



Developing  
**RULES** &  
*Boundaries*  
For Your Teen

Mark Gregston



# Developing Rules & Boundaries for Your Teen

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(formerly, *Disciplining Your Teen*)

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## Foreword

In a world where conflict, confusion, and turmoil surround our teen's culture, it's difficult for parents to correct, confront, and be firm with their teens who display inappropriate behavior, or show a need for some "help" to mature and develop responsibility.

For parents to balance their role between confidant and disciplinarian is complicated, especially in a world where parents strive to create a relaxed atmosphere for their kids, away from the pressures of life.

Mark Gregston shares his insight of 30 years of working with teens and parents, showing parents how to use discipline as a way of helping their child "get to a place they want to be," and "keeping them from a place they don't want to go." His practical suggestions along with his proven ideas are formulated from a relational mindset that encourages parents to not miss a great opportunity to deepen their relationship with their child.

## Were My Parents Really that Bad?

My concept of discipline, like so many other people, was formed from my childhood. If you did something against the rules, you were disciplined. That discipline was usually corporal. Pretty simple. Don't do anything bad, and you won't get nailed. If you did do something wrong, dad would find out, get home from the office, and you'd get a few licks from the belt. Mom sold us out...dad corrected the problem. It was probably what they learned from their parents, who were influenced by other military precedents.

I learned that you never said anything bad to your mom or dad. Cussing, swearing, and dirty jokes never darkened the doors of our home. I mean, it wasn't only that we didn't "say" it; we didn't even think it. Beds were always made. Shoes were always shined (I remember competing with my brother to see who could shine their shoes the brightest). You were always on time. "Yes Sir", "No Sir." "Yes Ma'am," "No Ma'am." Load up; we're going here or there. Meals were served, you ate...everything. Clean your plate. Comb your hair. Stand up straight. Shake someone's hand (the civilian act of a salute) and when you do, do it firmly. Speak when spoken to. It was dad's way, or no way. Period. No sissy stuff. Treat a girl like a lady. Keep your closets and toys neat. Take care of your business. Defend yourself. Treat your mom nice.

Sound a little like the military? You bet it did. Respect ran high...but it was a little short on the relationship side.

dad worked hard all his life to provide for his family. He worked at the same job for 38 years. It was his way of providing for his family. Or should I say, the way that he *loved* his family. He worked hard and long, because that was the way you loved. He demanded (strongly), because that was the way you were to live. You respected your elders, because that's the way it was. Period.

As my dark hair lightens, I hear less, and my eyesight diminishes, I find that wisdom comes easier, that I listen more, and I see more with the eyes of my heart than I do with those on each side of my big nose. The aging process brings a greater understanding of my mom and dad, thus more of an acceptance of the fact that things really weren't as bad as I thought they were while growing up. Now don't get me wrong, "things" weren't perfect, but everything wasn't as bad as I thought then with my foolish thinking.

My dad worked hard because he grew up during the depression, and knew what it meant to have nothing. I've never even been close to that reality. My dad left his junior year of high school to go fight a war in the South Pacific. I spent my junior year with my girlfriend (who later became my wife), swimming laps, and growing hair.

His desire was to provide for his family, and to protect all of us. He did both. Food was always on the table, a roof was always over our head, and we never got attacked.

Then the 60's and 70's came along. The focus of my generation moved toward "all you need is love", "smile on our brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now.", and "whole lotta' love." We "showered the people we love with love." We "showed them the way that we feel" (that was a new concept...feelings). Our music expressed our longing and new pilgrimage to relationships. The concept of all holding hands, growing out long hair, and screaming "Peace" amidst an Asian conflict was a struggle for some dads who hadn't known how to do "that", as they were too busy "loving" in other ways.

Why in the world are these comments in a, e-book on discipline? It's important for us to understand that the roots and concepts of discipline are usually transferred from parents. The transfer is not just "like father, like son." It transfers differently. It

transfers upside down. It's like this. What my dad did, I want to do differently. I used to think that I had to stand against everything he stood for. The generation gap was becoming as big as the Grand Canyon....widened by the desire for relationships.

So my focus when I raised my kids was on relationships.....not on provision and protection. The “pendulum of parenting” was swinging the other way. On one side of the pendulum is the military rule. On the other, are pure relationships. My generation leaned and fell “head over heels” toward relationships.

We're the “Starbucks generation.” We wanted to have a place to go sit and have a cup of coffee, and talk. We wanted to go to a Cheers kind-of-place where “everyone knew our name.” Somehow, we were determined to have relationships with our kids in extra-ordinary ways. We embraced new tools of communication: cell phones, instant messaging, text messaging, e-mail, blogging.

We gave our kids things we never got. We did things with them we never did with our parents. We spent time in activities and encouraged our kids to do the same. We became taxi drivers, shuttling out kids everywhere to do everything. We became coaches. We began to work in boosters clubs. We started teaching Sunday School. We home-schooled. We got involved. We indulged. We bestowed everything. We spoiled. We began to see fathers push strollers, change diapers, and forsake business deals to spend time with their children. We put TV's, stereos, computers, X-boxes, Play Stations, microwaves and phones in our kids' rooms, creating little apartments for them to separate themselves from the family.

We gave them everything we could. Toys 'R Us stores sprung up around the country. Playgrounds flourished. McDonald's added play areas for kids. Baby Gap. Kids Gap. Pre-K. Pre-pre K. Ministries to children exploded with emphasis. Laws to protect children were enacted. We filled our kid's high school parking lots with new cars.

