

## DEFINITION

The main task of adolescents in our culture is to become psychologically emancipated from their parents. The teenager must cast aside the dependent relationship of childhood. Before she can develop a new adult relationship with her parents, the adolescent must first distance herself from the way she related to them in the past. This process is characterized by a certain amount of intermittent normal rebellion, defiance, discontent, turmoil, restlessness, and ambivalence. Emotions usually run high. Mood swings are common. Under the best of circumstances, this adolescent rebellion continues for approximately 2 years; not uncommonly it lasts for 4 to 6 years.

## DEALING WITH NORMAL ADOLESCENT REBELLION

The following guidelines may help you and your teenager through this difficult period.

1. **Treat your teenager as an adult friend.** By the time your child is 12 years old, start working on developing the kind of relationship you would like to have with your child when she is an adult. Treat your child the way you would like her to treat you when she is an adult. Your goal is mutual respect, support, and the ability to have fun together. Strive for relaxed, casual conversations during bicycling, hiking, shopping, playing catch, driving, cooking, and working and especially at mealtimes. Use praise and trust to help build her self-esteem. Recognize and validate your child's feelings by listening carefully and making nonjudgmental comments. Remember that listening doesn't mean you have to solve your teen's problems. The friendship model is the best basis for family functioning.
2. **Avoid criticism about "no-win" topics.** Most negative parent-adolescent relationships develop because the parents criticize their teenager too much. Much of the teen's objectionable behavior merely reflects conformity with the current tastes of her peer group. Peer-group immersion is one of the essential stages of adolescent development. Dressing, talking, and acting differently than adults help your child to feel independent from you.

Try to avoid any criticism of your child's clothing, hairstyle, makeup, music, dance steps, friends (unless they're in trouble with the law), recreational interests, room decorations, use of free time, career choices, use of money, speech, posture, religion, and philosophy. Allowing your teen to rebel in these minor areas often prevents testing in major areas, such as experimentation with drugs, truancy, or stealing. Intervene and try to make a change only if your teenager's behavior is harmful or infringes on your rights (see section on house rules). Another common error is to criticize your teen's mood or attitude. A negative or lazy attitude can be

changed only through good example and praise. The more you talk about these nontraditional behaviors, the longer they will last.

3. **Let society's rules and consequences teach responsibility outside the home.** Your teenager must learn from trial and error. As she experiments, she will learn to take responsibility for her decisions and actions. The parent should speak up only if the adolescent is going to do something dangerous or illegal. Otherwise, the parent must rely on the teen's own self-discipline, pressure from her peers to behave responsibly, and the lessons learned from the consequences of her actions.

City curfew laws will help control late hours. A school's requirement for punctual school attendance will influence when your teen goes to bed at night. If she has trouble getting up in the morning, buy her an alarm clock. School grades will usually hold your teenager accountable for homework and other aspects of school performance. (It's not your job to check the homework.) If your teen has bad work habits, she will lose her job. If your teenager makes a poor choice of friends, she may find her confidences broken or that she gets into trouble. If she doesn't practice hard for a sport, she will be pressured by the team and coach to do better. If she misspends her allowance or earnings, she will run out of money before the end of the month. If her mood or attitude is negative, she will lose friends.

If by chance your teenager asks you for advice about outside activities, try to describe the pros and cons in a brief, impartial way. Ask some questions to help her think about the main risks. Then wrap up your remarks with a comment such as, "Do what you think is best." Teenagers need plenty of opportunities to learn from their own mistakes before they leave home and have to solve problems without an ever-present support system.

4. **Clarify the house rules and consequences.** You have the right and the responsibility to make rules regarding your house and other possessions. Written rules cut down on misunderstandings. A teenager's preferences can be tolerated within her own room but they need not be imposed on the rest of the house. You can forbid loud music or incoming telephone calls after 10 PM that interfere with other people's concentration or sleep. You can forbid a television set in her room. While you should make your teen's friends feel welcome in your home, clarify the ground rules about parties or where snacks can be eaten. Your teen can be placed in charge of cleaning her room, washing her clothes, and ironing her clothes. You can insist on clean clothes and enough showers to prevent or overcome body odor. You must decide whether you will loan her your car, bicycle, camera, radio, television, clothes, and other possessions.

