

[back](#)

Coming Down the Home Stretch-- How Parents Deal Effectively with their Adolescent Children

by James B. Stenson

Here are some key ideas to keep in mind--all based on other parents' experience--in leading your adolescent children toward responsible adulthood.

- Remind yourself of your real job as a parent: to raise adults, not children. Your job is not to keep your children busy and amused, nor just to keep them out of trouble and make them behave, nor to exercise a kind of "damage control" at home. The real job of parenthood is to lead children--by example, directed practice, and explanation--so that they grow up to be competent, responsible, considerate men and women who are committed to live by Christian principles all their lives. They should live this way before they're out of their teens. Your responsibility, in other words, is your children's earthly and eternal happiness--to save their souls from the "second death" and lead them to the 100-fold in this life that Christ has promised to those who love Him.
- Your overall goal should be to finish the job begun in their childhood: to form the virtues (character-strengths) in them--faith, hope, charity, judgment and conscience, a sense of responsibility, courageous perseverance, self-control. See materialism as your family's enemy: the belief that man is just a beast, seeing life end with death, living as though pleasure and power were the purposes of life, treating other human beings as objects.
- Try to treat your adolescents as what they really are: young adults with everything but experience--which you must now exert yourself to provide. Consider adolescence as the final stage of apprenticeship in growing up, the first stage of real adulthood. Do not treat them as large children. Remember that young people tend to come up to our expectations or down to them.
- Bear this in mind: When children deeply respect their parents (by witnessing them live virtuous lives), they remain relatively immune from peer pressures and the rock/drugs/sex culture. If teens do not see their parents as strong, confident leaders, then they pattern their lives after peers and "celebrities" of the entertainment industry.
- Never forget, the whole of moral development is to move from self to others. Your children will not grow up when they can take care of themselves, but rather

when they can take care of others--and want to. The life-outlook of small children is "Me first!" and the teen years are the time to leave this attitude behind. If teens retain this self-centered outlook into adulthood, they are headed for disasters later in their marriages and careers--and even possible tragedies with drugs, alcohol, and automobile accidents. (Teens who see life as nothing but irresponsible play will tend to treat the automobile as a toy. If they retain an aggressive "me-first" attitude, they can succumb to road rage and treat the car as a weapon.)

- Be aware that the present-day materialistic "teen culture" is bogus and unrealistic--an historically recent movement that turns adolescents into an artificial leisure class, similar in lifestyle to that of previous ages' corrupt aristocrats: abundant leisure time, irresponsible avoidance of work, hedonistic abuse of food and alcohol, unlimited access to drugs and recreational sex, life centered around play, flight from boredom, fear only for sexually transmitted disease. The "teen culture" is itself countercultural. Real life--which is what you're trying to teach--consists of loving sacrifice, responsible commitments, productive and service-oriented work, affectionate relationships with family and friends, enjoyment of food and drink and leisure pursuits in healthy moderation, being loved and respected by all who know us.
- Distinguish between trusting their integrity and trusting their judgment. When they ask why you don't trust them, make this clear to them: We implicitly trust your integrity--always have and always will. Unless we have rock-solid evidence otherwise, we trust your honesty and good intentions. What we must sometimes mistrust is your judgment. It's your inexperienced judgment that can make trouble for you and others; when teens get into trouble, the fault is nearly always bad judgment. Be patient. As you gain experience--directly through living, and indirectly through our experienced advice--you will have much stronger judgment, and then we can trust you entirely, right across the board.
- Remember that "no" is also a loving word. There's such a thing as loving denial. If young people do not experience their parents' loving denial, then they cannot form the strength of self-denial--and this could lead to tragedy. So, permit nothing in your children's lives that you morally disapprove of. Keep the electronic media under your discerning control. Allow nothing in your home that offends God, undermines your lessons of right and wrong, and treats other people as mere objects. This means no pornography, no gratuitous violence, no glamorous portrayals of sin and disrespect for others. Teach discernment in use of the media: to accept what is good, reject what is wrong, and know the difference.
- Bear in mind the powerful influence of body chemistry on their emotions and judgment. They are often uncertain, impulsive, overly sensitive, especially at ages 13, 15, and 17. In many ways, the mood swings of adolescence are like those that children display at ages two to five, and are largely caused by the same growth spurts and

hormonal currents within them. So they need the same things they needed from you in their earliest years. They need you to be certain, confidently directive, patient, affectionate, understanding, and fair. They also need nutritious food and plenty of sleep.

