



# Helping Your Teen Without Doing Their Homework

*Can we help our child too much?*

## Introduction

Somewhere along the way, parenting became an extreme sport. In an effort to do right by their children, some parents go beyond good parenting practices and end up as hyper-parents. You've probably met one or two. Their kids have all the latest gadgets and fashions. You hear about the child's awards and achievements from these parents, and they will also ask you to buy candy for the track team or fill out a recommendation form for honor society.

Even teens in more moderate circumstances seem to have it all—TVs in their bedrooms; instant access to

their child's academic pursuits not just in high school, but college, too. Some insurance companies even allow kids to stay on their parent's policies until they are 30.<sup>1</sup>

As parents, we want to give our children every opportunity, but where is the line between supporting their interests, pushing too hard, and doing too much for them? How and when is it appropriate to step back and let our children make it or break it on their own? How can we convince our children that they are loved, even if we don't always give them what they want? How can we

Loving your child and wanting a bright future for him or her isn't anything new. Just look to the Old Testament. Rebekah encourages Jacob to trick his father Isaac into securing the birthright from his older brother Esau (Gen. 27:5–17). Jacob then favors his own son Joseph by giving him fancy clothing (Gen. 37:3–4). Would a modern-day Rebekah hire an essay writer for a college application? Would today's Jacob buy his child an \$800 designer handbag? Did their loving and involved parents make their lives better or worse?

## Today's Teens

Today's teens are part of Generation Y, a tech-savvy group in continual contact with each other. They tend to be optimistic and team oriented. Teen pregnancy, abortion, smoking, and drug-use rates are all down and volunteerism is up. In their book *Generations*, Neil Howe and William Strauss say today's generation is making up for "what teens see as the excesses of today's middle-aged Boomers: narcissism, impatience,

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friends, family, and fun on their phones; and parents who might get involved in

motivate them when they don't seem at all interested in their own future?

1. "Covering Young Adults through Their Parent's or Guardian's Health Policy," *National Conference of State Legislators*, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/dependentstatus.htm>.

iconoclasm, and a constant focus on talk (usually argument) over action.”<sup>2</sup>

A recent MTV/AP poll found that most teens are content in their lives. When asked what one thing makes them happy, the top answer was that spending time with family made them the most happy.<sup>3</sup>

Our teens also have been called the least rebellious generation in recent history, but those who have recently graduated and entered the work force are making waves. *Fortune* magazine and others have lashed out against the new supply of Generation Y workers.

Children not only got what they wanted but also became the center of their parents' lives. Self-esteem was in, spanking was out, and coaching—be it for a soccer team or a kindergarten interview—was everywhere.

Affirmation continued as they grew, and when they spoke up, their opinions were not only entertained but celebrated. Overscheduled grade-schoolers became overcommitted teens, with the emphasis on achieving. The goal was to get into a great college, which would lead to a great career and a great life.

But there was a hitch. Upon graduation, it turned out that a lot of Gen Yers hadn't learned much about struggle or sacrifice. As the first of them began to graduate from college in the late 1990s, the average educational debt soared to over \$19,000 for new grads, and many Yers went to the only place they knew they'd be safe: home.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the critics of Generation Y blame the problems they see on the parenting practices we use. They say the parents are too involved in the lives of young adults, they push too hard and give too much. By doing so, they are raising twenty-five-year-olds who don't know how to behave as adults on their own.

## Professional Parenting

For many, parenting has taken on the trappings of a profession. There are parenting classes and parenting coaches, parenting books and DVDs. Parenting practices begin in the womb as we are taught to sing, talk, and play music

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for our developing babies. As a culture we've gone from keeping our children safe and fed to “making” our children into something special. Just look at the headlines of many parenting magazines. Our children couldn't possibly grow into happy and successful adults without our work. Parents are called to “End Picky Eating!” “Learn Your Babies' Language!” “Make Your Baby Smarter!” and “Build a Better Boy!”

“Parenting has become a ‘job’ with supposedly good techniques and measurable outcomes,” explain Alvin Rosenfeld, MD, and Nicole Wise, authors of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*.<sup>5</sup> Today's moms and dads who step out of careers to care for kids often use the skills that made them a success on the job, only the product is now the child. Even as teens they are a reflection of our “work” as a parent. So sometimes we push too hard, making sure the teen gets the right classes, coaches, and activities. Letting go of this dynamic is important for both the parent and child.

To overdo the involvement isn't healthy for either the parent or teen, says Anthony Wolf, PhD. He goes on to state, “Giving is fine and necessary, but parents who run themselves ragged doing things for the children may be setting themselves up for disappointment. A problem with giving too much of oneself to a teenager is that if she does not pay you back—and often adolescents do not—a parent can feel angry and hurt.”<sup>6</sup>

## Parents Take It upon Themselves

As parents we sometimes confuse taking responsibility for the child with taking the child's responsibilities. We may rush out to buy special pieces for a school project or put the finishing touches on that project hours after the child has gone to bed. We might type a paper. If a teen gets in trouble at

2. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992). Quoted in Bob Schultz, “Millennials and the Pop Culture,” *The School Administrator*, March 2007, accessed at <http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticleDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=8453&snItemNumber=>

3. MTV and the Associated Press Release Landmark Study of Young People and Happiness, August 20, 2007, <http://www.mtv.com/thinkmtv/research/>.

