

When Parenting Teens, Become a Rubber Wall

Our friend is a couple of years ahead of my wife and me in parenting. She's had teenagers a few years longer than we have, and she recently gave us one of her ideas—an illustration really—for parenting teenagers.

It's a good thing she did. We've needed the help! She calls her idea the "Rubber Wall," where parents serve as a sturdy and safe wall against which their kids can practice living, try out their ideas, experience failure and learn consequences.

Her kids don't physically or literally collide with her, but she likes to say that she wants to provide the safety and structure for them to "bounce off" her. A sturdy wall + a rebounded kid + a little give = The Rubber Wall.

We liked the sound of that, so we tried it out. One of our teens had been lying about homework and grades over a period of some weeks. When we found out, we were hurt and angry—both about the school performance and the evasion tactics. We talked in private, thought about the Rubber Wall, and agreed to not make our feelings the focus of our conversation with our kid.

Instead, we said something like, "OK, look. This was your choice. You know this is a bigger deal than some of the kid trouble we used to talk to you about. So, you're getting some new boundaries (doing your homework in front of us) and some consequences (grounding and a letter of apology to the teacher).

"Yes, I can see you're upset about this. While we're not thrilled either, you're about to head out into the world where lying and skipping your work just won't make it. We are here

to help you keep practicing hard work and truth-telling for as long as it takes.”

We then sent that child back out to make amends with the teacher and to work on transparency in work habits. (We also called the school to prepare the teacher for what was coming and to intercede for our child, asking if there was a way to make up the work.) Sturdy wall + rebounded kid + a little give = Rubber Wall.

We don't do anything perfectly as parents. No one does, but we're trying to learn as fast as we can. The image of a rubber wall has been helpful for us on several counts:

1. It has reminded us to stay solid, maybe even tougher than we'd initially think we should be. And this interestingly, has provided a sense of security for our kids, as they realize their choices aren't going to wreck us or “hurt the wall.”
2. At the same time, we remember to stay flexible. As parents we're the place our kids are *supposed* to bounce off. Out there, in the real world, there are a lot of concrete walls. “So, kiddo, if you collide with those walls by making bad choices, you're going to pancake and get hurt. Practice on and with me. You can have some give and mercy as you learn.”
3. It has helped us think about and manage our own emotions in the face of our kids' bad choices. We're often tempted in the heat of the moment to take things personally or to lash out in fear and anger. “Don't you realize that (fill-in-the-blank consequence) almost happened? What's wrong with you?” Or, filled with inappropriate levels of parental concern, we're tempted to entirely absorb or cushion the consequences for our teen. The Rubber Wall helps guard us against both extremes in emotion. “I'm not here to unnecessarily hammer you with my own anger, but I'm not here to insulate you, either.”

4. Finally, the Rubber Wall reminds us to rebound *the child*, propelling *them* into action and more learning. It can be tempting for us simply to apply the solution to our kid's problems: "Look at the mess this is. Now I have to fix it." This image has reminded us not to rush into activity, fixing every issue. We are starting to look for creative ways to activate our kid to handle their own problems.

No single idea or approach to our teenagers is ever going to be comprehensive enough to address every situation. But we've been finding it helpful to think about how we see ourselves. We're not a house of cards, about to be knocked over by our kids' issues. We're not a pillow that catches and absorbs every impact. We're not a baseball bat that crushes incoming issues with added force.

We're trying to be a Rubber Wall. Sturdy wall + rebounded kid + a little give. It's helped us. I hope it helps you. {eoa}

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