

Teenage Behaviour

By Dr Jo Jones, Paediatrician, in Blazer, May 2011

“Hire a teenager whilst they still know everything....” I laughed like anything when I first saw that slogan 14 years ago, and still covet one for my fridge. I can feel my 12 year old giving me a ‘death look’ as I type....

It’s hard being a teenager.... Conflicting comments are flung their way – “For god’s sake, grow up!”....”You’re way too young to do that!”. No wonder they’re not sure how they should act. We wonder what’s happened to the cheerful, biddable child that has morphed into a veritable monster. What can we do?

Here are a few ideas that seem to work:

Choose the moment when you try to talk to a teenager about behaviour such as rudeness and anger. Don’t try to engage them when they’re angry, such as straight after or even during an argument, as they won’t listen and anything that you say will be swiftly translated into something negative. Wait till things have calmed down a bit, including yourself, then bring things up in a constructive manner that’s not immediately going to make the teenager flare up again. If you say, “You make me angry!” this implies accusation hence builds guilt, defensiveness and more anger in your child. Try saying “When you do/say..., I feel...” i.e. no blame but simply admitting how you feel.

Choose the battles. If you’re generally feeling hacked off about your teenager’s behaviour, it’s easy to jump on every single small thing they do wrong. Decide what you really want to change and leave the rest till another time.

Share instances of your similar teenage misdemeanours too, as this can introduce **humour** into a tense moment and help dispel anger.

Teenagers need to learn to **suffer the consequences**. If you’ve decided that they are responsible for retrieving dirty clothes from their room, don’t then do it for them! You’ll feel resentful, and they’ll quite happily relinquish the job. They need to know what will happen if they don’t do their bit ... then let it happen!

I think it is better for us as **parents to walk away ourselves** than send a child in anger to their room. This means that a teenager cannot interpret your actions as being rejected or banished. If you use some form of ‘set phrase’ such as, “At these times, I feel really angry. That makes both of us argue. I’m walking away while I’m still calm”, this may help as it’s seen as sharing the fault.

Boundary setting and ‘safety’ are essential. Decide well in advance what you’re happy to accept and what you’re not, make it all very clear to your child, and stick to it. Don’t give in if they shout (see point no. 5).

Don't constantly bail your children out! Teenagers need to learn to manage allowances etc. Make clear rules as to what an allowance covers, and if they go over, tough luck, as that is what happens in the big world we are preparing them for.

Punishing by taking things away etc **rarely helps**. It's usually driven by parental anger and generates anger in the child. Work out what motivates a child (mobile phone, computer time etc) and use these 'motivators' as earnings for 'good enough' behaviour.

Take time to listen. Sometimes, those things that teenagers say in anger are what bother them the most. Try to put a bit of time aside when they want to talk, even if it always seems to be at the most inconvenient time....

Say you're sorry to children and teenagers, and admit that you can be wrong too. It goes a very long way to 'sharing blame' and forging a close relationship with a child. An argument is rarely just their fault.

Consider a '**behaviour contract**'. Teenagers need to know exactly what they have to do in order to have behaviour that is 'good enough'. Don't expect immaculate behaviour. Write a list of what you'd like to see, rather than a list of 'Don'ts'. Sit down with your child and talk about where your faults lie as well as theirs in a calm moment. Most teenagers can identify the things they do that are unacceptable.

"The average teenager has all the faults his parents outgrew" (author unknown) – we've all been there....