

Out of Control and Pseudomature Teens

It seems to go hand in hand; Out of control teens who can argue a point to death, enough to put their parents on the defensive.

Objectively, the teen is drinking, doing drugs, engaging in risky sexual behaviour and otherwise, just hanging out. School is not a priority, nor is working. The parents are distressed about the situation and seem helpless in the face of the teen's rationalizations or threats of running away.

Not uncommonly, there is a history of limited expectations or follow through by the parents. Now that things are so out of control, there is a call for help.

Typically though the call comes from the parents and they are seeking their teen to change.

From the teen's perspective, there are happy just the way things are. And why shouldn't they be? No responsibility and a lifestyle that is geared mostly to having fun. The teen doesn't want to change a thing.

The parents however want everything to change. It is the parents who are in distress. They worry about their teen's lack of responsibility and the risks inherent in their behaviour. They want their teen to stop drinking, stop doing drugs, stop hanging with the "wrong crowd", go to school and get a job. However, what parents must realize that for their teen to change, the parents must change first.

Until the parents hold their teen accountable to reasonable parental expectations, change is unlikely. However, parents feel like they are held hostage. As the teen protests against newly imposed expectations, in the face of prior freedom, they at best complain and at worse fight back. Their protesting behaviour can be verbal and even physical. They will try to argue, guilt their parents, threaten their property or person and threaten to run away. In the face of the teen's escalation, many parents again acquiesce and the teen says, "I've got 'em". And they do.

What parents need to know is that when their son or daughter is so out of control, yet arguing as if they know everything, this is just "pseudomaturity" – pretend maturity, not real maturity. These teens really have no idea about the dangerousness of their behaviour and the risk to their future life. They do not have the years of experience on which to draw. Parents must remember that being good at arguing does not make them right. Further, when teens are so out of control, there will be risks when trying to curtail certain behaviours in favour of redirecting

to appropriate behaviour. Hence parents may need support when trying to turn around an out of control teen. The purpose of support is to help mitigate risk and help parents stay the course even in view of an escalation of behaviour as the teen protests. The teen must be told that if they become violent, aggressive or destructive, police will be called as such behaviour will not be tolerated or excused. Parents may even have to accept that their son or daughter may leave home or at least fail to return home. However, upon their return, parents then must be clear as to new house rules and expectations or otherwise consider directing their teen to a youth shelter.

The message to the teen is that inappropriate behaviour and lack of meaningful productivity is no longer accepted.

Throughout, parents must also develop and exhibit appropriate compassion and provide guidance and direction. It is one thing to tell a son or daughter what not to do. It is quite another to then tell them what to do and out of control teens need both. So as parents limit some behaviours, they should at the same time help the teen engage in pro-social healthy activities, particularly those that are inherently fun. Teens should be directed towards enticing extra-curricular activities that promote skill building. They can also be directed to volunteer activity that is reflective of their interests. As inappropriate activities are curtailed yet replaced with reasonable activities, the teen has a chance to have appropriate fun, generally in a supervised activity where there is an opportunity for self-development. As the new activities and behaviours take hold, the problematic behaviour and pseudomaturity can give way to healthy adolescent development.

Just hang onto your hat though. The process takes courage and perseverance on the part of the parents who must change first! The first few weeks are definitely the hardest and most important. Withdraw and you know where your teen is heading. Hold on through the rough patch and you may stand a chance.

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