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"I Love My Child...But Sometimes I Can't Stand Him!"

by James Lehman, MSW

When parents say they don't like their child, I think that dislike almost always stems from their child's inappropriate behavior. These parents are understandably frustrated because they're tired of the constant backtalk, yelling and arguing. Or they might not like the way their child treats them, their siblings, or their teachers at school. And personally, I can really understand that. This article is directed toward those parents.

I think there are also periods of time when parents don't like their child because of a certain stage their son or daughter might be going through—adolescence, for example. As a father, I experienced this myself. When my son was eight or nine, he was a pretty good kid most of the time. I really liked being around him, and I couldn't imagine him ever leaving home, with all the unpredictability and risks that were involved. But by the time he was in his mid-teens, I disliked his behavior so much that I was ready for him to go.

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“A kid with behavior problems becomes a tyrant who assigns everybody in the family certain roles. To tiptoe around a child means to conform to the roles that the child assigns to you and everyone else in your home.”

Parenting Angry Teens

By MARIE HARTWELL-WALKER, ED.D.

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.

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.



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

The More Timid You Are Around Him, the More Power He Senses Over You

Here's the bottom line about walking on eggshells around your child. If you tiptoe around him, the child senses that he has power over you, and he will use that power increasingly to manipulate you. As parents, we have to turn that misplaced "power" into life skills. To do this, you have to set a firm limit and then do skill building to teach him how to solve his problems appropriately.

Your tone should be firm and businesslike, not unpleasant. Often with these kids their behavior will escalate when they're being told to do something. So it's not accepting those cues or giving them any attention at all, and then redirecting the child, giving him a minute to calm down.

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A child's individuation process (the time, usually during adolescence, when kids are forming their identities) almost always includes breaking away from their family. Sometimes that translates into obnoxious, annoying or self-involved behavior on the part of teenagers. And because the parent-child bond is so strong, that individuation process often becomes very strained and stressed for everyone as time goes on. For adolescents with unstable behavior, it can even become destructive or violent.

Another important part of this separation process is that the parent learns to let go—eventually, they want to push the child out into the world. They get tired of having this strong-willed, opinionated person in the house, making demands and arguing with them all the time. When their kids are in their late teens, many parents want them to go to college, find a job, move out, or rent an apartment with a friend. And I think that's completely natural—it's all part of your child growing up and starting a life of his own, even if it's painful at times. It also helps the parents complete the parent/child part of the relationship and begin the parent/adult child relationship. These transitions are rarely without friction.

Do You Dislike Your Child—or Do You Dislike His Behavior?

Here's an important distinction I'd like to make again: not liking your child's behavior is very different from not liking him as a person. That's hard to define for a lot of parents, because a child's behavior becomes part of his personality in some ways. In fact, you often can't see where he ends and the behavior begins. And it's not only his behavior—he also might be using his personality to confront, attack or demean you. Physically, you also associate him with his personality: the words are coming out of your child's mouth, after all. You can see the nasty look on your daughter's face; you can hear the rude tone in your son's voice. It's easy to get frustrated and annoyed with those behaviors, and it becomes easy not to like the child who's performing them.

A lot of my direction for parents is to not take this personally. Although this often feels like a personal attack upon you, it's actually driven by other forces such as your child's fears, frustrations, and the need to develop their own identity. Try not to fight it. No matter how hard it may be at times, I think the point is to avoid screaming at your child and getting into conflicts and unnecessary power struggles. Parents often take that kind of behavior personally, but remember, there are irresistible developmental forces taking place here, for both the parent and the child.

When Kids Are Mouthy in Public

These days, adolescents have less fear of being sassy, mouthy or disrespectful to their parents and other adults in public. I think if they're acting that way in public, then you can correct them in public. Say, "Don't talk to me that way, I don't like it." If the rude attitude doesn't stop, then take them to the car.

If your child is being smart alecky to other adults, you can use the same technique. Say "Don't talk to Mrs. Smith that way, I don't like it." If your child persists, you can say, "Let's go. Goodbye, Mrs. Smith." Take your child and leave. By the way, if it's another parent's child being rude to you, I still think you can say, "Don't talk to me that way Tommy, I don't like it." Then turn away from him. Use very simple, matter-of-fact behavior. Have a serious look on your face; you don't have to look mean or angry, but don't look like you're cracking a joke either.

