



## Tips for Parenting Teens

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

Adolescence is a fascinating and crazy time of life. It reminds me in some ways of the very early space probes that blasted off from Cape Canaveral in Florida. I remember my excitement when Col. John Glenn and the other astronauts embarked on their perilous journeys into space. It was a thrilling time to be an American.

People who lived through those years will recall that a period of maximum danger occurred as each spacecraft was re-entering the earth's atmosphere. The flier inside was entirely dependent on the heat shield on the bottom of the capsule to protect him from temperatures in excess of 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. If the craft descended at the wrong angle, the astronaut would be burned to cinders.

At that precise moment of anxiety, negative ions would accumulate around the capsule and prevent all communication with the earth for approximately seven minutes. The world waited breathlessly for news of the astronaut's safety. Presently, the reassuring voice of Chris Craft would break in to say, "This is Mission Control. We have made contact with Friendship Seven. Everything is A-okay. Splashdown is imminent." Cheers and prayers went up in restaurants, banks, airports and millions of homes across the country. Even Walter Cronkite seemed relieved.

The analogy to adolescence is not so difficult to recognize. After the training and preparation of childhood are over, a pubescent youngster marches out to the launching pad. His parents watch apprehensively as he climbs aboard a capsule called adolescence and waits for his rockets to fire. His father and mother wish they could go with him, but there is room for just one person in the spacecraft. Besides, nobody invited them. Without warning, the mighty rocket engines begin to roar and the "umbilical cord" falls away. "Liftoff! We have liftoff!" screams the boy's father.

Junior, who was a baby only yesterday, is on his way to the edge of the universe. A few weeks later, his parents go through the scariest experience of their lives: They suddenly lose all contact with the capsule. "Negative ions" have interfered with communication at a time when they most want to be assured of their son's safety. Why won't he talk to them?

This period of silence does not last a few minutes, as it did with Col. Glenn and friends. It may continue for years. The same kid who used to talk a mile a minute and ask a million questions has now reduced his vocabulary to nine monosyllabic phrases: "I dunno," "Maybe," "I forget," "Huh," "No!" "Nope," "Yeah," "Who — me?" and "He did it." Otherwise, only "static" comes through the receiver — groans, grunts, growls and gripes. What an apprehensive time it is for those who wait on the ground!

Years later, when Mission Control believes the spacecraft to have been lost, a few scratchy signals are picked up unexpectedly from a distant transmitter. The parents are jubilant as they hover near their radio. Was that really his voice? It is deeper and more mature than they remembered. There it is again. This time the intent is unmistakable. Their spacey son has made a deliberate effort to correspond with them! He was 14 years old when he blasted into space, and now he is nearly 20. Could it be that the negative environment has been swept away and communication is again possible?

Yes. For most families, that is precisely what happens. After years of quiet anxiety, parents learn to their great relief that everything is A-okay on board the spacecraft. The "splashdown" occurring during the early 20s can then be a wonderful time of life for both generations.

Isn't there some way to avoid this blackout period and the other stresses associated with the adolescent voyage? Not with some teenagers, perhaps the majority. It happens in the most loving and intelligent of families. Why? Because of two powerful forces that overtake and possess boys and girls in the early pubescent years. Let's talk about them.

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## Powerful Forces for Early Teens

### Changing hormones and peer pressure have an enormous effect on teen behavior.

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

The *first* and most important is hormonal in nature. I believe parents and even behavioral scientists have underestimated the impact of the biochemical changes occurring in puberty. We can see the effect of these hormones on the physical body, but something equally dynamic is occurring in the brain. How else can we explain why a happy, contented, cooperative 12-year-old suddenly becomes a sullen, angry, depressed 13-year-old? Some authorities would contend that social pressure alone accounts for this transformation. I simply don't believe that.

The emotional characteristics of a suddenly rebellious teenager are rather like the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome or severe menopause in women, or perhaps a tumultuous midlife crisis in men. Obviously, dramatic changes are going on inside!

Furthermore, if the upheaval were caused entirely by environmental factors, its onset would not be so predictable in puberty. The emotional changes I have described arrive right on schedule, timed to coincide precisely with the arrival of physical maturation. Both characteristics, I contend, are driven by a common hormonal assault. Human chemistry apparently goes haywire for a few years, affecting mind as much as body. Everything from sexual passion to aggressiveness is motivated by the new chemicals that surge through an adolescent's veins.

