

How to Be a Good Parent to a Teenager

By [Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD](#) WEBMD Wednesday, November 7, 2018

If you have a teenager at home, you may, like many parents, be praying to survive these tumultuous years. I recently listened to an experienced social worker, Scott Hull, explain to parents that while they cannot control their teens, they can exert influence. Unfortunately, parents often get sucked into repeated battles, where they and their children vie for control. He suggested some alternative strategies.

It struck me, as I observed the room, that along with providing some invaluable advice, Hull was also role-modeling for the parents how to interact with their teens – a way that he explained is suggested in the book, *Parallel Process* by Krissy Pozatek. Here's some of what I saw him showing the parents how to do:

Listen. Before responding to parents' concerns, he allowed them space to talk as he listened and empathized. For instance, when a mother opened up about her tendency to do too much for her son, he expressed understanding for how difficult it could be to stand by and watch her son struggle. When he did offer advice, she seemed open to receiving what he had to say. Similarly, if your child feels heard and validated, they will be more open to listening to your advice.

Know yourself. Hull was clearly aware of his limitations, such as not being able to eliminate the parents' concerns. He even asked a colleague to join in when one parent asked a particularly thorny question. By being confident, yet humble and open to input, he made the parents feel comfortable sharing their concerns, and they really listened to the wisdom he had to offer. By being self-aware, you can also remain attentive to your strengths and limitations, making it more likely for your teen to respond positively.

Be attuned. An important part of what enabled Hull to be so effective was that he was not just offering answers to stated questions. Instead, he validated parents' underlying worries about their children's distress and their fears of their children making poor life decisions. Yet, he also continued to emphasize the importance of guiding and working with their children – rather than trying to control what would happen.

Similarly, you can flatly tell your child, "No, you cannot stay out past midnight." Or you can acknowledge their desire to have more freedom and be with friends while still holding firm to house rules – and to the consequences you will impose if they break those rules.

Be accountable. It's easy to get so caught up in your teen's poor judgment or problem behaviors that you forget to keep a close eye on your own responses and your struggles. Your job is to love your child for who they are, provide the best guidance you can, and support them when they need help. Ultimately you want to help them learn to navigate life, including coping as best as possible with adversity (even when it is the result of poor decision-making).

If your teen struggles a lot and faces big challenges, you might be inclined to think that this approach is fine for minor issues, but won't work for them. So, it is important to understand that Hull works as a therapist at a residential treatment center for teens who need more help than a

family can offer at home. Working *with* your teen, rather than protecting or controlling them, is solid advice for any parent who wants to help their child become a healthy, independent adult.