

My Child is a Five, Going on Sixteen!

Three things you can do today that will positively affect your teenager tomorrow

If you know someone who is a parent of a 16 year old, you've probably heard about the challenges of having a teenager at home. You may have even thanked your lucky stars that your child won't be there for many years to come and feel a sense of relief that you don't have to deal with those issues anytime soon. But what if you had the power to minimize or eliminate those challenging behaviors to come? Would you care enough to implement changes now that could circumvent those teenage challenges later? Here are three things you can begin doing differently now with your young child that could influence your experience with her by the time she turns 16.

Arguing to Connect

If you thought your near school-age child argues with you too much now, just wait until the adolescent years arrive. When we think back to the arguing we did with our parents, it usually brings back bad memories of being sent to our room, being slapped for being disrespectful, or grounded for what seemed like months. According to Bronson and Merryman, authors of the book *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children* (2009, Twelve), university studies have shown that arguing is the modern age teen's mode of connecting with his parents. It is much easier now to connect with your younger child, reading to him, pushing her on the swing, or giving piggyback rides. Because the adolescent naturally begins to disconnect emotionally from his parent, arguing can be an easy and yet effective method for connecting, and it doesn't have to be an uncomfortable experience.

What You Can Do Now

Concentrate on building a solid relationship with your child now by letting her speak up and object to your limitations and boundaries. When you lay down rules, find ways to include your child in developing them and be open if she objects to your rules. Avoid getting angry and acknowledge and thank her for expressing her opinion. It doesn't mean you have to change a rule to her liking but if she brings up valid points and asks for modifications that seem reasonable, don't hesitate to change the rules if it appears appropriate. Demonstrating this kind and calm flexibility from time to time can have a lasting positive effect on her that will encourage her to have discussions. Not only will this prepare both of you for respectful arguments when she is 16, it will also allow her to speak up to others when you are not around.

Letting Them Fail

We parents do not like it when we see our children struggling or having experiences of discomfort. The old nurturing parent in us rises up and wants to swoop in and make everything all better for them. But to help a child truly grow and blossom, we must stop trying to make everything all better and allow them to learn from their failures. In his book, *Get Out of My Life, But First Can You Take Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* (1991, Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Dr. Anthony Wolf encourages parents to stop rescuing their children and to stop bailing them out when things don't go well for them. Doing so overburdens the parents and weakens the children.

What You Can Do Now

While we are responsible for keeping our children safe from the things they cannot control, non-critical problems in a child's life are meant to teach them valuable lessons. If your child leaves his lunch money at home, the hunger he will feel is the natural consequence that will teach him to remember it the next time. Being bossy to playmates may result in no one wanting to play with him. We can certainly offer advice but we must let go if they choose to ignore it. If we leave our daytime job to bring him lunch money or a fast food lunch, he learns that it is our job to always be there to rescue him and he doesn't have to remember. I'll always remember how horrible I felt as a Dad, the day my daughter called me at my office, pleading with me to retrieve her book report poster from our dining room table and deliver it to her school. To her at that moment, it was practically the end of the world if she didn't turn it in on time, but I reminded her of my new rule of not remembering for her, wished her a good day, and hung up the phone. Letting them fail now in the early years will lead to a more responsible 16 year old in the years to come.

Giving More Responsibility

Doing things for our preschooler and school-age child makes us feel good as parents. Sometimes it's hard to know when to stop doing too much for them because it validates our feeling of being needed. Most of us do our best to transfer responsibility over to them but when they object to having to take on what we are doing for them, we find we don't like the conflict and just keep doing it. But if we don't learn to stop doing too much for them now, it will only become more difficult when our child has a larger vocabulary and hormonal emotions to match. In the sequel to my original book, *Love, Limits, & Lessons Volume 2: A Parent's Guide to Raising Cooperative Kids* (2011, Cooperative Kids), I outline the importance of remaining steadfast at raising capable children who will become responsible teenagers and eventually responsible members of society.

What You Can Do Now

Determine key activities and responsibilities that must be transferred at appropriate times of development and do it with unconditional love (this means no coaxing, reminding, or nagging). When your preschooler is ready to put on her own socks and shoes, give her training, set up the transition, and encourage her when she struggles. When you think your school-age son is ready to get himself up in the morning instead of you having to tell him to get out of bed repetitively, allow him to buy his own alarm clock, teach him to set it, set up the official transition, and encourage him at his success. Small steps of success now will become huge steps of success when the teen years arrive.

Bill Corbett is the author of the award winning book "Love, Limits, & Lessons: A Parent's Guide to Raising Cooperative Kids" in English and in Spanish, and the founder and president of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, three step children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, CT. You can visit his Web site www.CooperativeKids.com for further information and parenting advice.