4. Nadira A. Hira, “Attracting the Twentysomething Worker,” *Fortune*, May 15, 2007, [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2007/05/28/100033934/index2.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2007/05/28/100033934/index2.htm).

5. Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2001), 112.

6. Anthony E. Wolf, *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall? A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager*, rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002) 65.

school, we talk with the principal trying to figure out what happened. However, there are important life lessons for our children in dealing with failure and facing consequences. Perhaps we need to let them deal with failure and learn from their mistakes. The teen who deals with the school rules himself rather than having a parent get involved learns how to be account-

As Malcolm Forbes once said, "Failure is success if we learn from it."<sup>8</sup>

## Give a Good Push

A completely laissez-faire approach to parenting a teen isn't necessarily a better approach since teens still need rules, limits, and a framework in which to grow up. Sometimes, they actually

when a teen can do nothing else except work on homework, fill out college applications, or practice an instrument can teach her to be accountable as long as you don't hover or do the work for her. A scheduled time can also reduce conflict that may arise about how and when things will get done.

## Deal with the Disappointment

The reality is that many of our children will not live up to the (often unspoken) great expectations we may have for them. We may feel disappointed when our teens accomplish little and don't seem to care at all. The success we wished for them may very well be the success we wanted for ourselves. This is normal and admitting it is necessary. Otherwise, we end up taking our feelings and disappointment out on our children and creating a destructive relationship.

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able for his own behavior. When a teen crosses the line, one authority system at a time is usually enough. As teens age, they must learn to answer to different authorities independently.

"Parents may ultimately be better off letting their teenage children deal on their own with the consequences of their behavior in the outside world," Wolf says. "They are no longer answerable just to us. They become answerable to their school, to their employers, to the police, even to the government."<sup>7</sup>

need a push to get something accomplished. That's OK. But think clearly about *why* you are pushing them into certain activities or colleges. For whose benefit is it really?

A good push inspires the teen to act rather than the parent. Punishment, promises, or lectures can have little positive effect on a teen. However, setting aside non-negotiable time and space for a teen may allow her to focus long enough to act. For example, a structured, regularly occurring time

## For More Information

Alvin Rosenfeld, MD, and Nicole Wise, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001)

Anthony E. Wolf, PhD., *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002)

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7. Wolf, *Get Out of My Life*, 165.

8. QuoteDB, <http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/2189>



# Discussing This Topic with Your Teen

If you want to talk with your teen, really talk and not lecture or yell, it's important to get the time and the space right. For example, the best time to talk about improving grades or staying out of trouble isn't right after she gets off the bus and is still upset. Wait until you have both calmed down. It's also important to realize that face-to-face conversations about serious subjects may feel too intense to your teen. Choose a time when you are working side by side or are in the car. That way the silences won't feel as awkward and your teen won't feel interrogated.

Rather than asking your teen what she plans to do with her life, ask her what she'd like to change in the world. Most teens are passionate about making the world a better place, but they don't have the power or resources to do anything about it. Asking about it clues you in to their interests.

Be honest and talk about your hopes and fears with your teen. If she is doing poorly in school, be sure she understands *why* you are pushing her to do better, especially if it ties in to your own personal experience or struggle with school.

Talk with your teen about his or her friends. Social relationships are important to teens and can often clue you in to what is happening at school both academically and socially.

Discuss how the roles of parents have changed. How did your parents raise you? How are you different?

Talk about love. Does loving someone mean doing everything in your power to protect them and make them successful? Or, does it mean letting them fail and learn something from the experience? Do we only love successful people or is it possible to love someone who fails regularly? How is family love different from friendships at school?

# Reflection Questions for Parents

**Take some time quietly by yourself to reflect on these questions.**

- How involved were your parents in your teen life? Did they attend every sports or arts event? Did they hire tutors, private coaches, or professionals to help with college applications?
- Have the times changed or have parenting practices changed when it comes to teens needing adult help with academics or college preparation?
- Is it OK to intentionally stand back and watch your teen fail at something? Why or why not?
- How much of your identity is wrapped up in your child's identity? For example, if your child has been asked to sing a solo at church and forgets the words because he didn't practice, do you feel embarrassed as if it's your fault? Why or why not?

## Discussion Questions for a Group of Parents

- What are your impressions of biblical parenting? Do the stories of Rebekah and Jacob or Jacob and Joseph fit those impressions? Are there other Scripture passages that come to mind when you think of parenting your teen?
- Are today's teens and young adults too dependent on their parents? Why or why not?
- Have you tried to or do you feel that you need to push your teen in order for him or her to get things accomplished? What strategies have worked for you? What would you advise other parents to avoid?
- How can we set boundaries and have a close relationship with our teen without making him or her too dependent on us?
- Should parents try to empower children and teens for a competitive world by giving them every advantage while they can, or should they encourage the teens to fend for themselves?