

## **Aggressive Teenagers**

What do parents do when a teenager blatantly rejects their authority and the essential ground-rules of family life?

In our post-modern age where many values, beliefs, and codes of conduct have been eroded and replaced by a variety of vague permissive ideas regarding teenage rights and freedoms, parents often feel undermined and peripheral to the decision-making processes of their teenagers.

It is a troubling fact that in some households teenage children are a law unto themselves. It is not unusual for me to work with parents where a teen intimidates them into surrendering their authority. It is often a terrifying and demoralising situation when a teenager essentially looks his/her parents in the eye and says “F... you. I will do whatever I want.” And does.

There is a line that once crossed moves a teenager from being a troublesome one to being a dangerous one – to themselves as much as to others. That line is represented by the use of aggression, violence, and threats that affect not just the teen, but the climate of the entire family. The teenager therefore begins to control the mood of the family. When they come in the door at home the climate changes, people are on edge waiting for the first provocation. They start fighting or harassing others in the family in a way that is aggressive and disruptive. Siblings are picked on and parents are insulted. The teen becomes, in effect, a domestic bully.

In these families the parents often end up feeling relieved when the teenager goes out with his or her friends – even if he/she is hanging out with gangs or causing trouble elsewhere. Many parents have said “we feel a sense of relief when (s)he goes out. We know it’s not right, but the house is so much more peaceful when (s)he is not there!”.

The development of this problem has usually been progressive but typically escalates from a manageable behavioural problem at national school to an unmanageable personality problem at secondary school.

Once violence and aggressive abuse becomes the successful tactic of choice parents have a very serious problem on their hands that requires a substantive, coordinated, and serious response. When it gets to this stage the problem cannot be handled ‘on the run’ or piece meal but must be given the same serious attention as if it were a grave medical condition in need of unpleasant but essential treatment.

There are certain conditions that are essential to the healthy functioning of any family which, if removed or threatened, affect the viability of the family itself. The most important one is safety. A family home must be a safe place. Once it becomes unsafe through the aggression, abuse, or violence of any member then it ceases to be a family home in the true sense of the words.

The problem with some teenagers is that they want freedom and privilege without responsibility. They want the freedom to be able to run their own life, like a mini adult, but without assuming the responsibilities of such adulthood. They want the benefits and privileges of being a member of a family that they simultaneously revolt

against. While this is the stance of many growing teenagers, when this involves domestic bullying and abuse it cannot be tolerated.

So what can a parent do? Two things. The first is to narrow their focus on a small problem behaviour and to bring all of their resources to bear on succeeding in eliminating this behaviour (for example eliminating the use of foul language in the home). Many parents are so frazzled and worn out by the guerrilla warfare tactics of their teen that they actually begin to give up, just for peace. However, this must be reversed, at least with one small issue. The parents must succeed in a small area first. I cannot overstate how symbolically important this is for parents in order to recover their confidence and self-belief and to show their teenager that they can manage them – which is what the defiant teenager is provoking for.

The real problem faced by parents is that their teens know that they can get away with what they are doing. What you have to remember about any abusive or bullying behaviour is that teenagers use these tactics because they work and because they get away with them. It is extremely difficult to counteract when the teen has no fear of the weak consequences that are employed.

The second thing the parents must do is to see the problem as the teenagers attempted rejection of the family and to see the choice that the teen is faced with is whether they want to be a member of the family or not. This does not mean that the parent tries to escalate the problem but rather to calmly realise that this is what is at issue. When the authority of the parent is persistently insulted and rejected in abusive ways the teen is rejecting the family. At this point its time to get help.

When faced with the genuine uncompromising choice between accepting the healthy non-abusive conditions of family life or the unappealing responsibilities and freedoms of adulthood, nine out of ten teens actually choose the former. But whatever you do, do not let yourself think you are a bad parent. Every good parent finds abusiveness to be the most difficult kind of behaviour to deal with because not only is it problematic, it is a distressing rejection of ones status and integrity. So hold tough.