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Adolescents: Dealing with Normal Rebellion

During the adolescence, teens work on becoming more independent. Your teen must cast aside the dependent parent-child relationship. Before he can develop an adult relationship with his parents, a teen must first distance himself from the way he related to his parents in the past. This usually means there will be a certain amount of normal rebellion, defiance, discontent, and restlessness. Emotions usually run high. Mood swings are common. This rebellion continues for about 2 years, but it is not uncommon for it to last for 4 to 6 years.

How do I deal with my teenager's rebellion?

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

- **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, mealtime, working, and other times together. Use praise and trust to help build her self-esteem. Recognize your child's feelings by listening and making nonjudgmental comments. Remember that listening doesn't mean you have to solve your teen's problems.
- **Avoid criticism about "no-win" topics.** Most negative parent-teen relationships start because the parents criticize their teenager too much. Dressing, talking, and acting differently than adults helps your teen feel independent from you. Your teen will probably like to do the things his friends do. This is an important step in your teens development. Try not to attack your teenager's clothing, hairstyle, makeup, music, dance steps, friends, recreational interests, room decorations, use of free time, use of money, speech, posture, and philosophy. This doesn't mean withholding your personal views about these subjects. But allowing your teen to rebel in these harmless areas often prevents testing in major areas, such as drugs, ditching school, or stealing. Step in and try to make a change only if your teenager's behavior is harmful, illegal, or infringes on your rights (see the sections on house rules). Another common error is to criticize your teen's mood or attitude. A negative or lazy attitude can only be changed through good example and praise. The more you dwell on nontraditional (even strange) behaviors, the longer they will last.
- **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. Speak up only if your teen is going to do something dangerous or illegal. Otherwise, you must rely on the teen's own self-discipline, pressure from her friends 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 being on time will help your teen want to get enough sleep at night. School grades will hold your teenager accountable for homework and other aspects of school. 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 mispends her allowance or earnings, she will run out of money before the end of the month. If by chance your teenager asks you for advice about these problem areas, try to describe the pros and cons in a brief, impartial way. Ask some questions to help her think about the main risks. Then conclude your remarks with a comment such as, "Do what you think is best." Teens need plenty of opportunity to learn from their own mistakes before they leave home and have to solve problems without an ever-present support system.
- **Clarify the house rules and consequences.** You have the right and the responsibility to make rules regarding your house and other possessions. A teen's choices can be tolerated within his own room but

they need not be imposed on the rest of the house. You can forbid loud music that interferes with other people's activities, or incoming telephone calls after 10:00 PM. 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 his room, washing his clothes, and ironing his clothes. You can insist upon clean clothes and enough showers to prevent or overcome body odor. You must decide whether you will loan him your car, bicycle, camera, radio, TV, clothes, and so forth. Reasonable consequences for breaking house rules include loss of telephone, TV, stereo, and car privileges. (Time-out is rarely useful in this age group, and spanking can cause to a serious breakdown in your relationship.) If your teenager breaks something, he should repair it or pay for its repair or replacement. If he makes a mess, he should clean it up. If your teen is doing poorly in school, you can restrict TV time. You can also put a limit on telephone privileges and weeknights out. If your teen stays out too late or doesn't call you when he's delayed, you can ground him for a day or a weekend. In general, grounding for more than a few days is looked upon as unfair and is hard to enforce.

- **Use family meetings for negotiating house rules.** Some families find it helpful to have a brief meeting after dinner once a 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 to too many places and your need for her help in arranging carpools). The family often functions better if the decision-making is democratic. The objective of negotiation should be that everyone wins. The atmosphere can be one of: "Nobody is at fault, but we have a problem. How can we solve it?"
- **Give space to a teenager who is in a bad mood.** Generally when your teenager is in a bad mood, he 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 best to give your teen lots of space and privacy. This is a poor time to talk to your teen about anything, pleasant or otherwise.
- **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 his 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 without anger if possible. If your teen 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 willingness to apologize.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call during office hours if:

- You think your teenager is depressed, suicidal, drinking or using drugs, or going to run away.
- Your teenager is taking undue risks (for example, reckless driving).
- 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.

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