaves, existing rewards are not taken away, but the child must wait longer or improve behavior to receive new rewards. This is called Delayed Rewarding.
- Instead of grounding children, or taking away their freedom as a consequence of undesirable behavior, re-define the concept of freedom as a reward that must be earned with good behavior, rather than an entitlement.

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