

IT'S WORTH IT.

Parenting Adolescents by David Melillo, M.S., LPC

There are few things more difficult in life than parenting an adolescent. They are dealing with new and powerful hormones, mood swings and a genuine need to differentiate from Mom and Dad. We are dealing with the challenges they present without the benefit of all the warm fuzzies younger children provide. And parents are often dealing with this when they are growing tired. Add to the above that during adolescence the consequences that your child may face are so much more serious. Drug and alcohol use, car accidents and pregnancy are among those consequences. All of this can make us feel overwhelmed or make us want to hide our heads in the sand.

The good news is that even though the stakes are higher, the same general rules of parenting apply. Most of the skills you need you practice when your child was two.

1. Love your child and let them know it.

Be sure they know that there is love that is not conditional. That you don't only love them when their homework is done and their room is clean. If you were forced to leave the planet tomorrow, what would you want them to know? Whatever that is, tell them! Even if you only get a grunt in response.

2. Have and enforce sensible limits.

What happens when curfew is missed? When your child comes home drunk or stoned? When chores aren't done? When they have been in a car with a drunk driver? When grades drop? All of these questions and many more should be answered ahead of time by the parents and shared with their child. From the everyday issues (e.g. taking your dish to the table) to the life threatening issues (drugs and alcohol) there should be expectations, limits and consequences.

I strongly suggest that you limit rules to only those things that really matter. Health and safety issues should take precedence. Parents often shoot for perfection but too many rules and too many details can lead to the collapse of your system or worse yet, your child. Keep your perspective. The cleanliness of your child's room shouldn't get more emphasis than the rules that can keep him or her alive.

3. Share the rules and consequences with your child.

Allowing them input can produce more “buy-in” from your child and lead to improved rules and more acceptance from your child. You might be surprised to find your children are very responsible about their rules.

4. Enforce the consequences.

This can be hard. It can create more work for you. But without follow through you wasted a lot of time and sent the wrong message.

5. Depersonalize the anger.

Children are allowed to be angry about a rule and its consequences. Don't waste time and precious energy trying to get your child to agree with the rule. He or she need only comply. Do not take their anger or insults personally. They are being a kid. You must be the parent. That is what your child needs.

Finally, the best orientation to discipline is to get out of the middle. Your child violated a rule knowing the consequence. Don't let the fight be about you. You can share their disappointment, sympathize with their pain, but they made the choice.

6. Get Help.

This is a tough job and there is no shame in getting help. My suggestions on when to get help are:

- If you no longer can manage rules and consequences with your child.
- When something begins to affect your child's health and safety (drug and alcohol use, possible depression, strong anxiety, etc.)
- Family trauma (abuse, death, divorce, serious illness of a family member)

To get help you can start with your pediatrician, school staff, private therapists or Guilford Youth and Family Services (203-453-8047).

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