I indicated that two great forces combine to create havoc during adolescence, the first hormonal in origin. The other is social in nature. It is common knowledge that a 12- or 13-year-old child suddenly awakens to a brand-new world around him, as though his eyes were opening for the first time. That world is populated by peers who scare him out of his wits. His greatest anxiety, far exceeding the fear of death, is the possibility of rejection or humiliation in the eyes of his peers. This ultimate danger will lurk in the background for years, motivating him to do things that make absolutely no sense to the adults who watch. It is impossible to comprehend the adolescent mind without understanding this terror of the peer group.

Why have I reminded you of the world of adolescent power? Because your teenagers are knee-deep in it right now. That is why they are nervous wrecks on the first day of school, or before the team plays its initial game, or any other time when their power base is on the line. The raw nerve, you see, is not really dominance, but self-esteem. One's sense of worth is dependent on peer acceptance at that age, and that is why the group holds such

enormous influence over the individual. If he is mocked, disrespected, ridiculed or excluded — in other words, if he is stripped of power — his delicate ego is torn to shreds. As we have said, that is a fate worse than death itself. Social panic is the byproduct of that system.

Now, what about your sons and daughters? Have you wondered why they come home from school in such a terrible mood? Have you asked them why they are so jumpy and irritable through the evening? They cannot describe their feelings to you, but they may have engaged in a form of combat all day. Even if they haven't had to fight with their fists, it is likely that they are embroiled in a highly competitive, openly hostile environment where emotional danger lurks on every side. Am I overstating the case? Yes, for the kid who is coping well. But for the powerless young man or woman, I haven't begun to tell their stories.

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## **Unstructured Time and Choosing Battles**

### **Keeping teens relatively busy and avoiding conflicts over "nonessentials" are an important part of raising adolescents.**

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

To help parents cope with these special stresses of the adolescent years, let me offer four suggestions [in these next few articles] that have been beneficial to others:

#### **Keep your teenager moving.**

The strong-willed adolescent simply must not be given large quantities of unstructured time. He will find destructive ways to use such moments. My advice is to get them involved in the very best church youth program you can find. If your local congregation has only four bored members in its junior high department and seven sleepy high schoolers, I would consider changing churches. I know that advice could be disruptive to the entire family, and I'm sure most pastors would disagree, but you must save that volatile kid.

Obviously, such radical action is not as necessary for the more compliant individual or for one who has other wholesome outlets for his energy. But if you're sitting on a keg of dynamite, you have to find ways to keep the powder dry! Not only can this be done through church activities, but also by involvement with athletics, music, horses or other animals, and part-time jobs. You must keep that strong-willed kid's scrawny legs churning!

#### **Don't rock the boat.**

In my second film series, titled *Turn Your Heart Toward Home*, I offered this advice to parents of teenagers: "Get 'em through it." That may not sound like such a stunning idea, but I believe it has merit for most families — especially those with one or more tough-minded kids. The concept is a bit obscure, so I will resort to a couple of word pictures to illustrate my point.

When parents of strong-willed children look ahead to the adolescent years, they often imagine it to be like a flowing river with rapids that will soon give way to swirling currents and life-threatening turbulence. If that doesn't turn over their teenagers' boats, they seem destined to drown farther downstream when they plunge over the falls.

Fortunately, the typical journey is much safer than anticipated. Most often, the river descends not into the falls but into smooth water once more. Even though your teenager maybe splashing and thrashing and gasping for air, it is not likely that his boat will capsize. It is more buoyant than you might think.

Yes, a few individuals do go over the falls, usually because of drug abuse. Some of them even climb back in the canoe and paddle on down the river. But the greatest danger of sinking the boat could come from *you!*

This warning is addressed particularly to idealistic and perfectionistic parents who are determined to make their adolescents — *all* of them — perform and achieve and measure up to the highest standards. A perfectionist, by the way, is a person who takes great pains with what he does and then gives them to everyone else. In so doing, he rocks a boat that is already taking on water.

Perhaps another child could handle the additional turbulence, but our concern is for the unsteady kid — the one who lacks common sense for a while and may even lean toward irrational behavior. Don't unsettle his boat any more than you must!

I have seen parents fight battles over such nonessentials as the purchase of a first bra for a flat-chested premenstrual-adolescent girl. For goodness' sake! If she wants it that badly, she probably needs it for social reasons. Run, don't walk, to the nearest department store and buy her a bra.

