



Parenting Angry Teens

psychcentral.com/lib/parenting-angry-teens

Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D.

May 17,
2016

Some teens seem to walk around assuming that their parents are in a fight with them. The king-sized chip on the kid's shoulder invites the older folks to try to knock it off. The kid then feels justified in fighting back because Mom or Dad "started it." Unaware that, in fact, he (or she) started it by being so cranky and uncompromising, these teens are always upset with the people around them. And they are always upsetting to parents who desperately want to have friendly relationships with the adolescents they love.

When this kind of family shows up for an appointment at my office, things are intense indeed. The kids are angry, hostile, and generally unwilling to participate in the session. The parents are bewildered, hurt, and angry. The kids see their parents' hurt as manipulative and their anger as pressure. The parents see the teen's hostility as unfair and their demands as unreasonable. Pleasant time together has become very rare. Conversations are often punctuated by threats from both sides. The kids threaten to leave. The parents threaten to kick the kids out. Both are just plain scared.

Believe it or not, the intensity of feelings can be a hopeful sign. People who fight with each other still care what the other person thinks and still want to have impact and influence on each other. Families that are the most difficult to pull back from disaster are those in which people have given up on each other and no longer care. Where there are fights, there is some room to salvage the relationships.

After 30 years of working with families with angry teens, I have come to a few conclusions about what works and what doesn't. The principles are easy. Staying with them isn't. There are few things as hard to withstand as hostility from one's own child. It hurts. But when adults manage to stay adult even when under attack, they often end up with more influence than they thought they had. By preserving the relationship, even while under fire, these parents both model maturity and make room for the child to mature eventually.

Six Tips for Parenting Angry Teens

1. **Hang in there!** The difference between the families that make it and those that don't is parental tenacity. Parents who hang in, who continue to express love and concern, who continue to insist on knowing where their kids are going and with whom, who include their teens in family events, and who stubbornly refuse to give up are the parents who generally manage to save their kids.

2. **Hang on (to your sense of humor)!** Yes, a sense of humor. Without it, 'rents are really sunk. As one exhausted mom told me, "I've decided to take the position that it's all quite boring. Every weekend, my son goes somewhere he shouldn't with someone he shouldn't and does something he shouldn't. It's all boringly predictable." This Mom hadn't given up. She had discovered that putting a sardonic twist on the situation allowed her to take a step back. She was then able to look at the larger picture instead of getting caught up in the misbehavior of the week.
3. **Take it seriously, but not personally.** Angry teens sometimes do have things to be angry about. But equally often, their anger seems totally out of proportion to their lot in life. If you have treated your child with love and respect all along and that child is still hostile, it may have very little to do with you or with how that child was raised. There are more influences on a child's life than his or her parents. Parents who resolutely stay involved and responsible but who don't take each and every misbehavior as a personal attack are usually more effective than those who take all comments and actions to heart.
On the other hand, if you do have things to apologize for, do it. It's never too late to start over. Kids really do want parents, but they want parents they can trust. An honest apology and genuine efforts to make the family a better place to be can set the family in a new direction. It will take time. The kids won't believe you at first and may even test you. But if you stick to it, most kids will come around.
4. **Remember that the kid is as scared as you are.** Sullen and hostile moods often are covers for fear. Let's face it: it's scary out there! It's hard enough to negotiate the world as adults. Many kids find it just plain overwhelming. Rather than show their vulnerability, they posture to themselves and each other. Talking and acting like a surly big shot is a great cover when a person feels small, ineffectual, and scared. (By the way — parents who act like surly big shots are usually also feeling small, ineffectual, and scared.)
5. **Find ways to let the teen "save face."** It's not all that uncommon for a kid to realize that he or she has gone too far. In those moments, it's very important to give the kid a way to back down gracefully. Scolding, punishing, nagging, or lecturing will only make the teen defensive. When cornered, teen pride demands a hostile response. Instead, give the kid a back door. Try that sense of humor (see No. 2). See if some gentle kidding like "Who are you and where did you put my son?" alters the situation.
6. **Understand adolescent depression.** Irritability and explosiveness in teens are sometimes symptoms of depression. If your teen's mood seems unreasonable given his or her situation, it is important to have a professional screen for depression. Sometimes it really is about biochemistry. When that is the case, some medication and counseling will do more than lectures and consequences.

Parenting Makes Us Humble

One of my wise older friends tells me that the purpose of parenting is to teach us humility. There is nothing like dealing with an angry teen to teach us just how little control we have in the universe. But parents who hang on tight with love and care often end up having more influence than they would have believed possible at the time. Eventually maturity does kick in and these hostile teens become strong, independent adults.



Copyright © 1995-2019 Psych Central. All rights reserved.

Site last updated: 18 Aug 2019

Handcrafted with pride in historic Massachusetts.

Psych Central does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment.
Learn more.

