

## ***Teaching Maturity***

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It's probably happened to a lot of dads. Your kid spends his mornings watching you drag yourself to the bathroom mirror, pile some shaving cream in your hand, break out your razor, and start shaving your face. Soon, your son (or maybe even daughter) decides they need to shave too. So you squirt a little cream in their hands, supply them with a tongue depressor, and let them "shave." As you both lean into the vanity mirror, it's hard not to laugh, watching your five-year-old seriously attack the non-existent stubble on his face.

Fast-forward a few years. Okay, maybe your teen actually needs to trim a few straggly hairs from his chin now. But, like the child who thought he was ready to shave way before he reached puberty, most teens still consider themselves more mature than they really are. Their spirit of independence makes them believe they are ready to tackle the world, when they can barely tackle their homework!

As parents we know that maturity is the byproduct of responsibility and experience. We only gain maturity because we have to in order to survive! And so unless our teens are given responsibility, they will get stuck in a state of perpetual immaturity. And what parent wants (or can handle) that? We need to teach our kids how to survive in the wild, not cope in the zoo. Let me offer some "do's" and "don'ts" to help you eliminate your teen's illusion of adulthood and get them moving towards maturity.

### **Don't Shame Them**

Giving your teen more responsibility and experience can be a very scary thing! You probably remember your son or daughter wearing a blanket as a cape and jumping off the roof thinking he or she was going to fly. And you want to give that kid more responsibility? Isn't that a recipe for mistakes? You bet! But here's the deal. When your child is learning to ride a bike, you eventually have to take the training wheels off. You're not going to make your eighteen-year-old ride around on a three-wheeler. No, you take off those extra wheels while your child is still young, fully realizing he or she will wobble and weeble, and probably crash a few times. When the inevitable happens, and the bike flips, you don't run up, point, and shame your child by saying, "What did you do? How could you have crashed? What were thinking?" Rather, you pick them up, brush them off, dry a few tears, and put them right back on the bike.

Life is like that bicycle. Your teenager will crash. But we don't run up and pile on the guilt and blame. Gaining experience and becoming responsible takes time. So you when your teen falls over, pick her up, and keep encouraging her to pedal. That's how you can help your teen mature.

### **Don't Nag Them**

Of course, your constant reminders are coming from a place of love and a desire for what's best for your kids. You're trying to nurture them to be responsible adults. But parents—nagging simply doesn't help a kid mature. It only teaches him how to tune you out and treat your instructions like white noise.

Of course some parents have the opposite tendency. Instead of stepping up to the plate and teaching our kids how to take initiative, we become passive observers and watch our teens float through life without ever growing up. Thankfully, moms and dads can work together so the bumps in one personality fill in the dips in another. By working together and communicating with each other well, parents can encourage each other and ensure that they are striking a good balance between nagging and passivity. Moms and Dads may tend towards one end of the spectrum or the other, but both nurturing and pushing are incredibly important to the development of a teen.

Now, you might be a single parent, and this method for pushing and relaxing is a bit harder. You have to play both roles. So, try this. Three days out of the week, push your teen towards more responsibility and accountability. The other days of the week, focus on loving and encouraging instead. In this way, you're striking a balance being training and relating to your teen.

### **Do Have a Plan**

When your daughter thinks she's mature but she's not, mom and dad need a plan to get her to where she needs to be. Be very intentional about maturity, because it doesn't simply happen overnight. Your daughter won't go to bed a kid one day, and wake up an adult the next. Have a game plan in place to take those training wheels off and get her moving in the right direction. It might look something like this:

- 12 to 13 years old—Require your daughter to make her own lunch for school. Assign your son weekly household chores. Extend her curfew. Place him in charge of the family pet.

- 14 to 15 years old—Give your son a cell phone with pre-determined minutes and data thresholds. Allow your daughter to go on group dates. Hold him responsible to get up each morning and make it to school. Have her wash her own laundry. Allow him to decide the family dinner once a week.
- 16 to 17—Require her to pay for her own car insurance and gas. Make him responsible for finishing his homework and school projects without parental supervision. Make her find a summer job to supplement a decreasing allowance. Require him to volunteer time at a local charity on a regular basis.

This is just a sample of the plan that you might use to develop maturity in your child. Tailor it to fit your family and teen. But don't go blindly into the teen years without a map showing you how to take your son or daughter from immature child to mature young adult. That's the quickest way to lose your child in the teenage jungle!

### **Do Help Teens Think for Themselves**

Gaining maturity requires thinking as well as doing. As moms and dads, we not only want our teens to become responsible for their own actions, we want them to carefully think about their decisions before they act. You can help them along by stimulating their developing minds and hearts.

Ask good questions that stoke a teen's thought process. For example, take the recent trend of young female musicians pushing the envelope. Ask your teen daughter about her thoughts on the issue. Are these young artists simply being creative? What message are they projecting? Do their actions help or hurt them?

When you sit down to watch a television show with your son, engage his mind afterwards. It could be something as simple as, "what do you like about this program? What don't you like?" Then sit back and listen, without judgment, correction, or condemnation. As your teens answer, the synapses in their brain start to fire, and connections begin to be made. It might take a while for them to see the logic (or illogic) in their thoughts, but you are starting them on a path that will help them see the world in a critical and discerning way. You're preparing them to approach situations and ideas with a wise heart and mind.

So stop supplying your teen with the ideas and thoughts you think they should have. Our job is not to recreate our minds and beliefs in their lives. While this might be appropriate when they are young, as teenagers we need to train them to start thinking critically, to apply what they have been taught to the situations and circumstances in their own lives. They need to develop their own thoughts and feelings and learn to process them. If you are constantly telling your teens what they should think, those brain synapses will never get a work out, and they'll never arrive at any place of maturity.

### **Don't Give Up**

Many teens walk around thinking they have all the answers to life's mysteries and possess all the skills necessary to conquer the world. But you and I know that they aren't there yet! So it's up to us to guide them in the right direction and supply them with opportunities to gain the skills and experience that make maturity possible. And it's not a one-and-done process. It requires ongoing effort from moms and dads. If you feel like your teen will never get there, let me reassure you that he will! Keep being the parent God has called you to be, and one day your son or daughter will be the mature adult God has called them to be, as well.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, radio host, and the founder and director of Heartlight, a counseling facility for struggling teens located in Longview, Texas. Check out our website, [www.ParentingTodaysTeens.org](http://www.ParentingTodaysTeens.org). It's filled with effective parenting ideas, helpful articles, and practical tools and resources for moms and dads.