

“My Teenage Son Won’t Come out of His Room”

And so goes the question I received from a mother recently. She added that he had become lazy since school got out, spends too much time playing video games, and refuses to play any sports or other athletic activities. Her biggest concern was her worry about what he was doing in his room and asked me if she should force him to keep his door open.

THE MODERN DAY TEENAGER

The fact is that teenage boys tend to become more absent and hide from their parents in their room. This behavior in many boys is normal. In his book “Get Out of My Life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), Anthony E. Wolf, Ph.D. describes modern day teenagers in how they develop an allergy to their parents; boys are more likely to withdraw more to their room to separate themselves from their parents and girls tend to battle. This separation during adolescence is necessary for the teen to eventually move to the next level of maturity.

WHAT ABOUT GIRLS?

For the number of mothers coming to me for help with sons locked in their bedrooms, I have an equal number of women coming to me for help with their argumentative and sometimes insulting daughters. Like boys, girls retreat to their rooms to some extent, but they are more likely than boys to verbally and physically challenge their parents. Dr. Anthony reveals in his book that teenage girls handle the repulsive (yet normal) feelings of wanting to separate from their parent, coupled with a deep desire to still connect. This combination comes out in bantering, wanting to argue every little rule and boundary and sometimes to the point of insulting the parents. The hard truth to swallow for many parents is that this general behavior is normal for the majority of girls. The healthiest (and yet hardest) thing a parent can do is to allow it to happen. This requires the parent to remain calm and avoid being accusatory. It means participating in the bantering and allowing the teenager to express her concerns and points of view. If the parent is feeling defensive and likely to get angry, he or she should end the bantering session and walk away.

RESPECTING THEIR PRIVACY

Back to the issue of boys in their rooms; my advice to the mom who asked the question is to NOT force him to leave his door open. That would be a huge mistake, robbing him of his privacy. A parent wanting to take this action is being driven by feelings of fear that the boy may be doing something that must be controlled. Effective parenting means limiting or controlling the nonproductive activities that a teen may be participating in, such as video games, television, or the Internet. Although many adults disagree with me, the teen’s bedroom is NOT an acceptable place for cable television, an XBOX, or unfiltered Internet. These entertainment vehicles should be in common area rooms where they can be monitored by the parent.

LIMITING ENTERTAINMENT ELECTRONICS

As long as a teenager has unlimited access to entertainment electronics, why would he or she want to do anything else? To parents who complain to me that their teens are playing too many video games and not helping out more around the house, I ask, “Why are you not limiting those other activities?” Many tell me that taking them away or limiting them would cause their teen to get angry and explode, and I agree. The emotionally charged outbursts from teens who have things taken away are a result of parenting mistakes made years earlier, such as letting children have cell phones, Facebook accounts, or entertainment electronics in the bedroom. If you have made some of these earlier mistakes, know that

you're going to have to face the teenager's fit to realign boundaries that should have been set up much earlier. Don't get angry and fight with them. Admit your mistakes, state the new boundaries clearly, and most important of all, remain calm.

RE-ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

One method for firming up boundaries that may have been lax is the cooperation exercise. It can be used with children ages 6 and up. Set up a time when the child or teen is in a positive mood and more open to learning. Get him to help you build two lists; one of all the things every parent should do (by law) for the child or teen, and another that lists all the privileges that a child or teen has at home. The object of this exercise is to separate rights from the extras that parents don't have to provide, such as entertainment electronics, cell phones, rides to the mall, having friends over, brand name clothing, etc. This creates some important awareness for a child or teen in recognizing the extra things that parents do. Once the privileges are identified, work with your teen at establishing what the boundaries are for each one, such as when, where, and under what conditions. Don't be afraid to stand firm on some boundaries if you feel strong enough. Teenagers will wear a parent down to get as much as they can.

CONCLUSION

Remember, you can't control what your teenage son does in his room or how long he stays in there, but you can limit and control the things that can create problems. If he's playing too many video games, limit the games. If you're concerned about food rotting in his room, set up parameters about where in the house food can be eaten. If his laundry is piling up, teach him to do his own laundry. And don't let the hormones create fear that will keep you from stepping up and taking charge as an engaged parent. If your son is not submerged in entertainment electronics and lacks motivation to do something outside of his room, then perhaps something else is going on. Some conversation may be necessary to determine if there is something else at play that is keeping him from wanting to participate in a sport or other activities. You'll be more effective as a parent if you preach less and listen more.

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