The objective, as Charles and Andy Stanley wrote, is to *keep your kids on your team*. Don't throw away your friendship over behavior that has no great moral significance. There will be plenty of real issues that require you to stand like a rock. Save your big guns for those crucial confrontations.

Let me make it very clear, again, that this advice is not relevant to every teenager. The compliant kid who is doing wonderfully in school, has great friends, is disciplined in his conduct and loves his parents is not nearly so delicate. Perhaps his parents can urge him to reach even higher standards in his achievements and lifestyle.

My concern, however, is for that youngster who *could* go over the falls. He is intensely angry at home and is being influenced by a carload of crummy friends. Be very careful with him. Pick and choose what is worth fighting for, and settle for something less than perfection on issues that don't really matter. *Just get him through it!*

What does this mean in practical terms? It may indicate a willingness to let his room look like a junkyard for a while. Does that surprise you? I don't like lazy, sloppy, undisciplined kids any more than you do, but given the possibilities for chaos that this angry boy or girl might precipitate, spit-shined rooms may not be all that important.

You might also compromise somewhat regarding the music you let him hear. I'm *not* condoning music that is saturated with explicit and illicit sex or violence. But neither can you ask this teenager to listen to your "elevator music." Perhaps a compromise can be reached.

Unfortunately, the popular music of the day is the rallying cry for rebellious teenagers. If you try to deny it altogether to a strong-willed kid, you just might flip his canoe upside down. You have to ask yourself this question, "Is it worth risking everything of value to enforce a particular standard upon this son or daughter?" If the issue is important enough to defend at all costs, then brace yourself and make your stand. But think through your defense of them thoroughly.

The philosophy we applied with our teenagers (and you might try with yours) can be called "loosen and tighten." By this I mean we tried to loosen our grip on everything that had no lasting significance, and tighten down on everything that did. We said yes whenever we possibly could, to give support to the occasional no. And most important, we tried never to get too far away from our kids emotionally. It is simply not prudent to

write off a son or daughter, no matter how foolish, irritating, selfish or insane a child may seem to be. You need to be there, not only while his canoe is bouncing precariously, but after the river runs smooth again.

You have the remainder of your life to reconstruct the relationship that is now in jeopardy. Don't let anger fester for too long. Make the first move toward reconciliation. And try hard not to hassle your kids. They *hate* to be nagged. If you follow them around with one complaint after another, they're almost forced to protect themselves by appearing deaf. And finally, continue to treat them with respect, even when punishment or restrictions are necessary. Occasionally, you may even need to say, "I'm sorry!"

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## Avoid Exhaustion

### **Fatigue in parents can put additional strain on the parent/teen relationship.**

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

#### **Maintain a reserve army.**

A good general will never commit all his troops to combat at the same time. He maintains a reserve force that can relieve exhausted soldiers when they falter on the front lines.

I wish parents of adolescents would implement the same strategy. Instead, they commit every ounce of their energy and every second of their time to the business of living, holding nothing in reserve for the challenge of the century. It is a classic mistake which can be disastrous for parents of strong-willed adolescents. Let me explain.

The problem begins with a basic misunderstanding during the preschool years. I hear mothers say, "I don't plan to work until the kids are in kindergarten. Then I'll get a job." They appear to believe that the heavy demands on them will end magically when they get their youngest in school. In reality, the teen years will generate as much pressure on them as did the preschool era.

An adolescent turns a house upside down — literally and figuratively. Not only is the typical rebellion of those years an extremely stressful experience, but the chauffeuring, supervising, cooking and cleaning required to support an adolescent can be exhausting. *Someone* within the family must reserve the energy to cope with those new challenges. Mom is the candidate of choice. Remember, too, that menopause and a man's midlife crisis often coincide with adolescence, which makes a wicked soup! It is a wise mother who doesn't exhaust herself at a time when so much is going on at home.

I know it is easier to talk about maintaining a lighter schedule than it is to secure one. It is also impractical to recommend that mothers not seek formal employment during this era. Millions of women have to work for economic reasons, including the rising number of single parents in our world. Others choose to pursue busy careers. That is a decision to be made by women and their husbands, and I would not presume to tell them what to do.