Our kids became the most fashionable in the world. Summer camps flourished. Kids visited businesses with their dads. PTA, PTO, MADD, and MOPS emerged. Young Life, His Life, Youth for Christ, and K-Life boomed. Youth buildings were built. Youth and children's ministry positions became full-time paid positions and not just volunteer ones.

Sports and extra-curricular school activities exploded. Some parents began to live life through their kids, others began to live life as a kid, and some began to idolize their child and find new meaning as a parent, thinking all along, isn't it great to have a relationship that I never had?

Didn't we all begin to revolve our family's world around our kids?

Better relationships? Maybe. But what we also got was some things that we didn't anticipate.

Putting kids at the center of our world backfired. It created a self-centered generation that lacks maturity. They're disrespectful of adults and of things. They say inappropriate things to parents, teachers, and coaches. They're demanding, always wanting more, even though they already have everything. They can't keep busy enough away from home, nor spend enough time "hanging" with friends. Down deep, they're angry, but they don't know why.

Need I go further? I'm sure you get the picture, and maybe you have the epitome of this description living in your home. Don't think that I don't love kids....I love all kids. And I know that there are exceptions to everything that I'm writing. But, I think there's some accuracy in stating that we've created an environment that we didn't anticipate, and for the most, a generation for which we didn't prepare. So, it's not the kids' fault – it mostly ours.

To do all we have for our kids and to get the response that this new generation exhibits, is probably as upsetting to us as it was that generation who sacrificed and loved us in different ways and saw a response that “thumbed our noses” at what we later called the “Great Generation.”

Somewhere, because of our desire to build friendship with our children, we moved from parenting to “**peer-enting**.” It’s easy to bark out orders when we’re the boss. It’s simple to direct when we’ve been made the director. It’s relatively painless to correct someone when we’ve been placed in that authority position. But, correcting a peer or a friend is far harder, when we stand on equal ground with them. By wanting to have stronger relationships with our children, we have eliminated our position of authority. I think this is a result that we all wish we would have better anticipated.

*Parents need to let their teenagers know, "I desire to stand beside you and walk with you in life....but make no mistake; I will stand in front of you when I need to."*

So the big question is this: *How do we get back into that position of authority, and while also maintaining the relationship that we have longed for with our kids?* Can we do both? You bet we can. Maybe we’ll even learn to love our kids in a deeper way and find a stronger relationship with them than we have ever had.

We can say to our child: “As a parent, I desire to stand beside you and walk with you in life....but make no mistake; I will stand in front of you when I need to.” Discipline is helping my child get to where he wants to be, and keeping him from going to a place he doesn’t want to end up. A combination of being strong when you need to and being tender when called to results in better parenting. It’s not either/or. It is both/and. I would submit to you that a healthy parent knows when to do both, and knows when to do neither.



Scripture describes God as a mighty warrior in the book of Isaiah. It also tells about His soft side, “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.” God embraces both feminine and masculine characteristics; power and a great sense of tenderness. If one of our purposes as a parent is to give our kids a taste of the character of God, then we must give them both sides. Each parent must exhibit both sides; not masculine characteristics just from dad and feminine characteristics just from mom.

If you’ve never been “firm” with your children, then chances are it will be harder to “change your style” and begin offering your children something that they need desperately. In addition, if you’ve never been tender with your child, your kids will have a more difficult time accepting your new desire for warmth and gentleness. It’s never too late to start.

### **It's not about me . . . It's about them.**

Most people don't discipline their child because they're afraid they will become like that military father who they swore they would never be like. Others don't discipline because they're afraid of losing something with their child that they have worked years to attain...a good relationship. Some parents flat don't know what to do because everything has gone so well, and then they are "blindsided" by the fact that their child is moving into an arena that will demand some behavior changes, some consequences, or some new boundaries.

Most of the time we're just unprepared. The teen years bring new ways of parental teaching. We should be moving from the lecture method to the discussion method. We talk differently to them. We give them more freedom. We catch a glimpse of adolescent rebellion occasionally. They begin to move away from us socially. It's a time of change. Change means that parents would be wise to anticipate these changes, and understand the new world they are about to move into with their soon-to-be adolescent. If you're already there, then you know what I'm talking about. Needless to say, understanding that there will be changes, allows me to prepare, rather than being caught with my guard down.

We tend to raise our kids doing everything for them. They, for the most part, think that we can do no wrong. They think we're Superman or Wonder Woman. It's easy to idolize your children when they make you think you're a god or goddess of some kind. Our image of them — running to us screaming our name and waiting to be hugged — does amazing things for our egos. As kids get older, things change don't they? They go off to 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade and find that they aren't as "neat" as they thought they were. As their thinking process morphs from "concrete thinking" to "abstract thinking," they begin to view us a little different as well. They begin to realize that we're not as "neat" as they thought they were.

A teen has an amazing way of pointing out issues, struggles, and shortcomings in a parent's life. These, perhaps, are items of the past that have never been dealt with, items that you thought had already been dealt with, or new feelings and thoughts that you never even knew existed. We always think we have to deal with all the issues at hand.

Let's make sure we are clear on this: **while a parent might need to deal with some of their own issues, discipline's focus is about the child, not the parent.** (How you deal with your own issues will determine how effective you are in your discipline techniques. Your issues don't give license to your children, at any age, to ignore or neglect the type of discipline that will help them get to the right place.)

