

GIVING UP POWER TO GAIN EFFECTIVENESS: Power Struggles Between Parents and Adolescents. By Dr. Joseph Rock & Dr. Barry Duncan.

An important task for a teenager to accomplish is to establish independence from his or her parents. Contrary to what many people believe, that process does not have to be conducted via out-and-out rebellion. Most teenagers find relatively non-disruptive means to demonstrate they are their own people, not just extensions of their parents. Clothing and hair styles, taste in music, choice of friends, and opinions on matters large and small are some areas through which adolescents declare autonomy without dramatic conflict.

There is, however, a significant, and very visible, minority which utilizes more drastic means. These teenagers are relentlessly contrary, in both words and actions. They often get into trouble, and generate very reasonable fear in their parents. No issue is too small for these teens to choose to say "black" just because the parents say "white." And they vociferously defend their positions, regardless of how indefensible they may be. Behaviors range from the defiant and annoying (missing curfew, cutting classes) to the genuinely dangerous (drug taking and selling, stealing).

Parents typically begin their attempts to deal with this kind of problem with reason. The activities of the teenagers are so illogical and self-defeating that their parents can't resist the temptation to share their wisdom and the benefits of their experience with their children. Then they get surprised and frustrated when the teenagers don't see the light and mend their ways. What the strategy of reasoning overlooks is that logic and rationality have little or nothing to do with the adolescent's behavior. The goal is to point up differences between them and their parents. They see advice as attempts to control, and cling more tenaciously to their positions as the power struggle begins. Parents, please note that innocent and well-meaning attempts to reason are often the starting point for situations that escalate into full-blown power struggles.

After failing in repeated attempts to reason with their teenaged children, the parents usually resort to threats and/or punishment. With teenagers committed to being contrary, these don't work either. Punishment certainly inconveniences them and is unpleasant in that way. However, it just raises the stakes in the power struggle ("They can't make me do it their way no matter what they do."). Punishment is particularly ineffective in these types of situations if it is accompanied by upset on the part of the parents. That upset signals to the teenagers that they have "gotten to" their parents, which is seen as a victory in the battle for control (they have forced the parents to lose emotional control).

It is very hard to really "win" a power struggle with a contrary teenager. Even if the parents are able to enforce a punishment, it doesn't often work to change behavior. In fact, if that punishment involves grounding the adolescent, who really suffers? The parents have to be home to enforce it, and they are exposed to hostile, sullen attitudes and behaviors. When a teenager's behaviors become truly dangerous, or point clearly in that direction, action does need to be taken. The police and juvenile courts are resources that many parents find themselves using, not to punish the teenagers or teach them a lesson, but to protect them from themselves until they can develop better judgment or more control.

In less severe cases, giving up power to gain effectiveness can be very helpful. One strategy alone is unlikely to turn this kind of situation around. In fact, unemotional administration of consequences (punishment) will usually be a part of the package. In the following example, a number of strategies were employed. We will emphasize the use of giving up power to gain effectiveness, and the importance of handling the underlying power struggle, as opposed to the individual issues one at a time.

Jean called seeking therapy for her 17 year-old son, Todd. Jean was 42 years old at that time. She had been divorced from Todd's father for ten years, and was remarried to Bill. Todd's two older sisters were both away at college. Jean was a hard-working, conscientious person, who wanted to make sure all her children had the advantages she had missed out on by marrying young. Her two daughters were much like her, and were motivated students who got good grades. Her husband, Bill, was an easy-going guy who helped balance Jean's serious approach to most matters. He got along well with all the children.

It was Todd who was throwing Jean for a loop. He was slow in maturing emotionally, and had been "mothered" by his two sisters. He had been held back a year in elementary school, because he was felt to be behind the children his age in emotional development. At the time the family entered therapy, Todd was in the tenth grade. He was passing, but his grades were bad—all C's and D's. He had a part-time job after school, except during soccer season, during which he played on the junior varsity team.

In the second semester of his sophomore year, problems began to crop up. It became apparent that he was cutting classes and forging his mother's signature to notes. His mother discovered he was smoking cigarettes, and that shocked and appalled her, since she was vehemently anti-smoking. He had a 14 year-old girlfriend, and Jean discovered he had been lying to her about where he was after work and on weekends so he could be alone with his girlfriend. One Sunday morning, after having been out with Bill Saturday night, Jean was stripping Todd's bed in order to wash his sheets when she discovered a pair of girl's panties. Evidently, Todd had been in bed with his girlfriend when Jean was out of the house. This made Jean furious. Not only had he been lying to her, but he had also been having sex with a 14 year-old girl under Jean's roof!

Before she reached the end of her rope, Jean tried hard to help Todd. When his grades began to drop, she asked him what the problem was. He talked about missing his father, not having gotten over the divorce, and being worried about girls. She asked if he wanted to see a counselor, but he said he didn't. When things didn't improve, Jean talked to him about the importance of college, and how she knew he had the ability. He said he would buckle down, but things just got worse. As Jean began to discover the extent of what he had been doing, she decided he needed more structure, and to feel the consequences of his behavior. She gave him a stricter curfew, limited his time on the phone, and grounded him each time a new infraction came to light. Todd responded badly. Many times he openly defied her. He would walk out of the house when he was grounded, and use the phone when he wasn't supposed to. He began to blame her for his problems. He said she had worked too much after the divorce, and had neglected him. He accused her of favoring the girls and picking on him because he reminded her of his father. They frequently yelled and screamed at each other.