By the way, I don't believe in giving your child a second or third chance when he's nasty or rude to you. I think this creates bad habits in kids. From the time you start giving him chances, your child will say to himself, "Well, the first one is free, so I won't get in trouble if I call my mom a name." I know it may be heartbreaking at first not to give your child a second chance, but that's the best way for him to learn.

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When You Can't Stand Your Kid...

I think it's important to realize that sometimes kids can be a pain in the neck, just like the rest of us. As parents of teens know, that behavior gets even more intense when children go through adolescence. The good news is that when your kids aren't being pleasant and you feel yourself getting angry, there are effective ways to avoid taking their behavior personally.

One of the things I try to teach parents is to talk more positively to *themselves*. This may sound simplistic, but think of it this way: we all talk to ourselves all the time, because we think in words—and perhaps too much of the time, we think in negative words. Let's say you're driving home from work and you're about to see your teenager. You're saying, "I hope he's not going to start up again today. I'm so sick of his attitude." Or, "I don't want to hear about my daughter's boyfriend anymore; I can't deal with her moodiness all the time." Here's the truth: If you're talking to yourself negatively on the way home, you're feeding into the problem. Instead, I recommend that you say things like, "What can I do differently so we won't get into an argument as soon as I walk in the door tonight?" In other words, think more about the solution, and less about the problem. Talk to yourself about the skills you can bring to the situation.

One of the things I recommend to parents who work is to have the following rule with their kids: For the first ten minutes you are home, your kids should leave you alone. That way, you have enough time to go up to your bedroom, change your clothes, and get your head ready for parenting your children at night. Transitions, and by that I mean going from work to home or school to home, are difficult for both adults and children. Try to organize your time so that you're taking that into account.

Stop Comparing Your Insides with Other People's Outsides

You may feel like people are looking at you and judging your parenting as inadequate when your child's behavior is inappropriate. All of us hate being judged—all of us. And even if we deal with it effectively, that doesn't mean it's not a

problem—it's just that we don't take it personally anymore.

If your child is acting out, you might have tried to tell your parents, other relatives or friends about it in the beginning. But if this is a persistent problem, most people eventually get tired of talking about it. Even family members and friends can be very judgmental and critical. And when they are, it's easy to experience that judgment as shame and guilt—you may feel as if others don't see you as a good parent. It also doesn't help that you're experiencing doubt about your own parenting techniques, because they don't seem to be working. And then whenever your child behaves inappropriately in front of those people, you re-feel that sense of shame. Those are heavy, powerful feelings, and many parents wind up resenting kids who behave inappropriately because of them.

What I always tell parents is, "Don't compare your insides to other people's outsides." So don't compare the inside of your house with the outsides of other people's houses—or the inside of your family with the outsides of other people's families. Other parents in your community might look like they're doing well and getting along. But you have to understand that from the outside, *you* may look good, too. The perception of your family might be that things are under control and everything's rolling right along in your home, even though on the inside you have problems you're having difficulty managing. So other people are looking at *your* outside, you're looking at *their* outside, and everybody thinks everybody else is okay—but nobody knows the real truth unless they've lived it. This is also true on a personal level: comparing your emotional insides to other people's physical outsides will only give you a skewed impression of what's happening—and usually only makes you feel worse about your own situation. Don't do it.

This is also one of the patterns that give adolescents so much trouble. They compare their insides to their classmates' outsides—and the other kids may look like they're popular and as if they fit in. This can cause your child a lot of distress.

Not liking your child's behavior is very different from not liking him as a person.

A disturbing new trend in underage drinking is making its way across the country: alcoholic gummy bears and worms. Kids are soaking the candies in vodka and then bringing them to school and passing them around— and in some cases, getting drunk in class, right under the teachers’ noses.

One of the most worrying things about this trend is the fact that it makes it so easy for kids to camouflage what they’re really doing. As a parent, it’s important to pay attention if you see your child taking a sudden interest in gummy candy, but it’s also crucial to talk to them about this trend, because they may be given alcohol-laced gummies at school or a party without even knowing what they’re eating.

It also makes me worry about younger siblings. If it hasn’t happened already, it’s just a matter of time before a toddler or young child will unknowingly eat enough of these “drunk gummy bears” to warrant a trip to the emergency room, or worse.

Talk to your teen about drinking!

Have you talked with your teenager about this subject? With all of the peer pressure on your child growing up in today’s society, they may think it’s not a “big deal” to indulge in alcohol. But the results can be deadly and your teen may not have the maturity to understand the choices she is making.

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Laurie Blair

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March 6, 20, 27
April 3, 10, 17
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