This is about them. It's not about you. You may need to deal with your own issues. However, your "dealing" doesn't mean that you can ignore the role that you play as a parent, nor does it mean that a child can ignore the role you must take.

The focus of teen discipline should be aimed at dishonesty, disobedience, and disrespect. Hopefully, your child will learn that, when these are present, there will be consequences. **Honesty** is a character issue that will help them in their relationships in the future. **Obedience** will help them gain direction and insight into life. **Respect** is the bedrock of all friendships and interpersonal relationships. So your corrections of these qualities are about them...not you. You correct them, so that they will have the type of relationships that they really want...and to keep them from destroying or impeding relationships with their foolishness.

Just a word about consistency of discipline: **mom and dad need to agree on what the parameters are** (I'll write more about this later). In divorces, each parent must maintain the same standards. Grandparents must not violate parents' standards because they think they know best, or just don't care about the parents' intentions. Consistency over a period of time is key, and must involve all the authority figures in the family.

I would add just another note here. I've always said that moms instill a sense of value in a child, and dads validate that (a book can be written on all the many aspects of that statement). I add this here because I see numerous times that mom is the one doing all the discipline (and ends up being the "bad guy") and dad doesn't participate or chooses to ignore the need. In these cases, the message given to the child is "I don't care." Without participation in the discipline of a child, a dad will force a child to find validation for their value somewhere else.

Who wouldn't want to help a child get to a place they want to be? Who wouldn't want to keep them from going to a place they don't want to go? If one thinks discipline is just punishment and the inflicting of pain, then shoot, who'd want that role? Being a "little Hitler" can't be enjoyable in any sense of the imagination. If the definition of discipline that I submit to you is accurate, I would then encourage you to embrace the wonderful role that you've been placed in with your child.

Just because you encounter a few "bumps" along the way doesn't mean that your involvement isn't necessary. You won't "get it right" all the time. You see, even Superman can make mistakes. If he does, remember, this isn't about him.

## Some Things to Remember about Discipline

After years of spending time with young people and their families who are having discipline issues, I've learned a few things by watching interactions, looking for effectiveness, and hanging in there long enough to see the outcomes, that might be applicable to many families.

If you are currently seeking direction for the disciplining of your child, or are in the midst of needing to change your style of discipline because it “just ain't working like it used to,” I would first encourage you to “hang in there.” You will get on the other side of this “thing” called adolescence. There is a brighter day. There is the opportunity to have a deeper relationship with your child than perhaps you had with your parents. But, hang in there.

John Wayne once said, “Courage is getting back up in the saddle.” These are true words that are well understood by those of us who have ever broken or trained horses. The process begins easy, but can get pretty ugly. I have a set “breaking and training” practice that I follow...BUT, it is adapted to each horse. The course of action that I take brings many different reactions. When one method doesn't work, I don't think of myself as a failure, but I simply start using another technique. The breaking and training of a horse is hard work. It's hard, but it's worth it because I know that one day, I'll have a great relationship with that horse that will carry me and walk alongside me in many different “fields,”

I've been bit, kicked, knocked down, snorted on, thrown off, pulled back, head butted, beat up, broken, worn out, pooped on, dog-tired, clothes ripped, blisters torn, slammed against fences, walked on, stomped on, and run away from during the process of training. The response from the horse...angry, mad, hostile, obstinate, belligerent, unwilling, un-teachable, stubborn, fighting, horse cursing, immovable, inflexible, and

bent to remain a wild, selfish, self-gratifying, hay-eating, headstrong and non-compliant equine. I've learned through my years of breaking horses, that the horse really thinks the problem is me and my interference in this stubborn animals' life. Eventually, even the horse learns that this isn't about me....it is about him. I keep the process going. Why? I love the horse. I really do love the process as painful as it is. It's because I know where I'm headed...for the both of us.

Here are some things to remember about discipline.

1. **The purpose of discipline is to help your child get to a place that he/she want to be.** Understanding that, a parent must then construct every consequence, rule, expectation, and directive around the intent of getting the child to a place that he/she wants to go. Much like a horse, any child can't totally understand, much less comprehend where they're going, or how they're going to get there. Unlike a horse, a child can learn to trust in deep ways, and can reason a little better (we hope).

I stated earlier that discipline shouldn't always be about punishment. The direction that I take my child must be predicated on the fact that I know where I'm going. As a parent, one must understand the direction, the "end point", and have some strategy to get there. If a parent doesn't understand this, then the purpose of discipline becomes nothing more than telling a child what NOT TO DO, without telling them what TO DO. It's like saying to them, "Don't go there, because I want you to go to a place that neither of us knows."

So the questions I would ask are: Where are you going with your discipline? Do you know where you want to go with your child? Do you know where your child wants to go? Do you know for what you're disciplining them? Do you have a

plan? (Remember, if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.)

2. **Rules without relationship cause rebellion.** If one thinks that discipline is nothing more than a list of rules posted on the refrigerator that line out how everyone is supposed to act, they are greatly mistaken. It is important that time be spent with your child outside of just correcting and disciplining them. I usually suggest that a father and son, mother and daughter or any combination of the four, spend time together over a weekly breakfast or a special weekly dinner, where a relationship can be fostered. If you tell me that you already have a great relationship, then I would tell you to do it anyway. It is one more opportunity for you to develop a platform of dialogue should a tough time arise or if you find that discussions at home just aren't working. Have a meal together. Spend time asking questions. Get to know your child. Ask what is happening in their life. Don't share your opinion until they ask. Move toward them. Get their "take" on things in their world.

