



# MAKING CHILDREN MIND WITHOUT LOSING YOURS

---

*How to Bring out the Best in Kids  
by Doing What Is Best for Them*

---

DR. KEVIN LEMAN



SAMPSON RESOURCES

4887 ALPHA ROAD, SUITE 220

DALLAS, TEXAS 75244

800-371-5248 • 972-387-2806 • FAX 972-387-0150

WWW.SAMPSONRESOURCES.COM • E-MAIL: INFO@SAMPSONRESOURCES.COM

© 2004 THE SAMPSON COMPANY (ALL RIGHTS RESERVED)

NOTE: REPRODUCTION OR DUPLICATION IN ANY FORM OF ALL  
OR ANY PORTION OF THE MATERIAL CONTAINED IN THIS PUB-  
LICATION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED BY U.S. COPYRIGHT LAW.



## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADOLESCENTS**

### *Communicating Respect with Teenagers*

One of the greatest challenges for those of us in positions of authority is that we must build relationships with the children in our lives. There are no short cuts to this process. It takes time, effort and energy. As we show children that we really want to share experiences with them, we are laying the groundwork for the mutual respect that grows from understanding each other.

#### **SEVEN WAYS TO BE A TEENAGER'S FRIEND**

Keep in mind that “friend” does not mean “peer.” The dictionary defines a friend as “one with whom you share mutual affection and respect.” This does not mean that teenagers want their parents and teachers to act like teenagers. They want them to act like normal authority figures, but authority figures who show understanding, compassion and a willingness to listen. In this case, “friend” means being caring, attentive and respectful, just as you would be with anyone with whom you want to build a relationship.

##### **1. Have home games.**

When your child spends most of his free time at his own house, you reap the benefits of meeting the teenagers with whom your child socializes, and you are aware of where and how he spends his time. Thus, the odds of getting into unsupervised trouble are reduced. Take the time to get to know your children's friends—not by putting them under a magnifying glass—but by simply finding out what they are like. In fact, you'll learn a lot about your own children by learning what their friends are like. Make your home a place where children want to be, and they will be there instead of in some other child's home where they might get into trouble. You may have to shell out some extra cash for videos and snacks, but consider it a wise investment in a precious commodity.

##### **2. Let teenagers see your mistakes.**

Always try to set a proper example, but be willing to admit that you are human—in word and deed. Since teens already know that you make mistakes, you will raise your esteem in their eyes if you admit it to them. For example, if you are a teacher and you happen to speak harshly to your third-period class, be willing to apologize to them. You do not necessarily have to apologize for the anger you felt, but apologizing to the class sends a powerful message of honesty and willingness to admit to a

mistake. Share yourself with the students and tell them stories to let them know that you *do* remember how tough it can be to be young and in the process of growing up. Showing respect for teenagers encourages them to show respect for you and for one another. Remind them that part of being an adult is admitting to and learning from one's mistakes. By no means should you focus on your mistakes, but you can and should use them as "teachable moments" in your teenager's life.

**3. Don't snowplow the roads of life for teenagers.**

Life can be tough, and teenagers who have every bump and pothole in the road smoothed out for them are simply going to be unprepared to deal with the realities of the real world. It is unfortunate not to prepare children for the true realities of life. By handling every teen problem and enabling negative or irresponsible behavior, you are not caring for them or preparing them. Reality discipline is loving, but firm. Allow your teenagers to accept the consequences for what they do. If your son does not do his homework all semester, then let him fail the class. He has earned that failure. If you visit the school to plead with his teacher for a passing grade, then you are doing your child a disservice. When teachers and schools work together, children are the beneficiaries. You must trust that schools are working in your child's best interests and thus help them help your child receive solid preparation for life.

**4. Listen to your teenagers when they are ready to talk.**

One of the most effective ways to build a relationship with a teenager—or anyone, for that matter—is to keep the lines of communication open. Getting to know someone beyond the surface of their lives is one of the most crucial factors in building a relationship and becoming friends. This does not mean that you and your teenagers should be best friends and tell each other everything. It does mean, however, that you care about them, are interested in what they are interested in, and that you are willing to listen to them when they want to share their fears, hopes and concerns with you. Even if they just want to tell you minor details about their day, let them know that you are interested in their lives and their interests.

**5. Never browbeat or bully a teenager into submission.**

Discipline does not mean browbeating or bullying. Reality discipline demands that an authority figure be in control of his or her emotions when dealing with a problem. Beware of allowing anger, frustration or fear to spur you into forcing a child to bend to your will, for it may be a temptation to allow the "authoritarian" in you to take over. You may allow a child to make a mistake and accept the consequences of that action, but do not browbeat or bully the teenagers in your life. They will grow to resent you for it.

**6. Expect the best from teenagers.**

Even though teenagers will make mistakes and fall short of their potential at times,

you should expect the best from them and encourage success by setting positive expectations. For example, when a teacher enlists a substitute teacher, she has a choice. She can intimidate her class with harsh threats concerning any misbehavior that might occur in her absence, or she can encourage and assure the students of her appreciation for and confidence in their good behavior. Which self-fulfilling prophecy would you choose?

Teachers are known for picking the best students to watch the class if they need to step out of the room, but one wise teacher picked the “worst” student in the class to watch and report back to him. What do you think that “worst” student did? He sat up straighter, announced to the class that he’d be watching their every move, rapped his pencil against his desk like it was a gavel and told the class they could now call him “Judge Jerry.” Notice he kept his “classroom” persona, but he took his temporary responsibility seriously and gave a full report when the teacher came back. Again, if you *expect* the best, you’ll have a better chance of getting the best.

