

The Relationship Approach: What It Is and What It Will Give You

Many parents feel a sense of loss when they realize battling for control no longer makes sense. It's almost like losing an old friend. Sure, it was an old friend that kept getting you into trouble and made you feel bad, but it was familiar. "Maybe I *should* stop battling for control," parents say, "but what am I going to do instead? Give up and just be permissive?"

Hildy was one of these parents. Listen to what she told us. It was like for her to struggle with her fifteen-year-old son, Danny:

Danny had been getting pretty obnoxious. It was impossible to tell him anything. He would never listen to me, though God knows I tried to get him to, and when he opened his mouth, all he did was grunt. He was so infuriating. What had happened to my baby? It's funny—the worse things got, the more I kept saying he was just being a typical teenager. I wanted to shake him. I kept getting into this scold/yell/nag thing about his not getting listening.

I wanted to make him do the things I wanted him to do. They were for his own good! Getting after him like that had worked when he was little, so I was sort of trained to

do that. You know . . . "If you're going to get tough, mister, I'll get tough."

But things just got worse. I knew that what I was doing wasn't working, but I didn't know what else to do.

How do you solve this dilemma? What's the alternative to battling for control?

Well, your parenting can only be successful if it's based on understanding what adolescence is all about. Since he's getting ready to leave home, being a child is the very last thing your teenager wants to be. If you continue to act like a parent trying to be in control, your teenager will fight you, because when you come on as the parent, he feels like a child. This is so threatening that he'll do whatever he has to shut you out. And if you keep insisting on being the controlling parent, he'll shut you out forever. The sad stories of the strained and painful relationships between adults and their parents are usually caused by mom and dad's continuing efforts to stay in control.

The solution is to begin the process of having an adult relationship with your teenager now. That way you acknowledge the adult part of him—he most wants to develop. And so you become a welcome person in his life, not someone to resist. And only by being a welcome person in your teenager's life can you—with all that you have to offer—find a place in his life and gain access to him so you can communicate with him, do your job as his parent, and enjoy your teenager as a person.

Just as adolescence is the special stage where your teenager gets ready to leave home, it's also the special stage where you get ready to have the relationship with your teenager that you're going to have with him for the rest of your life. This means that being successful as the parent of a teenager becomes astonishingly simple: the way to break through the barriers that have prevented you from getting good results is to use what we call the relationship approach. Instead of trying to control your teenager,

Work only at improving your relationship with your teenager. If you think something will improve your relationship, do it; if not, don't.

And that's all you have to do.

This really amounts to a revolutionary new way of thinking about how to parent a teenager. By focusing on only one area—your relationship with your teenager—you'll find you're doing everything necessary to be the best possible parent. With the relationship approach you can cope with your teenager today and help him get ready for the future—and still come out of it with you both liking each other and wanting to spend time together.

The relationship approach means not putting your energy into the struggle to improve your teenager, as you did in your previous role as "the parent." You must stop worrying if he's OK and instead put your energy into making sure that the two of you together are OK. Amazingly, when you switch from trying to improve your teenager to trying to improve your relationship with your teenager, you end up having the maximum possible influence with him.

It's really very easy. You don't need to master a complicated list of things to say and do in any situation. To use the relationship approach you need to do only the things you already do every day to improve any relationship:

- Make sure the two of you are talking to each other and, just as important, listening. Lecturing, scolding, judging, and nagging hurt relationships. But talking and listening help.
- Make sure you do things together that feel good. If all you are to your teenager is someone who criticizes and complains, he won't want to spend time with you. But if you do things together, you'll provide opportunities for you and your teenager to communicate.
- Make sure you pay attention to how well the two of you are getting along, and try to iron out problems between the two of you. If you allow bad feelings to develop in the hope of gaining control, you'll end up with neither

a relationship nor control. But if you work at clearing away bad feelings, you'll gain both access to your teenager and your only chance of having influence with him.

- Make sure you're both getting your needs met, and be sensitive to your teenager's needs. Getting into battles over things you think he should do by imposing rules will hurt your relationship. But having a discussion about what both of you need will enable you and your teenager to agree on solutions.

This last point needs emphasizing. The fact that you're trying to strengthen your relationship with your teenager does not mean that you have to abdicate your responsibilities as a parent. What distinguishes successful parents isn't that they avoid fights by letting their kids get away with murder. It's that they fulfill their responsibilities by building on the cornerstone of a good relationship.

Hildy told us what happened when she switched her priorities from trying to improve Danny to improving their relationship. Here's what she said:

It was easier than I'd thought. For me the relationship approach had to do with what was inside my head. I had to let go of the idea that I could keep on doing the same old job I had when Danny was little—except that now, since he was a teenager, I'd have to get tougher.

At first, I was afraid that having a good relationship meant giving in and being a patsy. But that wasn't it! Once I stopped trying to make Danny do what I wanted him to do and just tried to get along with him the way I do with my friends, things changed. Now we do things for each other because we care about each other. It was just sort of natural for me because, you know, I know how to be a really good friend.