Over time you'll find that this new platform will give you the opportunity to share your stories, a place to admit faults and shortcomings, an arena for them to share their concerns, and an opportunity for them to ask you questions. And don't quit meeting if there is disagreement or conflict in your household. Commit to the time, and commit to each other.

If your child doesn't want to do this, make it a requirement. Let them know that you think that it's important enough that you'll not pay for the cell phone, or not pay car insurance, or not pay for a car. Let them know that this is so important to you that you'll do whatever it takes to make it happen. Build the relationship.

3. **Look to their interest.** As stated, it's not about you, it's about them. Scripture reminds us in Philippians to *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”* Don't hand out a consequence just because it makes you mad. Hand it out because, if they continue in the inappropriate behavior, the result will be something that is harmful to them, and will take them somewhere they really don't want to go. Now you may still be mad, but don't let your anger be your motivation. Your motivation is to help your child, not to vent your frustration or anger. The purpose of getting together for breakfast should not be that you'll look like a better dad, but should be because your child needs time together with you. The purpose of having them make good grades is so that they can get to the college they want to go to, not because making bad grades is a reflection on you. The reason to encourage sports is not because you feel that every child who plays sports is better, but because your child wants to do something. This is about them...not you.
  
4. **“Standing in front of your child” means confrontation.** Confrontation is never easy, and is never really that enjoyable. It's easy to hang out with a child when everything is going well...not so easy when it's not. Confrontation doesn't have to mean war. Hopefully, you can move to a discussion about whatever the issues are, and put them on the table to talk about. It might happen at the breakfast you have every week. It might happen in the car. Wherever it happens, just make sure that it does. To avoid confrontation is only postponing the inevitable to a time when things will be worse.

As a word to the wise, I would tell you to not confront when you are angry. Let everything cool down first. When you do approach your child, let them know that you'd like to talk about something that has come up. When you do get together for the confrontation, lead with questions.



Give opportunities for answers. Keep telling yourself that this is about them, not you. Share your concerns.

5. **Don't be afraid of seeing your child go through pain.** Parents are, at times, much too quick to rescue a child from their discomfort, thus keeping them from learning from their mistakes or choices. A person will continue in their inappropriate behavior until the pain derived from that behavior is greater than the pleasure received from it. Your rescuing just might allow them to continue in their plight. There are many words for this...denial, enabling, equipping...all done with the wrong motive, and all leading to wrong results.

When your child does go through consequences for inappropriate behavior or poor choices, don't pull back from the relationship. They can be grounded and still have you spend time with them. They can "pay the price" and still have your love on them. Disengaging from a child while they're being "disciplined" or going through the pain of some loss of privileges communicates a performance-based relationship. This communicates to your child that you'll be "with" them as long as they don't do anything wrong, which isn't exactly what most parents want to communicate nor is it what most teens want to hear. Young people who I have met through the years all know that their parents love them when they're "right", but live with a fear that they won't be loved when they are "wrong." Let them know that you love them when they are wrong.

There's nothing wrong with communicating to someone that if one continues in the behavior then it will damage your relationship with them. Not because of what you're doing, but because of what they're doing. Remember...it's about them.

Whenever young people are disciplined at Heartlight, they are usually given work projects or eliminated from social activities. While they work, I make sure that I get them something to drink, grab something from Starbucks to take to them, stop and talk with them, or buy them lunch. It is my intention to communicate that I love them just as much when they've done something wrong as when they do everything right. All kids need to hear that message.

6. **You can't correct everything so pick your battles wisely.** If I was determined to correct every issue that a child presents, I would spend all my time correcting, and very little time building any relationship at all. Your child is not going to be perfect this side of heaven, and there's plenty of time to correct things along the way.

Experience has showed me a couple of things (among the thousands) of note about moms and dads in this regard. moms have a tendency to want to correct everything, and most of the time, can't sit still until everything is "right." Dads on the other hand don't think that anything is wrong, so they stop short of doing anything to correct the presenting problems.

The answer: **Mom and dad need to get together to figure out what is important at this stage of the game and determine how issues are going to be confronted, and decide what needs to be tackled now, and what can wait.**

7. **Discipline is a lot more than just rules, consequences, and justice...it's training.** *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."* Most take this Scripture to mean only spiritual training. No doubt, it does include that, but it also would pertain to training in the world of finances, in developing responsibility, and in personal relationships just to name a few.

I wonder sometimes if the reason that we see so much anger in young people is that we're not preparing them for the world into which they are walking. Anger is an emotional response to not getting what you want. Young people tell me all the time that they're angry, and they don't know why. As I spend time with them and help them process what they feel and think, I sense that they just aren't ready to hit the world running, and it angers them. Could it be that this is one of the reasons that young people headed off to college these days are so dependent on their parents? I'd be mad too if someone expected me to fulfill an expectation without preparing me for the task. It's just a thought...

The point is this. We must prepare our children for the world in which they will live. **Somewhere in the midst of raising children, our emphasis must switch from protecting to preparing, from lecture to discussion, and from doing things for them to allowing them to learn to do things for themselves.**

They're immature. They're immature because we've created a teen world that is lacking in accountability, and short on responsibility. Parents must move young people from dependency on mom and dad to independence. It's a part of training. It's part of discipline. It allows a maturing of relationships to happen. The kind of maturing that makes it easier to "leave and cleave" when the time comes.

The purpose of discipline, the need for real relationship, the interest of the child, the task of confronting, the necessity of pain, the value of wisdom, and the importance of preparation – what else do parents need to know about discipline?