But decisions have inevitable consequences. In this case, there are biophysical forces at work that simply must be reckoned with. If, for example, 80 percent of a woman's available energy in a given day is expended in getting dressed, driving to work, doing her job for eight or 10 hours, and stopping by the grocery store on the way home — then there's only 20 percent left for everything else. Maintenance of the family, cooking meals, cleaning the kitchen, relating to her husband and all other personal activities must be powered by that diminishing resource.

It is no wonder that her batteries are spent by the end of the day. Weekends should be restful, but they are usually not. Thus, she plods through the years on her way to burnout.

This is my point: A woman in this situation has thrown all her troops into frontline combat. She is already exhausted but has no reserve on which to call. In that weakened condition, the routine stresses of raising an adolescent can be overwhelming.

Let me say it again — raising boisterous teenagers is an exciting and rewarding but also a frustrating experience. Their radical highs and lows affect our moods. The noise, the messes, the complaints, the arguments, the sibling rivalry, the missed curfews, the paced floors, the wrecked car, the failed test, the jilted lover, the wrong friends, the busy telephone, the pizza on the carpet, the ripped new blouse, the rebellion, the slammed doors, the mean words, the tears — it's enough to drive even a *rested* mother crazy. But what about our career woman who already gave at the office, then came home to this chaos? Any unexpected crisis or even a minor irritant can set off a torrent of emotion. There is no reserve on which to draw. In short, the parents of adolescents should save some energy with which to cope with aggravation!

Whether or not you are able to accept and implement my advice is your business. It is mine to offer it, and this is my best shot: To help you get through the turbulence of adolescence, you should

- Keep the schedule simple.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat nutritious meals.
- Stay on your knees.

When fatigue leads adults to act like hot-tempered teenagers, anything can happen at home.

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## **Fathering Teen Sons**

**Teen sons need the leadership and discipline of a father.**

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

**Fathers, stay involved.**

It is stating the obvious, I suppose, to say that fathers of rebellious teenagers are desperately needed at home during those years. In their absence, mothers are left to handle disciplinary problems alone. This is occurring in millions of families headed by single mothers today, and I know how tough their task has become. Not only are they doing a job that should have been shouldered by two, they must also deal with behavioral problems that fathers are more ideally suited to handle. It is generally understood that a man's larger size, deeper voice and

masculine demeanor make it easier for him to deal with defiance in the younger generation. Likewise, I believe the exercise of authority is a mantle ascribed to him by the Creator.

Not only are fathers needed to provide leadership and discipline during the adolescent years, but they can be highly influential on their sons during this period of instability. (We will discuss fathers and daughters presently). Someone has said, "Link a boy to the right man and he seldom goes wrong." I believe that is true. If a dad and his son can develop hobbies together or other common interests, the rebellious years can pass in relative tranquillity. What they experience may be remembered for a lifetime.

Let me address the reader directly: What common ground are you cultivating with *your* impressionable son? Some fathers build or repair cars with them; some construct small models or make things in a wood shop. My dad and I hunted and fished together. There is no way to describe what those days meant to me as we entered the woods in the early hours of the morning. How could I get angry at this man who took time to be with me? We had wonderful talks while coming home from a day of laughter and fun in the country.

I've tried to maintain that kind of contact with my son, Ryan. We've hunted rabbits, quail, pheasant and larger game since he turned 12. As I did with my father, Ryan and I have had some meaningful conversations while out in the fields together. Last year, for example, we got up one morning and situated ourselves in a deer blind before the break of day. About 20 yards away from us was a feeder which operated on a timer. At 7 a.m. it automatically dropped kernels of corn into a pan below.

Ryan and I huddled together in this blind, talking softly about whatever came to mind. Then through the fog, we saw a beautiful doe emerge silently into the clearing. She took nearly 30 minutes to get to the feeder near where we were hiding. We had no intention of shooting her, but it was fun to watch this beautiful animal from close range. She was extremely wary, sniffing the air and listening for sounds of danger. Finally, she inched her way to the feeder, still looking around skittishly as though sensing our presence. Then she ate a quick breakfast and fled.

I whispered to Ryan, "There is something valuable to be learned from what we have just seen. Whenever you come upon a free supply of high quality corn, unexpectedly provided right there in the middle of the forest, be careful! The people who put it there are probably sitting nearby in a blind, just waiting to take a shot at you. Keep your eyes and ears open!"

