



THE PARENTS' CHAT ROOM

By: Dr. Maulik Trivedi

Q: *Dear Dr. Trivedi,*

I can't believe I am going to say what I will. I cannot stand my teenage children! They are 13 and 15. They do not listen to me and they push my limits. We are not very strict parents and every home has rules as does ours. I have just found out that my daughter borrows clothes from her friends, the kind of clothes that I would never let her wear! My son, who is only 15 years old is drinking alcohol. I have smelled alcohol on his breath more than once and when I ask him he lies and says he does not drink. My husband doesn't get involved unless I cry or threaten him. Most of the people I know have perfect children and I can't even ask anyone for advice.

A: You are not alone. Sooner or later, all parents of teenagers say something similar. In fact, you raise many questions that, I am sure, run through most parents' minds these days. Whether Indian or another nationality, most parents have rules that they have established over time to preserve their family's cultural and social integrity. All of us in the role of parent are constantly trying to prevent the popular culture from eroding away the rules in each of our homes. When the children reach their teenage years, this becomes especially challenging. Some of us, as you have, come to realize that the rules in our family are no longer working. This is a good time to rethink our formula. For some families, the change has to be a slow turn back towards family rules while for others, it is necessary to have the impact of an immediate overhaul of family rules. Depending on your situation, and based on the contents of this column, you may consider consulting with a family therapist for guidance in your situation. Here are some suggestions for how to work at reestablishing family integrity.

Start by having a conversation about your house rules with your husband. Talk about your individual preconceived notions of 'perfect' families. Try to see that there is no perfect, only 'work in progress.' The two of you together will decide whether you are headed for a slow turn or an immediate overhaul. Whichever you decide on, it is necessary for your children to see you acting together as a team. You can accomplish this by saying the same things and following the same formula in addressing the situation. Before you can do this, the two of you must define the problem and agree on a workable solution for your family. Only then can you implement an action plan, which is a step-by-step process to realign your family rules in a way that your children will adhere to them. The aim is to have a healthy balance of self-management by your children with recognition of your natural authority as parents. This will allow for everyone to maintain healthy self-respect and recreate a balanced family life without anyone feeling forced.

As you begin the discussion with your husband, be careful not to get into an argument over who is responsible for creating the current situation. This would be detrimental to having the children see you as a team. Instead, focus on the concerns that both of you share regarding the family rules being broken.

The next step will require your children to be included in the dialogue. You will need to set the right tone with your children from the get go in order to have a lasting impact. By setting a specific time on a specific date to sit down with your children you will give this process the necessary importance. Try to do it at a time when you will not be disturbed or have one or more of you having to leave

unexpectedly.

When talking to your teenage children, do not try to establish your authority over them by force. Be especially careful not to engage your teenagers in a power struggle between you and your children. In a power struggle, no one wins. Teenagers respond better to a give and take process, whereby, over time, everyone can win. Instead of telling them what you expect, have an open dialogue about your observations about their changing behaviors and give them an honest opportunity to elaborate on their thinking process. Sometimes, this type of open communication is all it takes to reestablish family ties. Remember, you want to give your teenagers the opportunity to demonstrate that they are on their way to becoming responsible adults.

Another key is for your children to understand your concerns objectively. Many parents become emotional and dramatic when communicating with their teenagers. They make subjective statements that only confirm the generation gap to their teenage children. This is a quick way to lose control of the process. Instead, offer objective evidence for your viewpoint. Be prepared to talk about statistics associated with drinking and the legal issues surrounding under-age drinking. You want to empower your teenagers with knowledge that helps them choose responsibly. You want to address peer-pressure issues and be available for them to turn to. They should see you as their strongest support that they can turn to in times of need.

When it comes to teenagers, the biggest conflicts result from their misperception of their self. Teenagers usually have stopped seeing themselves as children but are not quite ready to see themselves as adults. This poses a dilemma socially. They don't want to be treated like children. At the same time, they cannot consistently behave like adults. This makes for very confusing interactions with authority figures such as parents, teachers and the alike. Also, developmentally, they are able to do most things that adults can do. Except, emotionally, they are closer to a child's way of thinking and perceiving situations. Basically, they have adult ability without the benefit of adult experience.

Teenagers also have a false sense of understanding of the relationship between rights and responsibilities in society. They see themselves having a rightful access to privileges just like the grown-ups but fail to realize the responsibilities tied to the privileges. They fail to see that most things that adults get to do are earned through trust and not simply awarded to the adult for being an adult. For example, the privilege of having money comes from being responsible about one's work. They can not clearly see that having money to afford clothes, video-games or a family vacation usually involves being responsible with ones budget over time.

Lastly, be consistent and age-appropriate in your parenting. Provide enough freedom for your teenagers to develop their confidence while being there to remind them of long term consequences of their short-sighted decisions. Be sure to provide your children with 'tough' love. Give them love that makes them stronger, not weaker.

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Please send your questions to
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