## Beliefs, Boundaries, and Rules

### Beliefs

Most of the time parents are coming to me and saying the following: “Help me, my home is spinning out of control!” “What I’ve been doing for so long isn’t working any longer, what do I do?” “How can I get my kids to listen to me?” “I’ve ignored my kids for so long, how can I start something new when I’ve been such a failure?” “Where do I start?” These are great questions from some great parents who desire great things for their kids. They just don’t know how to start.

Let’s start at the beginning. Have you asked yourself those pertinent questions that would give you some direction? “Who am I?” “What do I believe about what I want for my family?” “What do I want for my kids and from my kids?” “What do I support, and what do I not support?” “What do my kids need?” “What are some goals I would love to see realized for my family?” These are all great questions that help parents establish what they believe.

Once parents know where they want to go, it’s much easier to map out a strategy. A major roadblock to developing a new strategy is the belief of most parents that parenting should become easier as the time goes on. Thus, there is a dependence on parenting skills “of old” and former “habits of the home” with the belief that because these formerly used customs worked then...so why won’t they work now? Using the old ways allows for old behaviors to continue: Fifteen year-old kids throwing fits like a five year-old; Sixteen year-olds who can’t even get out of bed, but are expected to hold a job; Eighteen year-olds, who are now adults, being treated like they were twelve, and acting like it. Which came first? The treatment or the behavior.

In his book, *Dedication and Leadership*, Douglas Hyde comments that to get more from people, you must demand more. Scripture tells us that “We have not, because we ask not.” It’s true. We get what we ask for. So the big question is: What are you asking for of your teenagers?

It is my personal **belief** that a seventeen year-old young man ought to be able to get out of bed. If he can’t, then he needs to pay the consequences. What are those consequences? He’ll be late to school, have to “stay after” to make up a class, might flunk the class or test that he was to take that day, or might miss something in which he really wanted to participate. Now, if he gets mad at his parents for not waking him up and is disrespectful, then we have another problem. I can promise you this, if he has to pay the price a number of times, he’ll change his tune and learn some new habits. Right now he doesn’t have to because mommy and daddy will come and wake him up. (My dad got out of his bunk at age seventeen to run radio communications on a naval destroyer in the Pacific. This young man can’t even get out of bed to make it to school, and worse yet, he feels it is mom and dad’s responsibility and he gets angry when they don’t do their job.)

There are problems written all over this scenario and they can be applied to several different situations. First, the parents have allowed old habits, those developed in the elementary school years, to creep over into the teen years. Second, the parents are keeping this child from developing responsibility, thus allowing immaturity to continue. Third, the child is angry because he hasn’t been prepared to do what he needs to do in a world that will demand that he work to get somewhere. Fourth, because of the dependence the young man has had on his mom or dad to wake him up, he will be even angrier when the parents decide to transfer control of this little responsibility to him. Why? He’s dependent on it. Where should he be moved to? Independence.

What do you think about this story? Sound familiar? If parents are going to tackle issues such as these, they have to start at the very beginning. And the beginning is asking them what they **believe**. The question here is, “Do you believe that a seventeen year-old young man ought to be able to get out of bed on his own?” If you do, then you take that **belief** and apply “rules of the house” to the situation to begin the process of preparing your child for the next stage of his life; a stage where “mommy and daddy” won’t be around to wake “Billy” up in the morning.

Please recognize the exaggeration in this story. I do so to make a point. It’s almost as if parents fall into the trap of depending on ideologies that were formed by their parents, or determined at the earlier stages of their marriages, or developed when their children were very young. These family customs have got to change. The first part of this change is to determine my **beliefs**. The second stage is setting some boundaries.

### Parental Boundaries

**A parental boundary defines us. It tells us who we are, and perhaps, who we’re not. A boundary gives us backbone. It allows us to not be walked on or taken advantage of. It defines my role; which roles I will play as a parent, and which ones I won’t. It’s saying “No” when I want to, and “Yes” when I want to. These boundaries are something that *are* about me. And, there’s nothing wrong with establishing who I am. In the process, defining who I am as a parent and individual will also define boundaries for our child and how we interact.**

Allow me to use this truth to demonstrate some parental boundaries that I would place in the “getting-out-of-bed” illustration. The first boundary that I would set is: *I’m not an alarm clock and I’m not going to take on the responsibility of getting someone over the age of twelve out of bed in the morning.* The second boundary is: *I’m not responsible for you getting to school.* The third is: *I’m not the person to complain to*

*when you can't fulfill what you need to do to make life happen the way you want. I'll talk about it, but don't "dump this one" on me.* Now, I can still make breakfast, still engage in conversation, but all the while, I let them take responsibility.

Young people tell me all the time that they want to make decisions for themselves and be in control of their own lives. My first thought is "Hallelujah! We want the same thing!" So what do we do as parents? Give it to them. Let them do it. Some young people have the ability to "set the world on fire," (figuratively speaking...not literally), but they can't even get out of bed.

It sounds harsh doesn't it? It does if you are accustomed to being walked on and have gotten in the habit of "babying" your child. It's not really that harsh if you sit back and read again what is being asked. How are we supposed to put this into action?

If your child is young, let them know that when they turn thirteen that you expect them to get themselves out of bed, do whatever you require thirteen-year-olds to do in the morning, eat breakfast, and be ready to leave for school by a certain time. Remember how they want to be a teen and take on responsibility? Give it to them. You'd much rather deal with the repercussions of their learning at an earlier age when grades don't matter as much, than you would when their learning could postpone going to college.

