



Build Rapport to Facilitate Teen Behaviour

Managing teenagers is a full-time job for some parents as they turn themselves into 24-hour police to monitor the consequences doled out for misdeeds. The problem is that a game of cat and mouse develops as the teen makes sure the parents have to police them because they continue to look for ways to undermine the consequence. As the game continues, the teen undermines the consequence and the parents look for harsher, more restrictive consequences to apply. The net result is that resentment builds and eventually the teen either runs away or the parent turns to tough love and kicks them out. Long gone is the kind and loving relationship of earlier years as both parents and teen spiral out of control.

When the relationship is spiraling out of control and parents find themselves at their wits end, the challenge is to rise above the animosity in favour of rebuilding the relationship. Harsher, more restrictive consequences will not bring the teen “under control”. Slowly and deliberately practicing rebuilding strategies can rekindle the relationship through which the parents may find increased influence to provide direction and guidance as opposed to “control”.

The process starts with the parents going out of their way to find moments when they can approach their teen with a fleeting interest in their activity or to provide a positive comment. For instance, with the teen seated at the computer, the parent can approach, place a hand gently on the shoulder and ask what they are doing. Then nod, as if interested, make a neutral comment such as “oh”, or “aha”... and then walk away. In the spiral of negativity this one neutral to positive interaction will stand out. It will be a start to rekindling rapport with the teen. On other occasions, perhaps when chauffeuring your teen hither and yon, make a stop, such as at a donut store and offer to get your teen a treat. Such positive “spontaneous” gestures also can go a long way to further the rapport building exercise.

Throughout, step away from escalating the consequences, already proven to be ineffective. Alternately, when your teen acts inappropriately, quietly and directly express your disapproval and then walk away. You want to leave the teen thinking about their behaviour, not yours. While you cannot control your teen’s behaviour, you can control your own.

If there are serious concerns related to school attendance, drugs or alcohol, try to discuss your concerns and if this isn’t possible, make an appointment with the school counselor to address these or other issues. Demonstrate to your teen that you will use appropriate strategies with their well-being in mind as opposed to them feeling you are just trying to exert your will or control over them through “discipline”.

If your child is violent, tell them that rather than engaging in counter-violence, you will call the police and do so if need be.

It is not that your teen should avoid the consequences of their behaviour, but that you should engage them in ways that can promote the relationship and your influence. This is how you de-escalate the parent-teen conflict, build rapport, continue to hold them accountable and help them develop appropriate life skills.

It starts with the parents taking responsibility as the grown-up to foster the relationship. While you may not believe it will work you know the other way didn’t. Take the leap of faith and try.

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