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"Tough" Love With Teens

Guidelines parents need to follow in setting limits on the behavior of their adolescent children.

Herbert G. Lingren, Ph.D., Extension Family Life Specialist

[Previous Category](#) | [Catalog](#) | [Order Info](#)

- [Frustration Produces Rejection](#)
- [The "Catch-22"](#)
- [The Struggle for Control](#)
- ["Tough" Love](#)
- [Rights as Parents](#)
- [Solutions](#)
- [Setting Rules and Limits](#)
- ["I Will Not..."](#)
- [A Word of Caution](#)
- [Understanding Your Teenager](#)



Your children are not your children

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

*They came through you, but not from you
And, though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.*

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.

*You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

-- K. Gibran. The Prophet

Adolescence is a time of challenge and change -- for both teen and parent. Our teens are at a stage in life where they face a multitude of pressing decisions -- including those about friends, careers, sex, smoking, drinking, drugs and parental values. At the same time, they are confronted with profound physical, social and emotional changes.

Before the early 1900's there was no stage or period of life defined or acknowledged as adolescence. It is a period unique to modern urban America, created partly because our society does not exactly know what to do with this group of young people. It is perpetuated in part, because many adults buy into the "myths" of adolescence. What, for instance, do you think of the following statements?

- Adolescence is an abnormal age, characterized by neuroses, anxieties and other psychological problems.
- Teenagers are inherently rebellious.
- Adolescents are nonconformists and unconventional in their habits and beliefs.
- A "generation gap" exists between adolescents and adults. Adolescents don't want to have anything to do with adults.

All of the above statements are **false!** Myths of adolescence are perpetuated because adults do not spend the time and effort learning about normal, expected changes during this period. It is much easier for us to put a label on people rather than to try to understand them. The teen years are truly "high speed, high need" years. The major developmental tasks to be answered during this time are: (1) "Who am I?"; and

(2) "How do I relate to the world?"

Frustration Produces Rejection

While most parents realize there are normal struggles between parents and teens as their sons and daughters struggle for independence and identity, they are often shocked by the length and intensity of the conflict. They are stunned by apparent rejection of some of their most sacred values and confused by their teenagers "acting up" and "acting out." In attempting to become psychologically independent of their parents, teens often attempt to move completely away from any control or influence by their parents. Instead of remembering the old proverb "the ear that accepts is better than the tongue that rejects," parents reject their adolescent, either directly or indirectly, through nagging, excessive criticism, impatience, anger, sibling comparison and suspiciousness.

When the rejected teenager reaches the limit of patience and tolerance, he or she lashes out -- rejecting the family, the school, the church, the system and becomes a "runaway." The teen may run away by lying, cheating, stealing, fighting, drinking, using drugs, breaking laws, quitting school, or becoming pregnant. The goal is to hurt as the teen feels hurt by others.

The "Catch-22"

When the above situations occur, many parents (and teens as well) feel they are caught in a "double bind" -- a "Catch-22" situation. That is, the situation is bad; it doesn't make any difference what you do, it still doesn't work. Parent and teen are further apart than ever, and both feel terrible. It often seems as if things are getting worse and they ask **why?** Why are there so many arguments and so much pain among people who are really supposed to love each other? Why can't our family be normal? Why can't our family be happy?

The reasons are many and complex. Often, parents today do not take enough time, working and playing with their children. They need to realize that the family is a complex emotional system, not a business organization. Parents must convey the message of caring, that "you count, you are important." They must nurture, encourage, show firmness, love, guide, respect, facilitate, and "let go."

The Struggle for Control

Disagreements arise between parents and teens, usually over a matter of **control**, and the power struggle over "Who's in charge" and "Who's right" begins. On the one hand the parent is frequently correct in saying, "My teen is just not responsible enough or careful enough to be allowed to ..." On the other hand, a teen is often correct when he/she says, "My parents continue to treat me like I am 10 years old." Conflict often arises when parent and teen disagree over whether or not the teen has acted responsibly enough in the past to make certain decisions more independently in the future.

One reason that the struggle for control continues or heats up is because both parents and teens are human. Parents give up control and then take it back. Teens act responsibly one weekend, irresponsibly the next. There are few things more difficult about being a parent than trying to figure out how to give the teenage son or daughter freedom enough to learn responsibility, self-reliance and the consequences of decision making, yet still keeping some control over behavior that is potentially dangerous.

The typically stormy emotions of a teenager often increase the difficulty of situations. And, if the parent is angry, hostile or rejecting, the situation can deteriorate into a "standoff" between them and full-blown crisis in the home.