If your child is that seventeen year-old, then it's okay to change directions with old habits. Yes, leopards grow new spots, old dogs learn new tricks, and I am not doomed to live by standards and habits that I developed twenty years ago. It's okay to have "that talk" with your teen, and simply tell them that you're not going to be able to do that any more, AND, this is a responsibility that they're going to have to take on. Tell them that you'll buy them an alarm clock if they want. Tell them that you'll show them how to set the alarm clock. Tell them that breakfast will be waiting. Ask them what they

want you to do if they don't get out of bed (I'd let them sleep all day). Offer yourself. Give them the responsibility.

You begin to set your own boundaries and you'll be amazed how they will learn to set boundaries. You begin to say "No", and they'll learn how to say "No." You establish rules; they'll establish rules. You ask them questions, they'll begin to ask you questions. You become who you are to be, and surprisingly, they'll start to become who they are to be. It's an amazing concept. It's called coaching...mentoring...training. It's called "Monkey see, monkey do." It's called preparing. I think we all should know it as "parenting."

### **Boundaries for Your Teen**

I've always said that *immaturity demands boundaries*, and all teens are immature at various levels. So, as a parent, I also need to set the boundaries (the fences) in which my child has the freedom to operate. It's saying to my child: "Here are the options for you to choose." Their choosing is in their control; therefore, their exercise of decision making takes on new meaning. However, if they choose outside of the boundaries, then consequences must be applied to bring them back into the corral.

### **Setting Rules for Your Home**

As parents begin to develop rules for the home, I encourage them to outline what they believe their home should be. I call it a "Belief System." After lining out the beliefs, determine what rules will support those beliefs. From there you can then determine what the consequences would be for violating any of the rules. I encourage people to graph out what they want in spreadsheet form, so that each belief has a rule and each rule has a consequence.



BELIEF SYSTEM: Using the “getting out of bed” illustration one could line it out as follows:

**Belief** –

*When turning thirteen, a person ought to be able to get out of bed on their own and get ready for school.*

**Rule** –

*You must get yourself out of bed every morning.*

**Consequence** –

1<sup>st</sup> Time: You have to make up all missed work

2<sup>nd</sup> Time: You’re grounded for a Friday and Saturday night

3<sup>rd</sup> Time: We’re taking the car away.

Do you think the consequences will “push” your child to either accept responsibility or develop some new habits? I’m sure they will. When they learn that you are serious about the consequences, they’ll become serious about maturing. Once the “system” is set, don’t undermine it by making exceptions. You can do that later. Put the system in place and let it be your guide. Just like a Policy and Procedure Manual for a company, this Belief System can determine actions to be taken because the decisions have already been made.

This is a pretty easy concept and can be adapted to just about any situation or home. When you develop this Belief System for your home, I would encourage you to insure that everything is age/maturity appropriate, clearly understood, and mutually supported by both parents and all involved.

When you then have to correct your child, they will know that this is about them and their choices. It’s not that you as a parent have gotten them into trouble. It’s that

they have gotten themselves into trouble by not following what has been agreed to. They chose.

I encourage you to determine what you believe about disrespect, dishonesty, or disobedience, and line out the consequences for the violation of each. The priority you give to your **belief**, or the value you place on certain rules over, will determine the priority and severity of the consequences. Driving while drunk will bring a more severe consequence than not getting out of bed in the morning.

Will they like consequences? No. Who does? Remember, you've got to let them experience the pain of their choices so that they learn "to not go there." It's okay to let them "sit in it." You don't have to pull back your relationship when they suffer consequences. Move toward them.

What are some of the consequences you can list? Remember how we've over-indulged them, how we've spoiled them and they can hardly make it on their own? Well, start taking it away. There's nothing wrong with showing some backbone.

Discipline is hard work. It is strategic work. I believe it takes a lot of work to formulate, communicate, and implement a plan to help a child get to where he wants to be, and to keep him from going to a place where he doesn't want to be. The problem that sometimes arises is the inability of a teen to get a glimpse of the "bigger picture." This inability means that a child will challenge and question along the path of training. How could he not? But, there comes a time when any parent wants to see progress and to know that at least something is getting through. We all want to know that our great plans are at least helping.

When you see that what you are doing is not working, and you've tried many different approaches, it may be time to ask for help. Help could be in the form of a youth pastor, a counselor, or a friend of the family with whom you and your child connect. The

issue is not so much *who* you find, but more that you do find someone to help. Don't wait until everything is spinning out of control before you seek guidance. Don't hesitate to ask just because you feel that asking means that you're a failure. That's not true. It's quite the opposite. You'll be a failure as a parent to not ask.

## Avoid Provoking Your Child to Anger

Young people today are angry for a number of reasons, some of which have been mentioned in this e-book. When anger is present, it is usually because someone isn't getting something that they want. When most families come to me, the child is angry about something, and the parents are equally angry. Usually, the anger of each is a response to not getting what they want from each other. Amidst all the anger, parents must reflect and insure that some *of* their issues are not causing their child's anger. (There are times when I as a parent must do things that anger my child. Let's call that *good anger*.)

My focus here is really the *bad anger*. These are the things that the parent does, whether intentional or unintentional, that really have something to do with his own issues, her lack of insight, his unwillingness to see, or her own struggles. That's the focus.