#### **7. Love and respect your mate and other adults.**

One of the most powerful things children can observe is one authority figure caring for and respecting another. Endorse your spouse’s decisions and don’t let your children play one against the other or manipulate the two of you. Speak well of the other teachers in your department, and show that you respect the job they are doing. If you demonstrate respect, children will have that model to emulate.

#### **Other tips for getting along with teenagers**

1. Use action methods whenever possible and do not yell or rant and rave with no follow-through. Be clear about what your expectations are and then be swift and fair with your action.
2. Be consistent across the board. Inconsistency confuses children and sends an unclear message about expectations and consequences. Consistency requires energy and effort, but it brings long-term success.
3. Emphasize order, schedule and routine, because children need boundaries and structure. Just as inconsistent discipline causes children to be confused, so does inconsistent scheduling. Therefore, try to provide them with structure whenever possible. Teach them that certain tasks must take priority, such as homework before television and healthy food before dessert. Children will see that order is a necessary element in our world.
4. Offer choices that reinforce cooperation, not competition. Each child is different and has different needs and strengths; and teaching teamwork is an excellent way to reinforce the fact the cooperation is an important part of collaboration.
5. Realize that teenagers are constantly pulled between two different worlds—school

and home. That history student you have to call on twice before you get his attention might be reliving his morning when his parents argued over which one was going to attend his football game. Understand that your class is not necessarily the center of his world, and that he walks through your classroom door with a certain amount of baggage. Likewise, your teenager who comes home after school not wanting to talk about anything might still be recovering from having a girl reject his invitation to the prom.

6. If you have a problem in a relationship with a teenager, then try this: Stop asking so many questions! When you give a child some breathing room and stop peppering him with questions about minor happenings, you allow the child the opportunity to share experiences, thoughts and feelings with you at his will, not yours. Kids want to belong and want to talk with their parents, teachers, coaches and counselors, but they need the freedom to do it at their pace and in their way...not always on your demand. Instead of asking questions, talk to them in statements. For example, you can ask: "How did you do on the test today?" or you can simply say, "I'll bet that test today was challenging" or "I'm sure you were ready for the test today." You'll get a response either way, and probably the same response.

The truth is, excessive questioning becomes a threat to kids and makes them think you are nosy and are invading their private world. Furthermore, by the teen years kids are convinced that adults use questions to draw them out so they can attack them. Unfortunately, this is too often the case. So kids will wind up trying to avoid you—the questioner—or grunt out as short an answer as they can get by with until they can get out of your sight and on the telephone with their peers who neither question them nor try to "trap" them. Questions have a way of putting the questioner "up here" and the questionee "down here," and kids don't like to be "down here."

My suggestion is this: when you must ask questions, try not to ask questions that can be answered simply by "yes" or "no." Ask a question that requires the child to think and give an answer, even though it may be a simple answer. And don't keep probing unless necessary.

Back to my original suggestion: Be careful with questions. Try to converse with your children with statements as much as possible. They'll find it much less threatening and much easier to talk with you.

## 7. Be REAL with kids.

- **RESPECT** them. Treat children with the respect and dignity you would accord anyone, and validate your children's emotions and thoughts. They want you to appreciate the fact that they are human and have thoughts, feelings and ideas that are different from your own.
- **ENCOURAGE** them. Focus on the behavior, not the child. Expect the best, but when a child is in error or an expectation is not met, communicate that the behavior is unacceptable, but that the child is still acceptable.

- **AFFIRM** them. Appreciate children for who they are, not just for what they do or how they act. Encourage them in directions where you see them succeeding, directions that will foster their growth.
- **LOVE** them. Expecting accountability, exercising discipline and setting boundaries are all loving acts. Love involves wanting to do what is best for the child, not just wanting to do what is easiest and most comfortable for you, or most preferred by the child.

## IN CONCLUSION

By working to build a relationship with the teenagers in your life, you are investing your time and energy in something that can return handsome dividends. Reality discipline works best when the relationships between children and their authority figures are growing and developing. By becoming friends with teenagers, you are both giving and receiving the best of each other. The goal is to be your child's friend—not his peer. In so doing you will come to share each other's respect, admiration and affection.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Summarize in abbreviated fashion your basic philosophy for getting along with children. What philosophy do your teenagers embrace in getting along with you? Are you on the same page? Discuss.
2. Consider the word "respect" and what it means to you. Do you think that respect is something you deserve or something you earn?
3. How would you explain the difference between "friend" and "peer"? Do you think teenagers want to be their "friends" or their "peers"? Why or why not?
4. How do you think an authoritarian adult would react to this lesson? A permissive adult? An authoritative adult? Discuss what you think the three types of disciplinarians would think about the concept of being a "friend" to a teenager.
5. Many families are so busy with clubs, activities, work and sports that they spend very little time together. Brainstorm creative ways that families can spend more quality time together.
6. What are some things that teenagers want to hear from the adults? What are some ways that people try to smooth things over for children? Brainstorm some common scenarios in which people try to "snowplow" for children and ways that authority figures could use reality discipline instead.
7. Opening the lines of communication between teenagers and their authority figures is an important part of reality discipline. Think of some ways that discussion and dialog could be better facilitated between teenagers and adults. Can you think of anything specific that might "turn off" a teenager to discussion?

NOTE: For more on the topic of this chapter, read Dr. Leman's book **ADOLESCENCE ISN'T TERMINAL—IT JUST FEELS THAT WAY**, available from Tyndale House Publishers.