

Reaching Your Teen When He Is Unteachable

As you face some of life's most challenging issues with your child, do not forget that love ultimately changes a person's life.

by Dennis and Barbara Rainey

With issues like attitudes, you need to become an astute observer and interpreter of your child's heart and actions. So much of good parenting takes place when you're in the hanging-around mode—on duty, ready to participate creatively and positively in the shaping of your child by listening, asking a question, giving a hug, offering an observation, or lending a hand.

But what if your child is giving you a “lip whip” and every word that falls from his tongue seems coated with battery acid? Nothing you say or do—even how you look—qualifies you for membership in the human race. Our suggestion is to wait for natural opportunities to let your child know of the possible consequences.

Let's say that, about the time you are enduring verbal humiliation, he mentions that he wants to go to the football game tomorrow night and that “you'll need to drive me there—the game starts at 7:00 p.m.”

Try this kind of response: “Your selfish, disrespectful attitude—the way you have been talking to me—is not acceptable. You want to go to the football game and want me to take you? Before I can do that, you need to demonstrate that you are worthy to be trusted. You need to deal with your arrogant attitude. You need to show me that you are teachable, that you are listening respectfully to me.”

Dealing with outright, flagrant rebellion is more difficult. From time to time, we have felt like one of our children was bordering on becoming an in-house prodigal—still home, but in total rebellion against God and us. Pray diligently and keep loving your child, no matter what. Most likely your child feels terribly unlovable, and he desperately needs to be loved.

One of the ultimate dangers of stiff-necked arrogance and selfishness allowed to run full course is isolation. Some friends of ours are still working through the ramifications of a child who chose to withdraw into her own world. The parents, Bill and Jenna, noticed when their daughter, Theresa, entered the sixth grade that she was walling herself off from people. Theresa holed up in her room for hours and became increasingly self-centered. She became preoccupied with listening to music, writing letters, and organizing her room.

Realizing that their daughter was sliding farther and farther away from them, Bill and Jenna prayed and fasted for her one day a week. In addition, Bill purposefully pursued a relationship with her by taking her on dates, playing games with her, and hanging out in her room. Many of these efforts were met with outright rejection. Theresa bristled when Bill tried to hug her, and she even turned away from him when he tried to kiss her good night.

Theresa was gripped by a selfish heart, an attitude that said, “I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody.” She didn’t share her clothes with her sister. She fought constantly with her brother. She didn’t accept loving discipline or correction from her parents. Her heart remained cold for most of her early teenage years.

But Bill and Jenna never quit loving Theresa. When she didn’t believe in herself, they believed in her. When she ignored rules, they loved her enough to discipline her. When she rebelled even more, they took her in their arms and loved her.

Once at 3:00 a.m. they bailed her out of jail for driving while intoxicated. Still, Bill and Jenna lovingly pointed out to Theresa that her rebellion was not just against her parents, but also against God.

Theresa is now 20 and is just beginning to realize how pride and rebellion have clutched her in their jaws. Ever so slowly her heart is thawing. God is using the magnetic power of true love to soften her hardened heart.

It’s at times like this that we feel like we are in a spiritual tug of war for our child’s soul and life. This is not the time to let go of the rope; it is the time to ask God for victory on your child’s behalf.

Having four teenagers while writing about raising adolescents has some advantages. Recently we were having a nice chat with one of our teens about an issue that demanded teachability and humility. The conversation was sprinkled with statements by our teen saying, “I know. I know. I know. I’ve heard your lecture already. I know what you’re going to say before you say it.” This teen was exasperated and unteachable. It wasn’t the first time.

Finally, we asked, “Are you going to be teachable? Are you willing to learn and grow? Or are you going to keep resisting the truth and thereby delay your maturity?” Then we reminded our child of something we say quite frequently: “Nothing bad that you do can cause us to love you less, and nothing good that you do can cause us to love you more.”⁽¹⁾

The result was a deeper conversation in which our child’s defensive guard began to drop, and we once again challenged this young person to take another step toward adulthood and maturity.

As you face some of life’s most challenging issues with your child, do not forget that love ultimately changes a person’s life. Your love may be used by God to soften a teen’s heart that would otherwise grow hard.

1) Quotation from an audiocassette series on the Book of Jude by Dr. James Merritt, “Keeping Your Guard Up.”

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