Bill always backed Jean up when she disciplined Todd, but she wanted to be the one to make all the decisions affecting Todd. Just prior to Jean's calling a therapist, she had become so exasperated with Todd that she had slapped him hard across the face. He pushed her and ran out of the house. When he returned very late that night, Bill confronted him and let him know he would intervene physically if Todd touched his mother again.

Surprisingly, Todd willingly came in to talk to the therapist. He was open and cooperative. He presented a picture of a confused young man who wasn't trying to hurt anyone, but was overwhelmed by the temptations with which he was faced. Not so surprisingly, he neglected to mention a lot of what he was doing, and tried very hard to convince the therapist his mother was the problem. If she would just back off, he could work things out. At the end of the second of the two sessions Todd attended, he said to the therapist, "I really think things would get better if I could use the car more. Maybe you could talk to my mother."

At that point, the therapist decided he was likely to have more of an impact on the situation by meeting with Jean. Jean was desperate enough to try anything, but she quickly realized it would be hard for her not to argue with Todd, because he really knew how to get her goat. She and the therapist came up with a message for her to give to Todd. When issues came up, she tried her best to stick to what she said in the message. When she got home she said to Todd:

“I have just talked to the doctor, and I realized a lot of things. You're right, I have been a bad mother. I didn't spend enough time with you when you needed me, and I'm sure that's why things are tough now. I've been trying to control you and tell you what to do and I can't. I always think I'm right and that I know what's best for you, and I don't. I am going to try my best to change, but you'll have to be patient with me. I've been this way for a long time. There will still be rules for you around the house, and consequences if you break them. But I realize it's up to you if you want to follow the rules, or put up with the consequences instead.”

Jean kept the rules that were important to her, such as curfew, no smoking or drinking, and his girlfriend's not being in the bedroom with him. She eliminated as many trivial rules as possible to avoid opportunities for power struggles. When he did break the rules, she gave him his punishments without much discussion, and did not lecture him on what he did wrong, or what he should have done instead. She stuck to punishments she knew she could enforce (for instance, if she took away his phone privileges, she unplugged and locked up all the phones but the one in her room). She tried her best not to argue with Todd. If he blamed her for something, she usually agreed it was probably her fault. If he said a punishment was undeserved or unreasonable she agreed, but still enforced the punishment. If he got in trouble at school, she told the school to do whatever they thought best, and not to show him any special consideration.

At first, Todd tested the limits as he had been doing. He missed curfew, cut classes, and lied about what he was doing. When he got no argument from Jean as he made excuses and blamed her for his problems, he escalated the situation. He accused her of not caring anymore, since she wouldn't talk to him (she did, but not in the way he wanted). He threatened to go live with his father. Fortunately for Jean, Todd did not become totally rebellious, and he did not engage in truly dangerous behaviors. If he had, she was prepared to take him to Juvenile Court, but her explanation to him would have been that she was too weak a parent to help him.

No miracle occurred, but things did improve. Todd still broke the rules occasionally, but less often. The biggest changes were in how he dealt with Jean, and how Jean felt. Todd became a lot more pleasant to her, and even began to confide in her again, without trying to manipulate. Jean felt much less angry at him, and a lot calmer overall.

In this example, Jean defused the power struggle by reversing her field in a number of ways. First of all, she stopped telling him what he could and couldn't do. She also stopped arguing over who was right, and verbally agreed with his criticisms of her (without substantially changing her behavior). She continued to employ punishment, but by removing the lectures that used to accompany it, it became matter-of-fact instead of a challenge. The overall tone of her message to Todd was, "You know what's best for you, I don't. You decide." In this way she was able to retain (and actually enhance) her parental authority, without creating a struggle for power.

There are a variety of positive outcomes that can result from the use of this strategy with a contrary adolescent. By giving up the verbal struggle, the parents are able to relax more. They feel more in control of themselves, and don't overreact to situations. Even if their teenager changes relatively little, they are less angry and desperate. Another way this strategy can help is by making punishment more effective. If a teenager is being contrary, he or she wants evidence that his or her parents are displeased. Punishment coupled with parental upset is not all bad to the teenager. The punishment is unpleasant, but the parental anger demonstrates that the teenager has "won."

Punishment without upset or discussion gives a uniformly negative message and is more likely to have the desired impact. Believe it or not, the purpose of contrary behavior is not to aggravate parents. It is the teenager's way of saying, "You don't control me, I do." The teenager is in a stage between dependence on the parents and independence. An intermediate step for some teens is counterdependence. This occurs when the teenager does not want to be seen as dependent, but does not know yet how to be independent. So, he or she does the opposite (counter) of whatever the parents want. By being less clear and insistent about what they expect, parents reduce the number of things the teenager has to react to. This gives the teenager the opportunity to think more about "What is good for me," instead of "What don't they want me to do."