

## Raising Teens is Like Trying to Nail Jello to a Tree!

Raising teenagers is never easy and this difficult phase can begin for some children as early as ten or eleven. I once heard someone say that raising teenagers is like trying to nail jello to a tree. Having gotten all three of my children safely to their twenties, I know first hand how difficult it is. For me it required clearly defined rules (regardless of the rules at the neighbor's house), being consistent (amidst them trying to wear me down), staying engaged with what they were doing and where they went, and avoiding lecturing them, just for starters. It also required spending time with them, avoiding judgment, and finding ways to ensure we made time for fun.

A parent recently asked me for advice on a situation with a 15 year old. The girl admitted to smoking pot and drinking alcohol a few times and her parents were at a loss as to what to do next. They thanked her for her honesty and then panicked as to what they were supposed to do with this information going forward. Two questions they addressed to me immediately were; why did she confess and if consequences are appropriate, what is the right approach without punishing her for her honesty?

When parents find themselves confronted with this dilemma, their first reaction is usually out of anger and fear. They react with anger, wanting to know the "how," "with who," "where," and "why" about the activity. They also react with fearful thoughts of their child destroying their life due to stupid mistakes that could have been avoided. The parents interrogate the teen with a barrage of questions, forcing the teen to respond with "I don't know" and plenty of excuses, or the teenager attacks the parents back to defend them self. The end result is yelling, accusations and further damage to an already strained relationship.

To lessen the chances of having to experience what I described above, parents should be putting more emphasis on the relationship with their child before the rules are set in place. Strong foundational relationships with your children will help build their moral compass, a requirement for making good safe choices and smart decisions. As the saying goes, "rules without relationship equals rebellion." Any adult can create rules and enforce them, but it takes a real parent to build and invest in the relationship with the child.

I would have been very curious about the tone and emotion that was present in the moment when the wrong doing was revealed. Without more detail, it is hard for me to determine what the girl's intent was for admitting it. She could have been testing her parents, reaching out to them for help, trying to connect with them, or perhaps throwing it in their faces. But instead of worrying about what to do about the past incidents, it is important for the parents to stay focused on going forward.

Here are some "next step" suggestions I offered them, which do not include punishment. Instead of putting all the emphasis on demanding that she not ever smoke pot, they should instead, remind her calmly and respectfully that it is not OK with them for her to smoke pot (or any other drugs) and then discuss what the consequences will be if she smokes it again. The consequences can be the loss of any of the privileges or liberties she currently has or things that they provide for her, especially if it involves money (rides to places, use of equipment, special clothing, allowances, etc.). They should also be reminded that if they are currently using too much control over her, she will purposely do it just to get even.

Aside from being clear with your teen about what is not acceptable and the consequences that will occur, here are some things parents can do to build or repair the relationship with their teens:

- Avoid reacting to backtalk; if they slam their door because they are mad, let them
- Don't attempt to control their attitude
- Spend time with them to connect through activities they enjoy
- Do not judge their tastes in things (clothes, music, themes, etc.)
- Do a lot of listening without judging or commenting; just be there 100%
- Let them go through their moods without reacting; their body and brain are going through an overhaul and it is not fun for them

- Let them believe you are dumber than they are, you won't convince them otherwise
- If you need to say something to advise them, preface it with "can I say a silly Mom thing for a moment?"
- Establish a family meeting with all members for open and judgment-free discussion, at least every other week

Here are some things parents can do to install and reinforce rules:

- Rules should be about appropriate behaviors around the house
- Computers should be monitored and placed in common areas, not in the teen's bedroom
- Avoid allowing them to have cell phones, at least until the late teen years
- Entertainment electronic time should be monitored and limited. This includes television, computers, and video games
- Parents should institute bedtimes and have full control over who they invite to visit
- Bedrooms should be for sleeping, reading, writing, and alone time; no televisions or computers
- Other family's homes should be visited and other kids parents should be met before giving permission to go to parties or hangouts
- The teen should be given full responsibility for getting herself up and completing homework assignments

An important key to staying connected with your teens is to know who they are hanging out with. Take measures to make your house the fun place for teens to want to be. It will be much easier to know where they are, who they socialize with, and what activities they are involved in. And when it seems cumbersome to have them around often and annoying when you have to monitor and make special arrangements, remember what you signed up for as a parent and the little time you have left with them!

*Bill Corbett is the author of the book "Love, Limits, & Lessons," and the executive director of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site [www.CooperativeKids.com](http://www.CooperativeKids.com) for more information and parenting advice.*