

6 Principles of Provocative Parenting

These six principles will put you back in the driver's seat with your son.

The Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III of Azusa Christian Church in Boston has never forgotten the advice he once got from a drug kingpin. Rivers wanted to spearhead an effort to clean up his community and help kids whose lives were being ruined by drug addiction, gang violence and joblessness. In a stroke of genius, he decided to ask the local drug dealers for insight. With their fancy clothes and Cadillacs, they seemed to be the real heroes to kids.

"Man, why did we lose you to the underworld?" he asked one powerful dealer. "And why are we losing other kids to you right now?"

The answer was stunning. The dealer stared him in the eye and said, "I'm there—you're not! When the kids go to school, I'm there—you're not. When the boy wants somebody older to talk to or feel safe and strong around, I'm there—you're not. I'm there—you're not. I win. You lose."

I don't want to lose with my kids, and I know you don't either. We want to win. Dad, as crazy as it sounds, it's time we take the advice of a drug dealer.

It's time to show up in a big way.

What I suggest is an in-your-face, audacious approach I call *provocative parenting*. The idea is to be a cause, not an effect; to be an active, unapologetic variable rather than a passive nonvariable; to make family life fun and interesting; to set high goals and reach them with your son.

Where do you begin? Think about this: Teenage men live in a provocative world. You can hear it in their music, their relationships, their cars and their competitive sports. Their hopes and affections thrive on energy and excitement. Their very nature calls for a parenting approach that respects and complements that zest.

Don't get nervous. Provocative parenting is not so much about who you are but about what you do. There are six principles of provocative parenting. We've already encountered the first rule of a provocative parent.

Principle 1: Don't just be there—be audaciously present. Now we're ready to look one by one at the other five principles of provocative parenting.

Principle 2: Don't try to force change—provoke it. To do this, you must first understand one simple truth: Change yourself, and the whole world must adapt. The world, and all those in it, will follow your lead every time.

For example, rather than yelling orders across the room, snuggle up close to him and whisper in his ear (mouthwash recommended) and watch what he does. Rather than scold him, ask questions about his future and watch what he does. Rather than criticize his pals, offer to take them out to eat and watch what he does. Get the idea?

As the parent in the house, the advantage is yours to be the instigator of positive action. This won't always make you the most popular person, but it will put you in a much better position to change a life.

Principle 3: Don't just get an attitude—get an awesome metaphor. To become a provocative and highly effective parent of a teenage boy, the word pictures you use to describe your teen have to work for you, not against you.

Using a word picture, how would you describe parenting your

teen? Following Jesus' lead, try filling in this sentence: "Parenting my teenager is like ... "

You might come up with all sorts of images and thoughts. Do any of your similes sound like these? Parenting my teen is like:

* Herding a rabbit (I don't get anywhere chasing him—but whip out the carrots, and he comes running).

* Pulling teeth (I have to yank all day just to get this guy to speak).

Your word pictures for parenting your teen reflect the truth about how to perceive the relationship. In other words, your pictures are probably attached to real feelings and experiences. Your word pictures also suggest how you probably act in his presence.

Choosing a more positive word picture won't cure all your parenting problems, by any means, but it's a great place to start—especially if you want to become a parent who makes good things happen.

Principle 4: Don't get a bigger hammer—get a better idea. Parents stuck in "bigger-hammer thinking" believe they just need a more powerful version of whatever isn't working, whether the hammer is talking, bribing or punishing.

Provocative parents choose to do something different. If a "hammer" fails to work, they quickly move to screwdrivers. If a screwdriver fails, they try a velvet glove. If that fails, they try butterfly kisses. They're always trying new things. These parents end up relaxed and at ease because their style is not to make their solution work but to find what works through open-minded exploration of alternative solutions. There's a lot of riding room out there on the range of better ideas.

Principle 5: Don't just tolerate teens—get passionate about them. I used to feel a lot of panic when I spent time with teenagers socially. Every time I was with a group of teens, I felt like I was in a cage with lions that would just as soon eat me as talk to me.

It all changed when I made the decision to change my point of view. I changed it to “These crazy creatures aren't man-eating lions! They're a bunch of frightened kids, more scared than I am. They want someone to walk up to them, talk to them, like them—maybe even tickle them under the chin.”

I immediately started to wade into crowds of teens whenever possible. I treated them like a bunch of quivering little kitties in need of a gentle scratch. They loved it. Soon I did too. Now the tension I used to feel in a teenager's presence is long gone.

When you begin to like teenagers on purpose, something powerful happens. Think about the strongest, most positive, visceral feeling you have for your teenager. A special message of love and strength is transmitted when you focus on that feeling. Your teen is waiting to sense that message from you. Act on the best things you feel toward him.

Principle 6: Have some fun! Above all the passions you provoke, I pray that having fun is at the top of the list. There's nothing worse in the realm of parenting than a joyless crank. Generations of well-intentioned, perfectly correct, biblically informed parents have gone down to defeat because their kids figured out something vital—the joy was missing. Laughs never happened. Fun had to be bought somewhere else.

Adults can overlook somberness in the duty of doing good, but teenagers never can. For them, humor and rejoicing are the proof of any pudding. Family fun has a way of salving the deepest wounds we encounter as we nurture our children through adolescence.

Let fun be part of your purposeful parenting plan, and your teen will see the spark of our Savior in you. It may be your most provocative move yet.

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