



Challenging Teens

The call is from a flustered parent rhyming off a litany of complaints about their teenaged son or daughter; drugs, alcohol, truancy, sex, smoking, shoplifting, vandalism, hanging out with the wrong crowd. The parent is focussed and organized by the youth's misdeeds. The parent is seeking the magical solution: someone to speak with his or her child, such that the egregious behaviour is instantly curtailed. Typically, the belief is that the counsellor can wag an even bigger finger in the teen's face, such that he or she finally gets it and mends his or her ways.

Sadly, when this kind of call is received, the teen is so far off kilter that correcting the course will be a drawn out process. The challenge for the parent is to withstand the process and for the parent to learn a new role in correcting their teen's course instead of just concentrating on the behaviour in the moment. This can be more thorny than working with the teen as many parents have difficulty surmounting their own anger in view of the turmoil imposed by the teen.

The change the parent must learn to adopt is to move from a policing and corrections stance where one seeks to only address misdeeds and curtail behaviour, to one where the parent gains control of their own behaviour first, to then offer guidance and direction to their son or daughter. The only goal herein is for the parent to engage their son or daughter in more reasonable and wholesome activities.

In truth, telling a teen what not to do and harping on them for misdeeds and poor choices only keeps them mired in the mud. In lieu of this, parents must come to coach and coax their son or daughter towards activities inherently of interest to their son or daughter. They must help the teen join clubs, sports, recreational or creative activities that are fun. Do not view this as rewarding misbehaviour, but providing alternate activities to that which the teen was otherwise drawn.

More to the point, every minute spent engaged in a reasonable activity, is a minute away from the other nefarious activities. Further, all structured and organized activities are supervised. Hence, the teen is now under the guidance and direction of an adult, geared to facilitating skill development as per the area of interest. If your teen is amenable, join with him or

her. Change the context of the relationship from punisher to collaborator. In so doing, resist harping on the issues of old, in favour of chatting about the new current activities.

In defensive driving terms, this is known as steering where you want to drive – crash avoidance. Steer towards the crash, and that's what happens. Steer where you want to go and enjoy the ride as you achieve your destination.

In some situations, the relationship between parent and teen is so deteriorated that all manner of influence is lost and the teen cannot contemplate a change in direction facilitated by the parents. In such situations, parents may need to use an alternate source of influence. To this end, there may be a youth worker in a community-based program who may be helpful in engaging the teen in their program. Such programs may be available through the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Salvation Army, church groups, etc. Call your local program and ask to speak with the youth worker. Explain your situation and see if the youth worker can invite and engage your son or daughter in their program. This means of "outreach" is designed to capture youth and reintegrate them into more meaningful activities with the support and guidance of the youth worker.

The goal remains the same: out-of-control, troublesome teens need to be engaged in meaningful activities, of inherent interest and fun. These activities are supervised and incompatible with getting into trouble. These are the first steps to changing the course of a wayward teen and improving relations with parents and family.

The real challenge in managing teens is engagement in reasonable activities. Put your efforts here.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

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.