
B O N U S # 2

How to Handle Teenage Rebellion Without Losing Your Child

*Practical Strategies for Tough Conversations, Stronger
Boundaries, and a Closer Relationship*

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A COMPANION TO WHY MY ADULT CHILDREN STILL CALL ME FIRST



Why Teenagers Rebel

(And Why It's Usually Not What You Think)

For a long time, I read my sons' pushback the way most parents do: as disrespect. Stubbornness. A child who had suddenly become difficult. It took me years, and a few uncomfortable seasons, to understand something that changed how I responded to all three of my children as teenagers.

The behaviour is rarely the real issue. It's the symptom. Underneath almost every teenage rebellion I've ever seen — in my own home or in the homes of the many parents who've asked me for help over the years — is one of two needs.

They Are Trying To Get Out

Some teenagers push back because they feel trapped. Every decision made for them. Every opinion corrected. Every mistake punished. Every step monitored. As they get older, they naturally start asking themselves who they are, what they actually believe, and whether they're allowed to make any choices of their own. When they feel there's no room to answer those questions honestly, rebellion becomes how they carve out space.

The argument is rarely really about the curfew, the hairstyle, the friends, or the phone. Those are just where the pressure happens to show up. Underneath, the actual message is almost always the same: *I need some room to be my own person.*

I saw a version of this with my own son during his kitchen-duty years. He wasn't rebelling against cooking. He was testing whether he had any say at all in how his time was spent, now that he was old enough to have opinions about it. I didn't remove the responsibility — but I did start explaining the reasoning instead of just enforcing it, and that alone changed the tone of almost every argument we'd been having.

They Are Trying To Get In

This one surprises more parents. Some teenagers push back not because they feel controlled, but because they feel disconnected. Misunderstood. Overlooked. Compared to a sibling. Like nobody in the house really sees them. In these cases, difficult behaviour becomes a strange kind of attention-seeking — not because they enjoy the conflict, but because being noticed, even through an argument, feels better than being invisible.

A teenager will almost never say, plainly, “I feel invisible in this family.” Instead you get slammed doors. Constant arguing. Emotional withdrawal. Rules broken for no obvious reason. The behaviour is a hand reaching for something, even when it looks like the opposite.

One of my sons, as a teenager studying abroad, told me about a relationship he'd started — but asked me specifically not to mention it to his father, because he was certain his father would respond with judgment rather than interest. He wasn't rebelling against either of us. He was doing something quieter: finding the one place in the family where he could still be fully honest, because he'd already decided the other place wasn't safe for

that particular truth.

A teenager who is trying to get in isn't looking for permission. They're looking for proof that they still belong.

Rebellion Is Often Communication

Most parents, myself included in my weaker moments, focus entirely on stopping the behaviour. But the more useful question is almost always: what is my teenager actually trying to tell me right now?

A teenager who constantly argues may be fighting for independence. A teenager who withdraws may be protecting themselves from feeling misunderstood, the way one of my sons did during a season of depression — he wasn't rebelling in the usual sense, but the withdrawal was still a message, and the message was *I don't know how to ask for help right now*. A teenager who keeps breaking the same rule may be searching for belonging in the only way they currently know how.

When we only react to the behaviour, we miss the message underneath it. And a message that keeps getting missed usually gets louder, not quieter.

The Mistake Many Parents Make

As children grow into teenagers, our instinct as parents is often to tighten our grip. More rules. More monitoring. More lectures. More consequences. I understand the instinct — it comes from fear, not malice. But it can quietly create a cycle: the more controlled a teenager feels, the harder they push back, and the harder they push back, the stricter we become. Before long, both sides are fighting each other instead of solving the real problem underneath.

I nearly fell into that cycle more than once. What pulled me out of it wasn't a perfect strategy. It was pausing long enough to ask

what my child actually needed from me in that moment, before deciding how to respond.

What Teenagers Need Most

If I had to summarize everything I've learned about this into one idea, it would be this: teenagers need both love and responsibility, held at the same time. Too much control creates resentment. Too little guidance creates confusion. The relationships that hold together through the teenage years tend to sit somewhere in the middle.

WHAT YOUR TEENAGER NEEDS TO KNOW

- You love them, without that love depending on their behaviour.
- You are for them, even when you disagree with a decision they've made.
- You believe they are capable of growing into someone good.
- You expect maturity from them, appropriate to their age.
- You will allow them real, age-appropriate choices — not just the appearance of choice.
- You will still hold them accountable when it matters, without turning accountability into shame.

Love without boundaries creates chaos. Boundaries without love create rebellion. Neither one works alone — they only work together.

There could be a consequence. But we would try to find a solution.

That's the sentence I kept coming back to during the hardest teenage years in my house. It meant a rule could still be broken and still have a real consequence — but the conversation afterward was never designed to make anyone feel small. It was designed to fix the actual problem.

The Question To Ask Before You React

The next time your teenager becomes difficult, try pausing before you respond — even for just a few seconds — and asking yourself one of these two questions.

Is my child trying to get out?

Do they need more freedom? More trust? More ownership over their own decisions and consequences?

Is my child trying to get in?

Do they need more connection? More attention? More understanding, or a stronger sense that they belong in this family exactly as they are?

The answer will not always be obvious right away. But asking the question at all, instead of jumping straight to correction, tends to change everything about how the rest of the conversation goes.

TRY THIS THIS WEEK

1. Name What You Notice, Not Just What You Want Stopped

Instead of leading with “stop doing that,” try: “I’ve noticed you’ve been pulling away lately — is everything okay?” This opens a door instead of just closing one.

2. Give One Real Choice This Week

Find one age-appropriate decision this week that genuinely belongs to your teenager — not a fake choice with an obvious right answer, but a real one — and let them make it, consequences included.

PARENT REMINDER

“Most teenagers are not rebelling because they hate their parents. They’re trying to solve a problem they don’t yet know how to explain.”

Key Lesson

When parents learn to look beneath the behaviour, they usually discover that rebellion was never really the problem. The real issue was a teenager trying to find freedom, or belonging, or both — using the only language they had available to ask for it.

You will not get this right every time. I certainly didn't. But every time you choose curiosity over correction, even once, you are teaching your teenager something they will carry for the rest of their life: that they can come to you, even at their most difficult, and still be met with love.

With love,

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