The comments that I hear from young people most often are those that usually begin with the words "I'm so mad at my dad..." and end with a variety of phrases like "because he never admits when he is wrong", or, "because he just ignores what I have to say", or, "he treats me like a little kid", or "because he never listens, and always thinks that he's right." They say "I'm mad at mom...because she won't quit hounding me about everything", or "because she cares more about what others think than what I think", or "because she knows how dad is, and won't do a thing about it." Some of the time, their anger is aimed at parents' hypocrisy, two-facedness, lack of backbone, wrongdoing, and other inadequacies that all imperfect people display, intentional or unintentional.

So, if a parent is going to exert authority in a relationship with their child, or begin to regain authority territory that's been lost, it's important that each parent follow some counsel of a fellow who said "*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's*

*eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”* The importance of this statement is paramount before you assume a position that will place you in a perceived role of judge, referee, and umpire within your family.

Now, you and I know that we aren't perfect. I'm sure that you display your imperfections at times. (It's hard to believe, but probably true.) If your imperfection shows itself in your home, your kids are going to see it. I believe the Scripture which says, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*" AND, I also believe the next verse, which states "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children.*" Another translation says "*Fathers, don't provoke your child to anger.*" That's what I want to focus on.

Why is this important? As stated earlier, the discipline that we are talking about is not about you...it is about them. So let's make sure that the focus is not on you, nor have you be the one that is at fault. It's hard to correct the problems in others when others think that you are the problem.

Here are some thoughts and suggestions on how parents can make sure that they aren't the focus of their child's anger. Not all of these thoughts are based on "things we do", but include those things that we "don't do" as well. Don't eliminate the observation and inspection of yourself to just what you do...what you don't do may be equally and sometimes far greater "anger producers" for your child. Here are my suggestions:

1. **Admit when you're wrong.** These are simple words for a very difficult task. The problem that teens have is that, while all parents know that they are capable of being wrong, seldom do they admit that to their kids. Quite honestly, some parents believe they can be wrong...they just never are. Remember the Superman mentality. (That was when your kids looked at you as such and thought you could do no wrong.) Well, as you've grown closer and as they have become more perceptive, they're willing to "tug on Superman's cape" a little more. My counsel

to parents is to go ahead and admit where you're wrong, and by doing so, you will be pulling the fuse out of an explosive situation. When you admit, there's no longer a reason to argue and fight. It buries the wrongdoing. The admission allows everyone to move to a different place and really deal with the main issues, rather than getting stuck in a conversation where you just waste time and breath.

The way to do this is simple. You begin the conversation with the words, "I want you to know that I was wrong..." even before you say hello, hug, or greet. It sets the tone. What you'll find is this example will often move your child to do the same. I've seen it work so many times when I've been wrong, it makes me want to make things up to say that I'm wrong (I'm joking, but there is some truth in the process).

Many times the problem is that I don't know that I'm wrong. Dads, that's where you've got to be willing to believe what your wife is telling you. Perhaps, there is some truth in what she's saying. moms, there's some truth in what your husband is saying as well. Both of you need to listen with your heart's ear to your kids. Even when they've been wrong, there may be some "right" in what they're saying. Take what is accurate, accept it, admit it, and move on. When you admit your wrongdoing, your teens can't use "it" anymore. The measure of good parents is not the absence of wrongdoing. It's the presence of strength that allows them to admit when they are wrong. That's integrity at its finest.

2. **Listen with "wise ears."** The tendency when you are confronted, or when approached by your child in regard to something they don't agree with, is to get on their level rather than remaining in a position of wisdom. Perception is reality to the one who perceives it. As a parent you don't have to be threatened by perceptions. Truth always wins out if there can be a discussion. Listen well and wise. Try to hear what's really being said. Sometimes a child who complains

about “dad’s always right!” might be a plea to a parent who “hears” the message “I’m the one who is always wrong.” If the Scriptures are true about considering the other person more important, I must try to see things from their perspective. It’s going to their turf, but still remaining who you are.

Listen. Look deeper than the actual words. Don’t let behavior fool you, there’s more going on than you think. Think wise. The problem is not always the behavior. Behavior, more than likely, is symptomatic of other issues. Do you know all the issues your child has or is experiencing? (I remind myself, for example, that my wife was sexually abused for seven years before her parents knew about it. It causes me to always ask “What is it that I don’t see, that is behind the behavior that I do see?”)

3. **Never discipline out of your anger.** It will only get you in trouble later. If you are mad because of something that your child has either done or not done, in some cases, count to 10, in other cases, count to 10 million. Count to whatever you need to so that you can enter a potentially volatile situation with a cool and clear-thinking head. Don’t let your anger become the focus of the struggle with your child.

Most situations with your child don’t need to be taken care of “right now.” Allow some time to pass so that things can cool down for your child and you, and so that you can think through the wisest way to approach whatever you are dealing with.

4. **When you say “Do as I say, not as I do,”** you are intimidating your child, stating that you are holding them to an expectation that doesn’t apply to you. You are to model behavior to your child. You are called to be a reflection of God’s character to your child.

