

Adjust Your Parenting Style, Or Else!

Parenting Today's Teens

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Most of us tend to parent the same way we were parented. Even those of us who vowed, "I'll never do that to my kids," often fall back to imitating what we saw from our parents. The problem is that the world has changed. Our parents would have been horrified by what our kids casually experience and discuss amongst themselves today. Things are different, and your kids are changing every day as well.

Are you keeping up?

I went to Chicago recently—and I'm here to tell you that it's a bad idea for a thin-blooded Texan to make a trip up north in the middle of winter! It was COLD. Fortunately before I left, I got a big warm coat (though it wasn't big enough) and a hat and gloves to wear. I could have said, "I shouldn't have to wear something different," but I likely would have ended up in the Chicago morgue. Making that adjustment didn't change who I was, it was simply a wise response to changing circumstances.

In the same way, sometimes parents can dig in their heels and refuse to change their parenting style to respond to the changes in the maturity of their children as they get older. But teens need their parents to recognize their growing maturity. To adjust from controlling to coaching them doesn't mean you are surrendering your core values or throwing up your hands in futility and giving up; it means you are meeting your kids at their level and respecting their individuality.

Parents who are unwilling to adjust tend to push away their teenagers away or cause them to rebel. I'm not saying that they be allowed to walk all over you; rules and boundaries must be set and maintained. But adjusting can help your kids think you're keeping up with their age and are in touch with their world—so they'll be more likely to lean on you when they need help or to discuss the issues in their life.

Back in the Dark Ages when I grew up, information turned over every eleven years. Today, it happens every nine months. The pace of change has quickened, and if we are inflexible and refuse to acknowledge those changes, our kids see us as "dinosaurs," out of touch with their world. It's more vital than ever that we stay engaged with our kids. That means we need to know what's going on in their lives and in their culture (which probably means we're going to have to learn a new language or two) and to fit in with the way they relate to others in their world.

Unfortunately, another important authority in our kids' life isn't adjusting. Lifeway Resources recently did a study that showed 85% of kids never attend church again after they graduate from high school. It shows that there's a huge disconnect between kids and the Church. After talking to and working with thousands of young people, I've discovered that many of them feel like what they're being taught there simply doesn't apply to the world in which they live. The Church isn't answering the questions many of them are asking, and we can fail to do so in our homes as well.

A New Way to Talk

The commanding communication style used when your kids were younger won't work well when they are adolescents. So stop lecturing; start discussing. Stop talking; start listening. Please understand that I'm not saying the old way is wrong. It's fine and it is needed for the care and nurturing of younger kids. But the changes in the thinking process of your teen will require a new way to talk to them if you want to really get through to them. Modifying the presentation doesn't change the content of the message or the values of the messenger. It just makes it easier for you to get through to your teenager.

Many well-meaning parents think they can protect their kids by sheltering them. They spend very little time preparing them for the real world because they aren't in danger at the moment. But they can only keep their kids isolated for so long. At some point they're going out into that world—to a job, to college, to marriage—and it is vital that they be prepared for that day. When you taught your kids to swim, you probably didn't pick them up and throw them in the deep end of the pool. You started them out splashing around in the shallow water, and gradually increased their exposure until they were ready and able to swim on their own.

Here's a practical application of this principle: most parents wait too long to give their teens privileges and responsibilities. Typically they drag their feet for about six months past the point where they should have. I tell parents, "If you're thinking about letting your teen do something, you probably should already have done it." If they have to fight for their independence, they are actually in self-preservation mode; they innately know they need to test out freedom to adjust to the world in which they will have to survive.

Having said that, I remain absolutely committed to protecting kids from danger. For instance, I strongly urge parents not to let their 10-13 year old kids attend sleepovers or to be in the homes of their friends unattended. That may sound old-fashioned, but it is at that early age that much harmful experimentation goes on. If you look at the statistics of the first use of drugs, alcohol and sexual experimentation, it falls into that age range and anecdotal evidence points to kids picking up these habits when alone with their friends. Give your kids freedoms, but as we say in the horse world "let out the reins" slowly. Don't do it in areas that will threaten their safety and their future, especially at the very impressionable "tween" years.

Breaking the Mold

One way to adjust your style is that instead of just telling your teenagers what to do (the way most of us were raised) have discussions with them; spend time working out the practical applications of the truths you have taught them. Rather than lecturing, ask questions. When you start asking questions, you convey a powerful positive message to them that they need to begin thinking on their own. Asking questions makes them feel valued—at the most devaluing stage of their lives. It empowers them to begin asking their own questions of you and about the negative things their peers may ask them to be involved in.

The answers you get to your questions will help you identify areas in which you may need to adjust or strengthen your teaching. Do not be judgmental or reactionary. If they are a teenager, you have already taught them all you're going to teach them about your values; now affirm and guide them toward what is right. If I'm counseling with a young person and they give a negative answer, I say something like, "That's interesting." I don't say "That's wrong." I then keep the conversation going (with more questions) and try to guide them rather than smother them. They'll often come around to the right decision — based on the values they've been taught — if it is discussed openly and without condemnation.

My friend Walt Mueller, the founder and president of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, says that parents should look at themselves like cross-cultural missionaries when it comes to their teens. Many kids feel like their parents don't understand their world and don't speak their language—and they're right. A missionary who goes to a foreign country takes time to learn the language and customs in order to be effective; they don't just stand on a street corner and yell at people in English. Are you willing to put that kind of effort in to help your teen survive the trip to adulthood?

Adjusting to your teen's age and maturity is like hitting a moving target. It's not something you can do just once. As they grow and mature and face new challenges, you need to keep changing right along with them. The relationship is far more important than minor issues. Don't violate your principles, but

do focus on what matters most and set aside the rest. They say “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” but don’t wait until your teen spins out of control to make the needed changes. Engage your child now, on their level, and make any changes or adjustments in order to improve your relationship with them and to prepare them for the all too soon day in which they will be out on their own.

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