

Teenage Rebellion

By Dr. Scott J. Larson

The words teenager and rebellion often seem synonymous. A quote I have always liked which depicts this age group is: "Our youth now love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders, and love to chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers." While this may sound like somebody's description of your teenager, it was actually written by Socrates, who died in 399 BC. Truly teenage rebellion has been around for a long time.

How does one know how much rebellion to allow? How do you confront the rebellion and still maintain the relationship? When do you let kids suffer the consequences of their actions, and when do you step in to stop them from getting hurt?

We have a home where we take kids in who have been locked up for crime. Rebellion is one of the major issues we deal with everyday. These are a few principles we've learned the hard way when it comes to dealing with teenagers and rebellion.

Teens Have a Need for Independence

It took us a long time to figure out that our definition of success and the definition of success of the kids that live with us is very different. To us, success is when a kid does the right thing. If we can intervene in that young life, help him see why he should do his homework, not go out with that girl, stay away from those kids, be in at this time, etc. and if the kid does it... That's Success!!

The only problem is that in the mind of a young person, even if they did their homework, didn't go out with that girl, stayed away from the wrong crowd and came home on time... They Failed!! - if they didn't make those decisions on their own. Teenagers would rather make the wrong decisions, but have them truly be their decisions. Why? Because success to a young person is independence.

This reality came home to us when we had grounded one of the boys in our home. Jason (not his real name) had shown that he could not handle the amount of freedom he had. So, for a few weeks he was restricted to the house unless he was at work, school, or with somebody else from the house. He was in night school and had to be to work everyday at 7am.

Several months later Jason told us that there were numerous nights that he would get up at 1 or 2am when everybody else was sleeping and walk around the streets of our town. Now I knew

why he was always so tired for work! When we asked him why he did that he said, "Just because I was told I couldn't." We asked him what he did on his hour long walks. "Oh nothing, I just wanted to do my own thing." The strange thing was that he never went on midnight strolls before or after those few weeks of grounding. But in Jason's mind, he succeeded. He was independent. Unfortunately, the search for independence is most commonly known as rebellion.

We know a Christian couple who have three incredibly wonderful children who have just completed adolescence with relatively few hitches. We asked them what parenting gems they could give to us. One of their key strategies was based on the assumption that kids have a need to rebel. "We don't try to get them not to rebel at all. Instead we try to get them to rebel against things that aren't big issues to us. For example, our son David didn't like to clean his room. To us it was no a big deal, but we didn't let David know that. In fact we insisted he keep his room clean. He rarely did. It was his area to rebel in. We're grateful that it was that and not a host of other possible things."

Teens Need Practice Making Decisions

If adolescence is a time of transition to adulthood, then it stands to reason that kids should be very independent by the time they leave home. Ideally, a senior in high school would have little or no rules. "Oh no, not in my house! If he's going to live under my roof, he's going to live under my rules!" I agree with that if there are major areas of rebellion such as drug abuse, criminal activity, or harmful influencing other siblings, where there can be no compromise and the law of the home must be upheld.

For many types of rebellion though, it seems that home is the safest place for kids to fail and get back up on their feet again. I was a resident assistant when I was attending a state college. I always dreaded those first couple of months in the fall. Much of my time would be consumed with cleaning up vomit from freshmen who had left home for the first time and couldn't handle the freedom of partying. What was most discouraging was that many of the ones who got the sickest were from conservative Christian families. A survey of high school age students revealed that kids feel they only do what they want 20% of the time, 80% of the time they have no sense of choice in what they're doing.

Am I saying parents should not issue consequences? Not at all. But perhaps we need to think a lot more about why and how we issue consequences. We must think about what will help the young person the most. In our home we talk with the kids about what will help them learn a principle the best. We ask them to come up with consequences that will teach them the most. In most cases we have found that their consequences were stiffer than ours would have been.

To short circuit this principle of a teen's need for independence can hurt kids in one of two ways. Either they can become so crippled and insecure, afraid to make any decisions on their own or else they will go against everything that their parents stand for. A close friend of ours grew up with a very stifling father. He is a very wise Christian now, but he has always stayed away from any institutions of higher learning. Why? Because his father always told him he needed to go to college if he was ever going to amount to anything.

Teens Need to Know We Have Confidence in Them

My parents made a very wise decision when I was finishing college. I had to make a choice between two job offers. One was several states away and the other was in my hometown. When I asked my parents which one they thought I should take I was prepared for, "Oh, it would be so nice to have you close to home." Surprisingly to me, they said, "We don't know what you should do, but we know that you hear from God and we're confident that you'll make the right choice." I ended up deciding to take the job back in my home town, but I know that if my parents had tried to convince me to move back home I would have chosen the other job.

Of course, even if a parent does all the right things it is no guarantee that a child won't rebel. I was encouraged though to read a survey done several years ago by *Youthworker Magazine*. They interviewed people who were walking with Christ ten years after high school. They wanted to find the common denominators. The two most prevalent were:

1. I was in an environment where I saw authentic faith lived out.
2. I rebelled against it for a time.