

Teenage Anger and Parenting Tools

"When you control your anger, it can't control you"

As an anger management specialist working with teens, I have noticed an overwhelming cry for help from parents regarding how to deal with their teenagers' frustrations and erratic behavior. Yelling, screaming, kicking, punching, not listening, running away... sound familiar? It can be frightening for parents, overwhelming to deal with the power struggle, and sometimes harmful when faced with a confrontation.

The angry brain of a teen is far more complex than we think. Parents become frustrated thinking they are doing everything in their power to "fix" the problem, but not understanding that the big issue being overlooked is the underlying factor causing the teen to explode. It is important to understand that while teens act like they are adults who have it all figured out, their brains are not yet developed as an adult. They perceive things in different ways and this is challenging for parents during the adolescent phase of a teen's life. We also have to take into account their hormonal changes during this time, which can cause emotional and behavioral distress as well as confusion. To justify their actions using cognitive behavioral therapy, we would describe teens as having faulty and distorted thinking. These include thoughts that are automatic such as, "It's not my fault the door is broken", "I didn't do that", and "You hate me, that is why you are punishing me." It is during this phase in which they are exploring their environment and testing their boundaries.

I would like to discuss 3 warning signs for parents to be aware of and tools to use:

WARNING SIGN #1

Anger is contagious: Teens with parents who use yelling and screaming at home to get their point across may result in the teens doing the same. Teens model behavior they constantly see at home and in their surroundings, and will mimic it in their daily lives. We have what are called "mirror neurons" in the brain that internalize what the other person is feeling. They eventually form together and create a part of their identity which later is associated with their sense of self.

Tool #1

Do not try to control your teen: Parents have this misunderstanding that if their teen has a consequence to their action, they won't repeat the same negative behavior. Instead of implementing a consequence, address anger in a non-accusatory manner by using a gentle tone to help your teen engage with you, and use empathy to let them know that it is hard struggling with anger. Join them in their journey, talk to them about how you cope with your angry feelings and the emotions you had to face as a teen. Avoid using threatening remarks such as taking away their phone or car. It can become extremely tiresome trying to control your teen. Threatening your teen will make things worse. You may wonder, "Well how

will they learn to hold accountability for their actions?" There is no magic answer – each child is unique and expresses anger in different ways. The ultimate goal is to continue to set rules and boundaries even if they break the rules. We learn from our mistakes as an adult, and teenagers go through the same cycle. The mantra that goes “we live and we learn” truly holds true.

WARNING SIGN #2

Underlying emotions: There are primary emotions that lead your teen to becoming angry – anger is the secondary emotion. Some primary emotions include shame, guilt, withdrawal, embarrassment, anxiety, grief, and sadness. Try to understand what is behind their anger. Sometimes they mask their true emotions so as not to be vulnerable, because revealing their true feelings would be much more embarrassing to them. There might be a case of depression, alcohol or drug abuse, and/or bullying, the latter of which has been an issue since I can remember. I almost always hear clients say they have anger issues because they were bullied when they were younger.

Tool #2

Train yourself to be a better listener: As parents you may be busy with work, or if you have another child to take care of, it can be difficult to sustain equal attention to both siblings. It is very important not to compare siblings by saying things such as “my younger one isn’t like my older one”. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and frustration. Recognize more of their good behaviors versus bad ones. It is easy to ignore their good behavior and criticize them for their negative ones, so be sure to point out the good behaviors more so than their bad.

Warning Sign #3

Confusion: During their developmental years, teens face emotions that they cannot quite understand. Some issues that arise during this time are things such as pushing boundaries, gravitating more towards gray areas rather than black and white thinking, talking intelligently than having trouble executing, using logical “weapons” against their parents, and most importantly, not recognizing how to deal with their stress, anger, and/or sadness. During this milestone, expect silence, conflict and tension by your teen as they are trying to create their own independence.

Tool #3

Be patient with the process: Avoid lecturing your teen and instead use open-ended communication. Do not attack their opinions or feelings, and do not – I repeat, do not – judge them for their actions. I remember my teen years; it was so incredibly hard because I didn’t want to talk to my parents, thinking they would judge my

opinions. Be neutral with what and how you say things. That way, your teen will feel more connected to you.