"Tough" Love

The concept of responsible parental love has been developed by Phyllis and David York in their publication *TOUGHLOVE: A Self-Help Manual For Parents Troubled By Teen-Age Behavior*. It represents a firm, caring solution for families torn apart by completely unacceptable and "acting-out" behavior. They distinguish "tough" love from "soft love," which is a non- helping, rescuing love that parents often provide their adolescent because they don't trust their child to make mistakes. They either feel guilty about not spending time with them, or they don't want their teen to make the same mistakes they did. In most cases, it does not help the child through the teen years in becoming a mature, responsible adult.

While "tough" love as defined here is **not** rejecting, it forces both the young person and the parent to become aware of reality of their behaviors and decisions.

- "Tough" love means giving teens **clear-cut rules** and reasonable limits and expecting them to abide by them.
- "Tough" love means allowing adolescents to experience the **consequences** of their own **behavior**, no matter how much parents want to protect them.
- "Tough" love means **getting tough with yourself** and not rescuing your teen when things don't turn out the way you would like. When you help teenagers avoid consequences by rescuing them in the name of "helping" you are giving them "soft" love. "Soft" love then becomes part of the problem that keeps teenagers from experiencing the real consequences of unacceptable behavior.
- "Tough" love means you as a parent have **rights**, and you need to insist on those rights as you live together as a family.
- "Tough" love means taking a stand and setting rules about how you as a family will live together, and then sticking to your **absolute limits**. This does not mean that you stop loving or caring about your teenager. It does mean you stop treating your adolescent like a poor, helpless child. It means expecting the teen to be responsible for his actions, no matter how tough it seems to be on the parent or teen.

Rights as Parents

Parents, like children, minorities and other citizens have rights that should be defined and agreed upon. You have:

- A right to live in a clean house.
- A right to expect cooperation and courtesy at home.
- A right to expect responsible behavior from your children at school.
- A right to a night's sleep without worrying where your teenager is.
- A right not to be treated badly or inconsiderately by your teenager.
- A right to stop rescuing your teenager and start taking care of yourself.

If you as parent do not make sure your rights are respected, you cannot expect others, even your teenager, to respect you or your home. The rights and privileges of Mom and Dad, and those of adolescents and younger children, should be thoroughly discussed, preferably at the weekly family council meeting (see *G 90-1006*, [Setting up a Family Council](#)).

Solutions

There are no magic, easy solutions. However, a parent is wise to communicate absolute support to the young teenager by saying -- "I am going to love you, support you, and fulfill my responsibility to you, my offspring, no matter what mistakes you make. You are my son/daughter and nothing can change that. I hope and trust you will do and feel the same toward your mother and me (or your father and me). So far, we are very proud of you and we feel that we will always be."

Of course, the most difficult task for parents is conveying this message, beginning at age 2, throughout childhood and into the teen years. But what about the teen years themselves? What can parents do? How can parents combine flexibility with the control necessary to help adolescents regulate their inner impulses? These guidelines may help:

1. *Give teenagers clear rules.* Adolescents need help in setting limits on their behavior. They need to know what rules are acceptable for family members to follow. They need to know what parents expect and what their "bottom lines" are. Often, teenagers resent rules and test the absolute limits. But parents should not be afraid of "taking a stand" and insisting on certain behaviors that reflect their values. Parents can show respect for their teenager's feelings and opinions, but should reserve the right to set a few absolute limits about their teen actions. Teenagers gain strength and self-respect from parents who are clear and consistent in their expectations and are willing to discuss the reasons for their decisions.
2. *Don't overact.* The most important attribute a parent can have toward the teen is **patience**. And, it is often the most difficult attribute to give to teens. Patience means accepting the teenager's feelings. It means "listening with your heart as well as your ear." Listening, in a non-judgmental fashion, opens the door for understanding.

Some parents are so anxious about the teen years that they react with severe punishment any time a teenager steps out of line. Usually, punishment does not help a teenager learn self-control. It is often more useful for parents to discuss their feelings about the problem behavior with their teenager and work out and enforce mutually acceptable standards.

