

## Peaceful Parenting

By Anne Courtney, MFT

Generally speaking, most parents who come to counseling report if my teen were only different, things would be fine. Their child says the same thing about his or her parents. The moment one person considers another to be the cause of the suffering; he/she is abandoning his/her responsibility. Yes, an adolescent may be doing all kinds of curious or absurd things that evoke his or her parents concern, and it is still the invitation and opportunity and challenge for the parent to figure out what to do about it.

Each is probably right, at least to some extent. It is important to acknowledge that essentially no one has control over anyone else. Until this is overtly acknowledged, most parents will unknowingly engage in a power struggle with their teenager by thinking they can control them. Mothers and fathers frequently report they have already tried requesting, insisting, browbeating, threatening, and so on, but still their teen has gone on behaving whatever way he or she wants to.

### **Do as I Say, Not as I Do**

Most adults can remember how frustrating and ineffective it was when his/her mother or father lectured from a stance of "do as I say, not as I do." Its a parenting style that clearly does not work, yet many people still employ the same obsolete parenting skills they disliked in their own parents. In this stance a parent feels powerless and unsuccessful and all the while overlook what their own behavior is demonstrating to their teen. For example, a father yells at his daughter to stop yelling. How crazy is that? (As an adult I can't stop yelling, but I expect you as a child to do it) A parent who flies off the handle when relating to an out of control teen is sending a message to his/her child that he/she is out of control too, and is setting up a lose/lose situation. I invite these parents to ask themselves, "Are my attempts to control my teenager working?"

One of the indicators of adolescence is acting without thinking of the consequences. When a parent is reacting without thinking, it can take the form of name-calling, anger or blaming and thus the parent ends up behaving as unseemly as his/her offspring when he/she really prefers to be acting as a responsible parent. A mother or father of an "out of control" teenager is often engaging in a parenting style based on the premise that he/she can control his/her child. This in turn leaves the parent feeling out of control as he/she tries to control the uncontrollable child.

When a parent reacts in anger without thinking of the consequences it usually comes out as nagging, scolding, complaining, yelling, or controlling, and sets everyone up to lose. This is when to ask Mom and Dad, "Does it work when someone attempts to control you? Does it bring out the best in you?" No? So then stop doing it to your son or daughter. If a parent doesn't behave as an adult, how can he/she expect his/her teen to learn how to behave like one! Sometimes it's as difficult for a parent to grow up and stop acting like an adolescent as it is for the teen.

### **It's About Personal Responsibility**

This is where responsibility comes in. Responsibility has nothing to do with culpability or guilt. Taking responsibility in relationships means acknowledging that the only person, place or thing that I ever have the power to change is myself. It means realizing I am the creator of my world. I am choosing my own reactions, responses and actions in relation to my child's behavior. No one can make me do or say anything that I don't choose to.

Most children excel at behaving in ways that push a parent's buttons. In this situation the parent has a choice. The parent can choose not to match his/her teenager's behavior. Often parents are quite surprised when faced with the reality that they can stop the power struggle with their teenager and can make things better by creating a win/win situation. If a parent refuses to argue, and remains calm, then his/her teen does not receive the pleasure of evoking the usual ranting and raving from his/her mother or father. Seeing that once a parent gets on the ranting and raving roller coaster, the teen wins since the focus is deflected elsewhere. The acting out behavior of the teen is lost in the shuffle because winning the argument, being right, placing blame, or getting the other to do what I want, now

becomes the focus of everyone's attention. If a parent chooses not to enter into this kind of power struggle, he/she is free to find effective ways of creating a better outcome for all involved in the conflict.

### **Constructive Options Results in Win-Win**

A parent who chooses to remain calm can behave as an adult and present his/her teen with options. For example, let's say that a fifteen-year-old boy is arguing with his father at the dinner table. Dad can respond by calmly giving his son two clear choices. "Either stop arguing with me right now and you may go to the movies with your buddies tonight as you had planned. Or, if you choose not to stop arguing with me, then go to your room and you lose the privilege of going to the movies tonight. Which is it going to be?" This is a win/win solution. It removes the power struggle from the parent/child relationship. When a parent responds by giving their child two constructive options, then each person benefits.

The parent then has the peace of mind that comes with being unattached to the outcome because regardless of which choice the teen makes, the unwanted behavior is extinguished. Another result of this parenting skill is that it gives the teen the option to decide his/her own destiny. The teen won't feel controlled and can begin to connect the dots that his/her choices and actions have consequences. The message the child receives is, "If I choose to behave I can have what I want. If I choose not to behave, I can't have what I want." Choice plus accountability equals growth and maturity.

Teenagers may test it once or twice looking to see if parents keep their word or not. If a parent will hold his/her ground and remain consistent, children figure out that it is up to them. A teen usually discovers that after just one experience of staying home alone in one's room all night versus earning the privilege to be with friends. In their resistance to change, initially parents complain that it's too hard to set limits, follow through with them and create these kind of win/win choices for their children. I tell them it's harder not to. If parents act responsibly, teenagers will too.

When parents consistently says what they mean and mean what they say, a teenager has no weasel or wiggle room and will give up trying to push the limits and accept the situation. A parent who copes by engaging in conflict and power struggles with a child often loses sight that his/her task as a parent is to show the teen how to engage in more adult-like behavior. Teenagers require guidance and direction in their passage into adulthood. A parent can give guidance and direction most effectively by demonstrating it with his or her own behavior. A parent can best accomplish this by walking the talk, which means engaging in actions that match up with his/her words.

### **Who is the Adult Here?**

Sometimes in the middle of a family therapy session I am compelled to say directly to a mother or father, "You are the adult here." Their response is often an appreciative, "Oh yeah, I am the adult." Being the adult means he/she has the power to do the right thing. It means holding one's tongue and not lashing out and not matching his/her teen's anger. It means being mature enough to take a step back from the situation and instead of reacting without thinking, finding a way to respond with constructive words and actions. It means keeping one's word and not caving in to a teens whining or bullying to get his/her way. It may even mean allowing a teenager to leave the house without a coat on a freezing night, knowing that eventually he/she will figure out it's too cold and will come home for it. The invitation for a parent is to be the person he/she wants to find in his/her teenager. If we respect our children, our children will respect us in return.

#### **About the Author**

Anne Courtney, MFT who graduated from JFK University in Orinda in 1990. She is in private practice in Lafayette where she sees individuals, families and couples. She has worked with students of all ages and their families in the Benicia Unified School District, San Ramon Valley Unified School District and Acalanes Unified School District. Learn more about Anne Courtney at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/AnneCourtney>