I guess I shouldn't say "I just tried to get along with him"—that makes it sound like I gave up trying to be a mother. I didn't. In the past I'd given up when I got tired of all the fighting, and that hadn't felt very good. No, it

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was more like I said, "OK, what do I need and what does Danny need and what does our relationship need?" And we'd talk about it.

It didn't always work like magic, but sometimes it sort of felt that way. When I stopped fighting, I stopped being the enemy, and when I stopped worrying, I stopped being . . . I don't know, I stopped being a jerk, I guess, to him. I could really be a good parent for Danny without making a martyr of myself and without making both of us crazy.

Hildy had thought that to do her job as a parent she had to fight for control even though that meant having an angry and uncommunicative teenager. The control approach is really the it's-a-dirty-job-but-someone's-got-to-do-it approach. But with the relationship approach she found—as you will—that she could finally do her job as a parent successfully and enjoy her teenager at the same time.

Payoffs from Using the Relationship Approach

When you try to strengthen your relationship with your teenager, you'll get a lot more than a good relationship. Here are some of the other payoffs you'll get from using the relationship approach.

Payoff 1: A good relationship with your teenager will give you the kind of influence you want.

Sure, having a good relationship with your teenager will make living with her a lot easier. But the first question many parents ask us about the relationship approach is, "Yeah, but how will just getting along with my kid give me influence? I'm the parent. I don't want to tie my hands."

You don't have to worry. To see how the relationship approach will give you influence, think about the people who have influence over you. Your best friend, for instance. Does she have influence over you because she demands it? Or be-

cause she's the smartest person in the world? No. Your friend has influence because the two of you talk to each other. Because you let her get close to you. Because you care about her.

So it's the communication and the closeness and the caring you have with your friend that gives her influence. And this can happen for you and your teenager. You don't have to wait until long years have cooled the anger that battling for control creates. You have it in your power to act now so that your teenager will talk to you and will let you get close to her and so that you strengthen the real caring that's possible between you. Only that communication, closeness, and caring will give you real influence with your teenager.

Payoff 2: The better your relationship with your teenager, the better you'll feel as a parent.

You can learn a lot by asking parents whose kids have grown up and left home what they wish they had done differently when their kids were teenagers. Almost never do they wish they'd been tougher and fought harder to gain control. Instead, overwhelmingly they say things like:

"I wish we'd been closer."

"I wish we hadn't fought so much."

"I wish we'd communicated more."

"I wish I'd gotten to know my kids better."

"I wish I'd shown more caring instead of always criticizing."

"I wish I hadn't worried so much, and acted so much out of worry."

"I wish we'd known more about each other's lives."

In other words, when it was too late, when patterns of anger and distance had already set in, these parents learned this simple truth: that only by having a good relationship with your teenager can you feel good about the job you have done as a parent.

Parents who battle for control have problems with self-

esteem. There they are, trying to straighten their teenager out, to make her do the right thing now so she'll be OK later on. Their teenager fights them, and they have no idea how she'll turn out. Instead of rewards, all they get are battles and hopes. So how can they feel good about themselves?

On the other hand, using the relationship approach has a magical effect on how good you feel about yourself as a parent. Instead of your self-esteem being buffeted by frustration in the present and being a hostage to an unknown future, you'll get daily evidence of the state of your parenting by looking at the current state of your relationship with your teenager. This will make your life easier. If the two of you have difficulties, you can do something quickly to solve the problems that have come up between you and get immediate, visible results. If you find out why your kid's not talking to you now, and solve the problem now, and start communicating again now, you can feel better today rather than having to imagine yourself feeling better twenty years in the future.

Payoff 3: With the relationship approach, you get a solid and enduring future with your son or daughter.

If you spend his teen years struggling with your teenager, then as you see him leaving your life and starting his own life all the distance you've created somehow becomes greater, and the loss feels more bitter. In the end you're relieved to be rid of each other. And what do you have to show for all your time, money, energy, and struggle? At best, empty bragging about a kid who is basically a stranger.

And it's a fallacy that after years of painful and bitter struggles, kids always "come around" when they become adults and finally understand what their parents were trying to do. The anger and distance don't end. When a teenager has to spend his entire adolescence building up patterns of resisting his parents' control, these patterns and the anger that fueled them live on like toxic waste, poisoning that relationship forever.

But when you use the relationship approach you can spend

the thirty or forty years that you're both adults in a relationship filled with love and respect. This happens very easily years—you've focused on the most stressful and difficult years—the teen relationship. You've laid a foundation of love and respect.

And really successful parents understand this. If Sally and Johnny do well in their lives it will be because of what Sally and Johnny do. The credit or blame will be theirs alone. And so you can relax. You don't have to worry about making a gigantic future for an entire human being. You just have to pay attention to the part of his future that is your relationship with him.

By focusing on the relationship, a parent bestows a great gift: the adult child is freed up to say, "My life is mine. I'm responsible for it." And a parent gives herself a great gift to include you in my life." "I'm happy

Payoff 4: When you use the relationship approach you save time.