- Make clear that you want and expect personal best effort, not just results: that they try their best in studies and try to comply with reasonable house rules. Make the rules in your house start with the word "We...."-- Not, "You must be in by 11:30," but rather, "We all get in at a decent hour." Not, "You must clean up your room," but rather, "We all pitch in to make this house clean and pleasant." Not, "You must apologize," but rather, "We all apologize when we've offended anyone." Give them credit for trying. Be patient.
- When you must correct your teens, try to adhere to the same standards you live by when dealing with other adults:
 - No public rebukes; whenever possible, correct privately.
 - No snap judgments: listen to their side of things. Respect their right to presumption of innocence.
 - Don't rub it in. Never say, "I told you so," or "If only you'd listened to me...."
 - If emotions are getting out of control, put off discussion till later: "Let's talk about this tomorrow night." (Waiting is itself a sort of punishment.)
 - If you've overreacted, go back and apologize. They will respect your desire to be fair: you try to put justice and truth ahead of your pride.
- In worst-case scenarios, you may rely on restrictions on use of the telephone, restrictions on driver's license and use of car, and summer school.
- Do not underestimate how much you have learned--how much experience and wisdom you can teach them. Start with these questions: What do I know now that I did not know at age 16, and wish I did? Based on my own experience (successes and mistakes) and what I've seen in others' lives, what can I teach my teens about responsible adult life--making the most of school, finding what you're good at and planning a career, finding or changing a job, dating and courtship, being a loving and supportive husband and wife, social graces, dealing with friends, sizing up people, staying in shape, overcoming worries, turning out excellent work, professionalism and professional etiquette, setting priorities and managing time, planning and meeting goals, managing finances, shopping intelligently, knowing malarkey when you see it, staying informed about public affairs, living as a responsible and engaged citizen.
- How can you tell that you are making progress with your children, that they are really growing up, especially in their early teens? In several ways....
 - They are aware of the rights and feelings of others, and act this way.
 - They have a habit of work, putting their powers up against problems. In family life, they are conscious of being needed. That is, they know the meaning of

responsibility: if we don't do our duty, someone else will suffer.

--They live like producers, not consumers.

-- They can take care of others, and want to.

-- Most of the time, in a host of situations, they do the right thing without being told.

-- When they've done wrong, they know it, and they apologize. They readily accept the apologies of others, and they forget as well as forgive.

-- They say, and mean, *please* and *thank you* and *I'm sorry*.

-- They keep their promises. They will endure hardship rather than break their word.

-- Most of their blunders come not from ill will or selfishness, but rather from lack of experience. By and large, they try to do the right thing.

-- Deep down, they know their parents' corrections come from love: they sense that their parents correct them *because* they love them.

-- They refrain from whatever would disgrace their family.

-- They choose friends of upright character.

-- Their prayers are addressed to God as a person. So they see sin as a rupture of their personal friendship with God, an offense calling for apology and amendment. They see the Church as an extension of their family--worthy of their love and loyalty, no matter what.

-- People outside the family--friends and neighbors--compliment the parents for their children's character.

- Remember that your children may forget most of the details of what you teach them, but they will remember what was *important* to you. For most of us, the lifelong voice of conscience is the voice of our parents--God speaking to us through the memory of what our parents lovingly taught us.

- When your children leave home for college, tell them: Do not forget that God is watching over you with love, as He has since your childhood. Do not offend Him, and do nothing that would betray what you learned in our family. We will pray for you every day. Remember that God commands all of us, "Honor your father and mother." And the way we honor our parents is this: we adopt their values as our own, live by them all our lives, and then pass them on to our own children whole and intact.

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[back](#)