Ryan may not always remember that advice, but I will. It isn't often a father says something that he considers profound to his teenage son. One thing is certain: This interchange and the other ideas we shared on that day would not have occurred at home. Opportunities for that kind of communication have to be created. And it's worth working to achieve.

Before we leave the subject of fathers interacting with their sons, I want to reflect briefly on a mother's contribution to that relationship. Women can help the generations bond together or they can drive a wedge between them. This concept was expressed beautifully in a book entitled *Fathers and Sons* by Lewis Yablonsky. The author observed that mothers are the primary interpreters of fathers' personality, character and integrity to their sons. In other words, the way boys see their fathers is largely a product of the things their mothers have said and the way she feels. In Yablonsky's case, his mother destroyed the respect he might have had for this father. This is what he wrote.

I vividly recall sitting at the dinner table with my two brothers and father and mother and cringing at my mother's attacks on my father. "Look at him," she would say in Yiddish. "His shoulders are bent down, he's a failure. He doesn't have the courage to get a better job or make more money. He's a beaten man." He would keep his eyes pointed toward his place and never answer her. She never extolled his virtues or persistence or the

fact that he worked so hard. Instead she constantly focused on the negative and created an image to his three sons of a man without fight, crushed by a world over which he had no control.

His not fighting back against her constant criticism had the effect of confirming its validity to her sons. And my mother's treatment and the picture of my father did not convey to me that marriage was a happy state of being, or that women were basically people. I was not especially motivated to assume the role of husband and father myself from my observations of my whipped father.

My overall research clearly supports that the mother is the basic filter and has enormous significance in the father-son relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Though Yablonsky did not say so, it is also true that fathers can do great damage to the conception their children may have of their mothers. Very early on I found that when I was irritated with Shirley for some reason, my attitude was instantly picked up by our son and daughter. They seemed to feel, "If Dad can argue with Mom, then we can too." It became clear to me just how important it was for me to express my love and admiration for Shirley. However, I could *never* do that job of building respect for my wife as well as she did for me! She made me a king in my own home. If our son and daughter believed half of what she told them about me, I would have been a fortunate man. The close relationship I enjoy with Danae and Ryan today is largely a product of Shirley's great love for me and the way she "interpreted" me to our kids. I will always be grateful for her for doing that!

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Yablonsky, *Fathers and Sons* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Fireside Books, 1984), 134.

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## Fathering Teen Daughters

**A good father will leave his imprint on his daughter for the rest of her life.**

by [James Dobson, Ph.D.](#)

### Fathering Teen Daughters

Let's talk now about fathers and daughters. Most psychologists believe, and I am one of them, that all future romantic relationships to occur in a girl's life will be influenced positively or negatively by the way she perceives and interacts with her dad. If he is an alcoholic and a bum, she will spend her life trying to replace him in her heart. If he is warm and nurturing, she will look for a lover to equal him. If he thinks she is beautiful, worthy and feminine, she will be inclined to see herself that way. But if he rejects her as unattractive and uninteresting, she is likely to carry self-esteem problems into her adult years. I have also observed that a woman's willingness to accept the loving leadership of her husband is significantly influenced by the way she perceived the authority of her father. If he was overbearing, uncaring or capricious during her developmental years, she may attempt to grab the reins of leadership from her future husband. But if her dad blended love and discipline in a way that conveyed strength, she will be more willing to yield to the confident leadership of her husband.

None of these tendencies or trends is absolute, of course. Individual differences can always produce exceptions and contradictions. But this statement will be hard to refute: A good father will leave his imprint on his daughter for the rest of her life.

Many fathers are also called upon to perform another vitally important role during the adolescent years. It occurs when tension begins to develop between mothers and teenage girls. That conflict is very common among the ladies of the house. Several years may pass during which they don't even like each other very much.

In that setting, fathers are desperately needed as peacemakers and mediators. I have found that teenagers who are greatly irritated with one parent will sometimes seek to preserve their relationship with the other. It's like a country at war in search of supportive allies.

If fathers are chosen in that triangle, they can use the opportunity to settle their daughters and "interpret" their mothers in a more favorable light. They may also be able to help their wives ventilate their anger and understand their role in perpetuating the conflict. Without this masculine influence, routine skirmishes can turn into World War III.

In conclusion, I have this recurring message for today's fathers — especially to those who have teenagers at home: Don't let these years get away from you. Your contributions to your kids could rank as your greatest accomplishments in life — or your most oppressive failures.

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