

5 Teen Behavior Problems: A Troubleshooting Guide

To be fair, no one has ever pretended that parenting a teenager was going to be easy. Still, until your own kids reach that stage, it's tempting to believe your family will be immune to teen behavior problems. No, you tell yourself, *your* teenager will never talk back, stay out too late or pierce her eyebrow.

Dream on.

Teenagers are basically hard-wired to butt heads with their parents, says Stuart Goldman, MD, director of psychiatric education at Children's Hospital in Boston. "Adolescence is a time of rapid change for kids both physically and cognitively," he explains. "It's the task of the teenager to fire their parents and then re-hire them years later, but as consultants rather than managers."

But that doesn't mean you have to take it lying down. With the right approach, you can troubleshoot the following teen behavior problems in a relatively civilized fashion.

Teen Behavior Problem 1:

Your Teen Seems To Hate You

One minute your sweet child is begging you to come on the class trip or to lie down with her while she falls asleep. Then, seemingly overnight, she starts treating you like dirt, discounting everything you say and snickering at your suggestions. If you look closely, you'll see that you've been through this before, when she was a toddler -- only instead of shouting "no!" like a two-year-old would, a teenager simply rolls her eyes in disgust.

"It's so hard for parents when this happens," says Nadine Kaslow, PhD, a psychologist specializing in kids and families at Emory University in Atlanta. "But part of adolescence is about separating and individuating, and many kids need to reject their parents in order to find their own identities." Teens focus on their friends more than on their families, which is normal too.

Your Solution

Sometimes parents feel so hurt by their teens' treatment that they respond by returning the rejection -- which is a mistake. "Teenagers know that they still need their parents even if they can't admit it," says Goldman. "The roller-coaster they put you on is also the one they're feeling internally." As the parent, you need to stay calm and try to weather this teenage rebellion phase, which usually passes by the time a child is 16 or 17.

But no one's saying your teen should be allowed to be truly nasty or to curse at you; when this happens, you have to enforce basic behavior standards. One solution is the good, old-fashioned approach of: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." By letting your teenager know that you're here for him no matter what, you make it more likely that he'll let down his guard and confide in you once in a while, which is a rare treat.

Teen Behavior Problem 2:

Communication Devices Rule Their Lives

It's ironic that teenage forms of communication like IM-ing, text-messaging and talking on cell phones make them less communicative, at least with the people they live with. In today's world, though, forbidding all use of electronic devices is not only unrealistic, but unkind. "Being networked with their friends is critical to most teens," says Goldman.

Your Solution

Look at the big picture, advises Susan Bartell, PhD, an adolescent psychologist in New York. If your child is functioning well in school, doing his chores at home and not completely retreating from family life, it's probably best to "lay off." It's also OK to set reasonable limits, such as no "texting" or cell phone calls during dinner. Some parents prefer not to let teens have computers in their rooms, since it makes it harder to supervise computer usage, and this is perfectly reasonable. Many experts also suggest establishing a rule that the computer has to be off at least one hour before bedtime, as a way to ensure that teens get more sleep .

One good way to limit how many minutes your teen spends talking on his cell and texting: Require him to pay his own cell phone bills. And do your best to monitor what your child does when he's online, particularly if he or she is using networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. You still own the home and computer -- so check into parental Internet controls and software to monitor use of any questionable web sites.

Teen Behavior Problem 3:

Staying Out Too Late

It's 10:30 p.m. and you told your daughter to be home by 10 p.m. Why does she ignore your curfew again and again?

"Part of what teens do is test limits," explains Goldman. "But the fact is that they actually want limits, so parents need to keep setting them."

Your Solution

Do some research before insisting that your child respect your curfew because it's possible that yours is unreasonable. Call a few of your kids' friends' parents and find out when they expect their kids home. Goldman suggests giving kids a 10-minute

grace period, and if they defy that, to set consequences -- such as no going out at night for a week.

If it seems like your child is staying out late because she's up to no good, or doesn't feel happy at home, then you need to talk with her and figure out what might be going on. However, if your curfew is in line with what's typical in your teen's crowd, then it's time to set consequences and then *enforce them* if your teen continues to break your rules. When you make a rule, you have to mean it. You can't bluff teenagers -- they will always call you on it.

Teen Behavior Problem 4:

Hanging Out with Kids You Don't Like

You wince every time your son traipses through the door with his greasy-haired, noisy buddies. Should you suck it up, or say something?

Your Solution

Kids can wear weird clothes, pierce their lips, act rudely and still be decent kids, says Bartell, who advises parents to hold off on criticizing something as superficial as fashion in their kids' friends. "Teenagers are so attached to their friends that it's like criticizing them directly."

On the other hand, if you know that your child has taken up with a group of troubled teens who skip school and do drugs, a talk is in order. "Without putting him on the defensive, tell your child you're concerned about who he's hanging out with and that you're worried he's doing drugs," says Bartell. While you can't forbid your child to hang around with certain kids, you can intervene and try to nip dangerous behaviors in the bud. Don't be afraid to ask for professional help about hanging out with a crowd engaged in negative behavior. Counseling or family therapy can help.

Teen Behavior Problem 5:

Everything's a Drama

Every little thing seems to set your daughter off lately, and the more you try to help, the more she sobs or shouts or slams the door.

Part of being a teenager is feeling things intensely, so what may seem like no big deal to you is hugely important to her.

Your Solution

Parents tend to trivialize the importance of things in teenagers' lives, says Bartell: "What happens is that kids feel misunderstood, and eventually they will stop telling you anything. Right now it is the most important thing in the world that her best friend is flirting with her boyfriend, and you need to take it seriously."

Don't offer advice, disparage her friends or try to minimize it by saying that one day

she'll see how silly high school romances are. "Just listen and sympathize," says Bartell. And put yourself in her position -- because, after all, you were once there yourself.

SOURCES: Nadine Kaslow, PhD, psychologist, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Stuart Goldman, MD, director of psychiatric education, Children's Hospital, Boston, MA. Susan Bartell, PhD, adolescent psychologist, New York, NY.

Reviewed by [John M. Goldenring, MD, JD, MPH](#) on 7/1/2007

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