

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Tips For Dealing Sensibly With Your Teenager's Mistakes

from the American Counseling Association

Every teenager will goof up sometime, make mistakes, act stupidly or perhaps try something which will put him or her in real danger.

And, as a responsible parent, it's going to drive you crazy. When you find out what has occurred you feel your blood boil, want to scream and wonder how badly you've failed as a parent.

But in most cases, what has happened isn't about bad parenting or raising a really stupid child. Rather, what you're seeing is a teenager being a teenager. It's a time when your teen, developmentally, is supposed to be moving away from your care and protection. It's perfectly normal and it's what we all want to have our children do successfully, unless you're looking forward to your kid at 48-years-old living in your basement rent-free and playing Xbox 20 hours a day.

While it's important to recognize that it's normal for your teen to be testing limits, it doesn't mean you should have to look away when he or she makes a serious mistake. But rather than exploding (usually to a blank stare or that infamous "whatever" response) you can be much more effective by reacting calmly.

How? Start by not confronting your child when you are wild with anger. Instead, when you first see your child after whatever has happened, communicate calmly that you plan to discuss this situation later. Set a time to do so. Then take a walk or do something to relax and give yourself time to prepare your response thoughtfully, rather than emotionally.

When you're calm, sit down at the appointed time and discuss what happened and why it troubles you. This is not a time for shouting or displays of violence. It's a time to communicate rationally. Share your feelings with "I" statements, such as "I felt very angry and disappointed when I learned..." Explain as calmly as possible why what they did has upset or possibly scared you.

A next step is to impose a meaningful and appropriate consequence. Don't try and impose vague or endless punishments ("You'll NEVER drive my car again!") which clearly are not possible to meet. Instead, let the consequences show that you truly were disappointed and concerned, but that you want your child to know that once he or she pays the price for what happened, you're confident future behavior will be more responsible.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcerner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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