Reasonable consequences for breaking house rules include loss of telephone, television, stereo,

and car privileges. (Time-out is rarely useful in this age group, and physical punishment can escalate to a serious breakdown in your relationship.) If your teenager breaks something, she should repair it, pay for its repair or replacement, or work for you until the debt is paid off. If she makes a mess, she should clean it up. If your teen is doing poorly in school, you can restrict television time. You can also put a limit on telephone privileges and week-nights out. If your teen stays out too late or doesn't call you when she's delayed, you can ground her for a day or a weekend. In general, grounding for more than a few days is looked on as unfair and is hard to enforce.

5. **Use family conferences for negotiating house rules.** Some families find it helpful to have a brief meeting after dinner once each week. At this time your teenager can ask for changes in the house rules or bring up family issues that are causing problems. You can also bring up issues (such as your teen's demand to drive her too many places and your need for her help in arranging carpools). The family unit often functions better if the decision making is democratic. The objective of negotiation should be that both parties win. The atmosphere can be one of: "Nobody is at fault, but we have a problem. How can we solve it?"
6. **Give space to a teenager who is in a bad mood.** Generally when your teenager is in a bad mood, she won't want to talk about it with you. If teenagers want to discuss a problem with anybody, it is usually with a close friend. In general, it is advisable at such times to give your teen lots of space and privacy. This is a poor time to talk to your teenager about anything, pleasant or otherwise.
7. **Use "I" messages for rudeness.** Some talking back is normal. We want our teenagers to express their anger through talking and to challenge our opinions in a logical way. We need to listen. Expect your teenager to present her case passionately, even unreasonably. Let the small stuff go; it's only words. But don't accept disrespectful remarks, such as calling you a "jerk." Unlike a negative attitude, these mean remarks should not be ignored. You can respond with a comment like, "It really hurts me when you put me down or don't answer my question." Make your statement in as nonangry a way as possible. If your adolescent continues to make

angry, unpleasant remarks, leave the room. Don't get into a shouting match with your teenager because this is not a type of behavior that is acceptable in outside relationships. What you are trying to teach is that everyone has the right to disagree and even to express anger but that screaming and rude conversation are not allowed in your house. You can prevent some rude behavior by being a role model of politeness, constructive disagreement, and the ability to apologize.



## CALL OUR OFFICE

### *During regular hours if*

- You think your teenager is depressed, suicidal, drinking, using illegal drugs, or going to run away.
- Your teenager is taking undue risks (e.g., reckless driving or unsafe sex).
- Your teenager has no close friends.
- Your teenager's school performance is declining markedly.
- Your teenager is skipping school frequently.
- Your teenager's outbursts of temper are destructive or violent.
- You feel your teenager's rebellion is excessive.
- Your family life is seriously disrupted by your teenager.
- You find yourself escalating the criticism and punishment.
- Your relationship with your teenager does not improve within 3 months after you begin using these approaches.
- You have other questions or concerns.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Peter H. Buntman and E. M. Saris: *How to Live with Your Teenager*. Birch Tree Press, Pasadena, CA, 1990.
- Lois Davitz and Joel Davitz: *How to Live (Almost) Happily with a Teenager*. Signet, New York, 1983.
- Don Dinkmeyer and Gary D. McKay: *Parenting Teenagers*. American Guidance Service, Circle Pines, Minn., 1990.
- D. E. Greydanus (Editor): *AAP's Caring for Your Adolescent*. Bantam Books, New York, 1991.
- Kathleen McCoy and Charles Wibbelsman: *Crisis-proof Your Teenager*. Bantam Books, New York, 1991.