3. *Teach survival skills.* Parents can do this by encouraging teens to take part in group activities. Belonging to 4-H or taking part in religious and school activities help teens learn to get along with others. Youth involved in supervised activities are less likely to be involved in activities which lead to delinquent behavior.
4. *Give lots of encouragement.* Teens need to know their families care about them, especially when they get in trouble. Be sure they know that you care. Show interest in their friends, school, and activities. Stand by them, not over them.
5. *Only battle over important matters.* As long as teenagers don't hurt themselves or others, ignore little things that irritate you. (Example: hair styles, clothes.) If parents battle with teens over everything they don't like or disapprove, teens may decide to rebel by "dropping out" or using drugs. Save your influence for important matters!
6. *Don't treat teens like children.* Don't say, "You aren't eating well enough" or, "You aren't getting enough sleep. You'd better be in bed early tonight," or "You can't have the car anymore till you bring your grades up." Treat your teens like responsible persons and they will act responsibly. Teenagers resent being treated like children. If you treat them like children, they will set out to prove they are not children, sometimes with delinquent, antisocial behavior.
7. *Encourage independence.* Parents have to learn to "let go" to keep their teenager. Separation from parents is a gradual process -- not a one-time event. It begins in infancy when the child first crawls away from mother and continues when the two-year-old says, "No! Me do it!" Separation, individuation, identity, autonomy are tasks which teenagers must accomplish to become mature, responsible adults. Parents can help by "letting go" gradually as the child matures. When parents see the teenager handling responsibility well, gradually increase opportunities for self-direction. Allow the teenager to make mistakes, without berating, putting down or chewing out. We often **learn more from the consequences of our mistakes than we learn from our successes.** Hodding Carter reminds us: "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give to our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings."

Setting Rules and Limits

If you have been having particular difficulty with your teen lately, and you have tried to listen without judging or giving advice, and your relationship still seems to be deteriorating because of "major problems" which are occurring, you may wish to try this activity to examine your role and your teen's role in creating and maintaining the crisis.

Think about some of the **major problems** you have faced recently that were created by your teenager. Perhaps your daughter had an accident with the family car; or perhaps your son skipped school and you had to see the principal; or perhaps you received a summons from the court for your teenager's drinking or shoplifting offense; or your teen is on the verge of being expelled from school because of insolent behavior.

Get a pencil and paper and **write down** all such incidents in the past six months. Most of us would rather list them in our heads than face the pain of writing them down on paper. Face your situation! Don't avoid it any longer. Put a check () by those problems that you **most strongly resent** and you never want to deal with again. Perhaps you checked all the items, perhaps only a few. These are your absolute limits.

"I Will Not..."

Look at the list of problems you checked as your absolute limits. For each item, write down one or more "I will not" statements. These "I will not" statements will provide the basis for your stand. There may be statements such as:

1. I will not pay my teenager's traffic fines.
2. I will not fight with school officials about my teenager's behavior.
3. I will not tolerate disrespect/violence in my home.
4. I will not give my teenager any more money for gas, movies, partying.
5. I will not argue with my teenager about any of the above.

These "I will not" statements represent your absolute limits. They should be thought out carefully and are "non-negotiable." To back off from your absolute limit is to retreat and begin crisis-supporting behavior.

In the "tough" love you give your teenager you:

- Set limits on alcohol use, drugs, and unacceptable behaviors.
- You make these rules and limits known, preferably at family council meetings.
- You do not argue with your teenager about the "rightness" of it.
- You do not pay attention to unhappy faces, tears, angry curses, or rejection.
- You keep your cool -- you are not angry, spiteful, rejecting.
- You ignore your own feelings of guilt, anger, remorse, the wish to rescue. Remember, you are not going to do battle on every little thing -- only on the absolute limits. You do have a choice, and you do care about your teenager.

A Word of Caution

Giving "tough" love to your adolescent is hard work:

- It is not a panacea to solve all parent-teen problems.
- It is not something you do to "win" the power struggle, to "get even" or put down your teenager.
- It should not be an alternative to effective communication, listening, negotiation, problem-solving, family council meetings.
- It is an attempt to break away from the vicious triangle of in which nobody wins.

Understanding Your Teenager

You can facilitate your teenager's growth through the adolescent years by:

- Feeling with them their joy when they are happy, and their sorrow when sad.
- Being on call to answer questions, to give information, and for companionship. Being able to be yourself with them.
- Knowing where your "skin" ends and theirs begins; by not intruding or telling them how they feel.
- Giving the adolescent options; then let him accept the natural consequences of his choice.
- Listening and being open to their views, even if you disagree.
- Being aware that our world seems different to the adolescent than to us. That the adolescent world is really different than when you were a teen.
- Seeking professional help from a family therapist if needed.

As an adult, you must model acceptable adult behavior in all situations. If you can say "I'm sorry I got angry," or "I apologize for criticizing you before listening to all you have to say," teens will have more respect for all adults. It is also useful to remind young teenagers (13-15) that it is easier to treat them as adults if they act like adults. And it is very useful to adult parents to remember that they were once teenagers themselves.

Erma Bombeck on the growing up process: "I see children as kites. You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until you're both breathless -- they crash -- they hit the rooftop -- you pat and comfort, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they'll fly.

"Finally they are airborne; they need more string and you keep letting it out. But with each twist of the ball of twine, there is a sadness that goes with joy. The kite becomes more distant, and you know it won't be long before that beautiful creature will snap the lifeline the binds you together and will soar as it is meant to soar, free and alone. Only then do you know that you did your job."

-- Field Newspaper Syndicate

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