5. **Ignore your child and you will stir them to anger.** They might carry out that anger by finding attention elsewhere. When they get into trouble, move toward them. When they make a mistake, share with them how you respond when you fail.
6. **Be consistent with your enforcement of rules.** Oddly, young people like to know where the boundaries are. They enjoy knowing the “game.” When rules change and fluctuate, so do attitudes toward them. They deteriorate.
7. **Be willing to change your perceptions.** At times, it seems that some parents are more concerned about holding on to old rules and opinions than they are about holding on to their children. If I continued to think that anyone who pierced themselves was gay, I’d be in trouble. If I continued to think that having a tattoo was taboo, I’d lose some very dear friends. If I still thought that wearing Paul *Revere & the Raiders* boots and a *Monkee’s* double-breasted shirt while growing out every strand of hair on my head was cool, the distance between my child and I would be unfathomable. I used to think that way. At one time (a very short time) that type of look was cool. I wonder if some people still think in ways that are about as appropriate as a *Monkee’s* shirt and go-go boots. My point is this. Things change. I don’t lower my standards. I do change my perceptions.
8. **Let them grow up.** Asking yourself if growth is happening in your family helps to determine if you’re training your teen and preparing them to face the world. If kids today are more immature than they were twenty years ago, chances are your child is too. We would all do well to help them grow up. It is harder to help them grow up than it is to do nothing and watch time pass. The “dues” they will have to pay in the future are much higher than those same “dues” they can pay now.



9. **Use Common Sense.** One father told me at a retreat that he had just gotten tired of doing what his pastor told him to do. His pastor's "wise" advice was to spank the child until you basically beat them into submission. The father told me that he would spank his daughter on the legs sometimes until he drew blood. Now this fellow wasn't a stupid fellow...he was a medical doctor who had demonstrated his ability to think, and surely understood what physical trauma he would cause. But, he was desperate...desperate enough that he would follow some bizarre advice that contradicts all logic and common sense. When you're desperate, you'll do anything. The damage that he caused was far greater than the damage that had been done through her stubbornness and strong-willed character.

This brings up another topic that should be discussed. People ask me all the time what I think about spanking. For young children...absolutely spank them; as long as it doesn't move into beating. Using common sense, restraint and wisdom, a mother or father will find that spanking can help a younger child learn.

I believe in spanking younger children as long as it is one of many different options for discipline, not when it is the only one. But I don't believe that teens should be spanked. I would expand that age group to pre-teens in most circumstances. Parents must be very careful about any form of corporal punishment for teenagers, and my encouragement would be to use your head, not your emotions, in determining what is right for your family.

In our residential program for teenagers in Texas, we've never used corporal or emotional punishment as a form of discipline. That's because other options are more effective for disciplining teens, like removing certain privileges and freedoms for a time. Teenagers can reason, and therefore, reasonable (non-physical) consequences can be applied to improve behavior.

## Final Thoughts

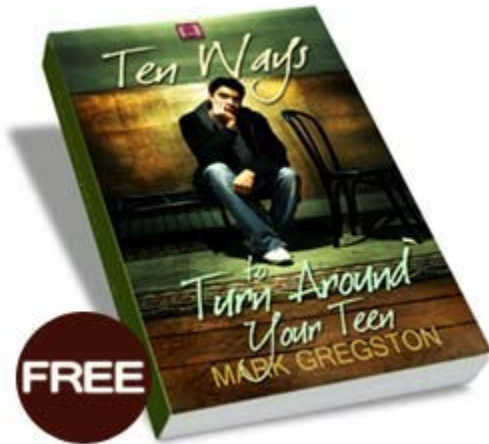
Perhaps you're feeling like Popeye. Popeye, the old cartoon character I remember as a kid, would take it and take it and take it, until he got pushed to his limit and then said, "That's all I can stand cause I can't stand no more." If your child has moved to become openly defiant, stubbornly oppositional, and blatantly disrespectful, and all that you have tried just isn't working, I would encourage you to seek a greater source of help. Sadly, there's no magical can of spinach that's going to give you all the strength you desire, and beating someone up (as Popeye always did) doesn't change your child's problems that you will face tomorrow. If you've reached that limit, take a deep breath and pray that God will give you a bigger picture of what is to come, rather than focusing on what you see before you. Keep looking with the eyes of your heart to see the heart of your child, who needs you desperately to train him and prepare her for a world that is bent on devouring their minds and erasing the fingerprint of God that has been placed on their life. You are not only a part of the process, but a key player on a team of people in your child's life who will teach your child throughout their life.

It's not an easy task to discipline your child. Your child needs you to do so. He needs your correction, your wisdom, and your willingness to help him travel the path on which God has placed him. She needs your gentle, but firm, guidance. And, He needs you to be a reflection of His love to your children. A wise man once told me, "When you're called to be a servant, don't stoop to be a king." There is never a more servant-like heart, than when a parent is willing to love a child through anything, and remain with them in everything. Don't quit because it's hard. Hang in there and don't grow weary in doing what is right. You are to do what you are supposed to do. Don't let your child determine your parenting.

Tom Landry, former coach of the Dallas Cowboys, once said that a coach is a person who makes someone do what they don't want to do, to get them to a place that

they want to be. Such is the world of discipline. One day, your child will thank you for hanging in there with him or her, and fighting for them and, at times, against them. Success lies in the process of what is transferred to your child as you discipline. So discipline your child well.

## OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM MARK



To download the free e-book, *Ten Ways to Turn Around Your Teen* visit:

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For more books, CD's and DVD's of Mark Gregston's teaching, visit:

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If you would like more information about the Heartlight Residential Program for teens, log on to: [www.HeartlightMinistries.org](http://www.HeartlightMinistries.org) or call 903-668-2173

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Turbulence Ahead Tour: [www.turbulenceahead.org](http://www.turbulenceahead.org)

Family Crisis Conferences: [www.familycrisisconference.com](http://www.familycrisisconference.com)

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