

Need help parenting a teen?

Some parents of teens confuse their parenting role with that of friend. In so doing, they abdicate their parental authority and minimize their ability to provide direction, guidance, limits and structure.

In such cases parents may feel their teenaged son or daughter must like them. The parent may be looking to their son or daughter for approval when it should be the other way around. When teenagers are, in a sense, in charge of the parent's emotional needs, this power is beyond their ability to handle responsibly. This is when their son or daughter has the parents most held hostage.

The teenager, with their parent's emotional needs in their hands, may work against the parent and extort unreasonable privileges. These teens may look to drink underage; have parties; surf the Internet for pornography. Some teenagers will demonstrate little self-control. If the parent objects, the teen winds up admonishing the parent and then the parent caves, not wanting to lose their teen's approval. Some situations escalate to the point where teens find themselves in trouble with the law. Here too parents may cover for their misdeeds, pay off their teens debts; even paying off bookies and drug dealers.

Parents who seek their teen's approval must come to realize, they cannot rely on their son or daughter's to meet their own emotional needs. Parenting is a verb, an action word. It implies parents do something with regard to their children. The *it* that parents do is provide direction, guidance, limits and structure.

That teens may not like this is not unusual. Teens are struggling towards independence. Parents are monitoring and modulating their independence in accordance with the teen's actual ability to handle independence responsibly. If the tasks of adolescence are not handled responsibly, e.g. school, part-time job, chores, etc., then the parent must step in correctively. In so doing, parents must resist their son or daughter's disapproval and hold firm with expectations of school attendance, reasonable behaviour and restrictions on alcohol or drug use and the like.

It is generally not realistic to be a friend and a parent at the same time. This doesn't mean parents are not friendly in carrying out their role as parents, but the objective is not to be a friend to their son or daughter. The objective is to have a clear parental boundary and provide the direction, guidance, limits and structure necessary to keep teens on track. The goal is to raise teens into healthy, law abiding, capable and contributing adults with good morals.

While some parents argue that peers have more influence over teens than parents, this is usually only the case where parents have abdicated their authority and tried to be their son or daughter's friend, versus parent.

If you, as a parent, are having difficulty maintaining a parenting role or if you find yourself held hostage, needing your son or daughter's approval and cannot provide the direction, guidance, limits and structure necessary to keep teens on track, then consider counselling – not for your teen, but for yourself.

Counselling is to help the parent understand their own needs and to separate their needs from those of their teens such that they can regain appropriate parental authority and regain influence greater than their teen's peers.

Counsellors will rarely have more influence than a parent. It is better to help the parent than the attempt to be of greater influence to someone else's child. As parents take action, teens tend to respond more respectfully with time. Then a positive and appropriate parent-teen relationship is restored.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.