

# **Essential Rules of Parenting: Raising Teenagers**

## **Successfully**

When your child becomes a teenager, you're well over halfway through the job of raising them, and you have only a few years left to instill all those values and principles you want them to go into adult life with. And suddenly, they look as if they're throwing away all the work you've put in up to now. But actually, if you just keep your head, and follow these essential teenage Rules, you'll find you come out the other end with a terrific adult you can really be proud of.

(Excerpted from "The Rules of Parenting" by Richard Templar)

### **Remember Newton's Third Law**

The thing is, you love your kids desperately. So it's incredibly hard to watch them making mistakes that you think will come back to bite them later on. Over the years you've gotten used to letting them make small mistakes -- helping themselves to too much pudding or riding their bike too fast downhill. As time goes on, the mistakes get bigger.

So now you have to watch them drink too much at their friend's party or wear clothes that are far too low-cut (or high-cut). Maybe you even [have to stand back](#) when they decide to leave school at 16, when you'd hoped they go to college or lose a brilliant Saturday job because it's too much effort getting up in the morning. It's a much bigger deal than letting your two year old take too much pudding. The stakes are getting higher.

Unless your child is putting themselves in serious danger, you really do have to put up with it. Sometimes even if it's dangerous, you have no choice. The more you try to tell them, the more you push them in the opposite direction. They're looking for something to kick at, to rebel against, because they're programmed to. The more force you use, the more they'll use.

Remember Newton's third law of motion? For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. He could equally well have called it the first law of teenagers.

So what can you do when you see them going wrong? You can tell them what you think, but don't tell them what to do. And tell them in the way you'd tell a grown-up and an equal. Not, "I'll tell you what I think! I think you're a fool!" More along the lines of, "It's your decision, but have you thought how you'll fund your senior trip if you spend your money on this?" Talk to them like an adult and maybe they'll respond like an adult. And if not this time, maybe next time. They'll certainly be quicker to ask your advice if they know it will be given as an equal.

### **Don't Look Under the Mattress**

Teenagers are up to things you don't want to know about. Of course, you do know about them really, which is why you're worried. If you were entirely ignorant, you'd be much happier.

Look, take it from me, your daughter has gone further than you'd like with her boyfriend. Your son uses porn magazines. They've both tried at least a drag of a cigarette by now. And they've almost certainly been offered drugs, but they won't have any evidence of it hanging around in their room, so there's no point looking. Happy? Good. Now you don't need to look under the mattress or read their secret diary.

You're not going to find anything that thousands of parents before you haven't found. In fact, you're probably not going to find anything that your own parents didn't find. And what are you going to do about it -- confront them? I think not. You'll severely [damage your relationship](#), and they'll just keep them under the floorboards instead.

Maybe you should think back to the [things you did as a teenager](#) that you didn't want your parents to know about. Maybe you do things nowadays that you'd rather not tell your parents. See? Your kids are just being perfectly normal teenagers. And if you don't make a big deal out of all those perfectly normal teenagery things they're up to, they're much more likely to come and tell you if anything gets out of hand or is a real problem for them. And that's the important point. If you act like all that stuff under the mattress is normal, they'll feel they can talk to you without fear of an irrational response.

## Running After Them Doesn't Help Anybody

You started off with 18 years and counting. How many have you got left? Because when you get to zero, they'll be on their own. That means they'll have to know how to shop, cook, clean, and straighten up (up to a point anyway), do their own washing, pay their bills, stay in the black, and all the rest of it.

I know parents -- and without wanting to be sexist here it's almost always mothers -- who are still [looking after their kids when they're 18](#). And the kids, not being crazy, let them do it. In fact, I have one friend who is 35 and still takes his washing to his mother's. I don't mean he borrows his mother's washing machine, which might be understandable; I mean he hands the washing to his mother and leaves her to get on with it. It takes two to play that game.

You're counting down the last few years now to independence. And if your child hits 18 never having used a washing machine or cooked a decent meal, is that really fair for them? They may not realize what a handicap it will be, but you know perfectly well, as a Rules parent, that pampering a child doesn't prepare them for the real world.

You know your child's strengths and weaknesses as well as anyone. So think through what they still need to learn, and make sure they do. If they're hopeless with money, [teach them to budget](#). Get them to do the family shopping for a week on your usual budget, or get firm about not paying to fill up their car beyond the agreed amount.

## Show Some Respect for the Things They Care About

I know a man who started to develop psychological problems as a teenager. He used to spend as much time as he could in his bedroom listening to music, which was the one thing that gave him pleasure. As time went on, things became worse. Even after he'd left home, the problems continued. Many years later, he said a very interesting thing. He explained that one of the biggest blows to his confidence was the way his parents used to complain about the awful music he listened to.

You see, when you criticize your teenager's choices, you criticize them. It's an age of fragile egos and [easily knocked self-esteem](#), and it's easy to make your teenager feel that you disapprove, or even that you don't like them. Whether it's their music or their politics or the [way they dress](#) or their decision to become vegetarian, they need to know that it's okay with you.

It's one of the many paradoxes of teenagers. On the one hand, [they want to rebel](#), to shock you, to do things that get to you, and on the other hand, they want your approval and your goodwill. I know it's confusing for you, but it's worse for them. They're trapped inside minds and bodies that are trying to make the transition from dependent child to independent adult, and they don't know what they want themselves half the time. One minute they want to grow up as fast as possible, and the next it's all getting too scary, and they want to slow down. You just have to accept it and go with the flow.