Part of the seductive power of battling for control is that you think it won't take much time. With one lightning raid (you feel) you can swoop down, impose rules and punishments, and turn the whole situation around on a dime. Your teenager comes home with a bad report card? Why not just yell, punish, and be done with it? Bang. You just set a limit. Pow. You threaten. Wham. You punish. What could be faster than that?

But it doesn't work. In the real world, battling for control just sets you up for more battles, and, of course, for defeat. You still have a kid who resists you, and he's that much more sullen and resentful. In the time you think you've saved, you have the leisure to contemplate what a really miserable attitude your kid has. And because the problem doesn't go away, there are more time-consuming battles over it in the future. The relationship approach takes far less time than battling for control. In relationship-approach families, parents' in-

vestment in improving the relationship with their teenagers pays off because they can simply say, "Please do this because it's important to me"—and the kids do it because their parent's feelings are important to them.

So the real answer to parents who are concerned about their limited time is this: yes, you don't have any time to waste. Therefore, you ought to use every minute of your time in the most productive way. And therefore, even if you have only five minutes, spend it trying to have a better relationship with your teenager. Everything else you want will come from that.

Payoff 5: By using the relationship approach, you get a teenager who's a pleasure to live with.

Remember how pressured you felt as a teenager? There was pressure from thinking about a looming, wide-ranging future that extended from tomorrow's math test and the dance on Saturday night, through getting into college, up to choosing a profession and finding a mate. There was the complex and sometimes conflicting network of peer pressure. There was pressure from teachers. And finally there was the internal pressure that came from your hormones and hopes, your fears and fantasies.

If you or the parent apply another set of pressures—even though you do it because you're concerned—then you become just another thing to get away from. You become something to be avoided, rather than a resource.

You know that you're pressuring your teenager and that he's resisting if he keeps telling you things like, "This is none of your business," "Why don't you leave me alone?" or "You don't really know me." He acts just like a pressured adult. He blows up easily. He avoids you. He's attracted to escapism. He may be depressed. And if he uses a strategy of not talking to you, you may fail to recognize the full extent of your pressure and his resistance.

But parents who use the relationship approach find they can actually enjoy their kids. When they're not busy resisting

their parents' pressure, teenagers can be charming, fun, creative, thought-provoking, and affectionate—just the way you and your friends were when you were teenagers. And ultimately, when you can enjoy your teenager, the two of you have an opportunity to experience the love that exists between you.

In a sample of teenagers we interviewed, the overwhelming majority wanted the same things from their parents: trust, respect, attention, independence, communication, and being treated like an individual—all qualities that have to do with having a good parent-teen relationship. Surprisingly, the teenagers we interviewed rarely mentioned that they wanted additional privileges or hoped that their parents made fewer demands on them. But they wanted their parents' demands to come in the context of a good relationship, because that way the demands could be discussed and could seem fair.

Payoff 6: The relationship approach allows you to stop feeling confused, stressed, and overwhelmed in dealing with your teenager. You always know clearly and simply what to do.

On Monday your kid is sullen and hostile. On Tuesday he tells you he wants to go to a rock concert that coming weekend. On Wednesday you finally reach the boiling point over all the stuff he's left around the house. Thursday he brings home a bad report card. And on Friday he tells you you're a lousy parent because you never listen to him, you never care about him, you never take his side.

This is typical. All teenagers assault their parents with behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and styles that do everything from making your flesh crawl to sending you into shock. So you constantly have to decide what behavior to focus on. And if you're like most parents, you deal with things as they come up, and most of the time you're overwhelmed.

Most parents are also confused by all the different directives they carry around: Be firm. Be fair. Be loving. Be tough to get him ready for the real world. Save him from himself.

Leave him alone to make his own mistakes. Be someone he can talk to. Don't let him think he can get away with things. And the list goes on. The effect of all these conflicting and confusing directives is to heighten your feeling of being overwhelmed, particularly during those times when you most want to be clear and effective.

The relationship approach helps with both of the causes of your feeling overwhelmed—your teenager's behaviors and your inner directives. Now you only have to focus on things that affect your relationship with your teenager. The number of problems you have to deal with and solutions you have to come up with shrinks as you move from trying to perfect an entire human being to getting along with one kid, your Joe or Jane. It's an infinitely more manageable universe. And that helps you be the relaxed, warm, effective, and confident parent you'd like to be.

Well, there it is, the solution to the problem of how you can be the best possible parent for your teenager. Remember, the relationship approach says that all you have to do to be a successful parent is:

Work only at improving your relationship with your teenager. If you think something will improve your relationship, do it; if not, don't.

When the going gets rough and you start feeling confused and overwhelmed, this is all you'll have to remember. It's as if instead of having to decipher a complicated map every time you wanted to take a step, you only have to glance at your compass and go in one straightforward direction: improving your relationship with your teenager. Nothing else is necessary.

And there are many payoffs from using the relationship approach:

- You will find that nothing will give you more influence with your teenager.

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- You will feel successful as a parent.
- You will build a solid and enduring future with your teenager.
- You will save time.
- You will get a teenager who's a pleasure to live with.
- You will no longer have to feel confused, stressed, and overwhelmed in dealing with your teenager.
- You will always know clearly and simply what to do.

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