

Is There a Rebel in Your House?

✖ I raised a strong-willed child—and survived. Here are some tips from a mom who lived through the teenage years.

There are few situations that grieve a parent more than having to deal with a rebellious child. In my travels around the world, I've met many heartbroken parents who have shared with me the depths of their sorrow over a prodigal son or daughter. It always amazes me to see how many believers have children who have strayed from God.

The attack on the children of godly parents is fierce. Satan is out to steal, kill and destroy (see John 10:10) the seed of believers to stop them from becoming a righteous generation who love God.

If you have a rebellious child and are seeking answers, please understand that I am writing this article not as an expert, but as an experienced mom who has raised two children. Somehow I was much more of an authority on the subject of child-rearing before I lived through the teenage years with them!

When they were growing up I read many books on how to be a good parent. I was convinced that they were going to be just perfect. Wrong! None of them is perfect. They're sinners who need the saving grace and process of sanctification just like the rest of us.

Aside from this common element and similarities in physical appearance, however, siblings often don't resemble one another. Each child is unique. Though you must deal with all equitably, you will find that each responds in a different way to parental directives. One child will be strong-willed, for example, and another compliant.

Opposite Ends of the Pole

These two personality types are as opposite as they can be. The strong-willed child has a tendency to test, challenge, resist and blatantly defy authority. I first learned about this amazing difference after the birth of our daughter, Mary. It seems that she was born wanting to run the family and tell everyone what to do. She would do and say outlandish things when she was tiny that kept me constantly on my toes.

One day when we were in the post office in El Paso, Texas, a rather large woman came into the building. The woman stopped to comment on what a pretty child Mary was. Mary looked up at her and asked in an innocent voice, "Lady, are you pregnant?"

The startled woman replied, "Why no, I'm not." Without stopping to think, Mary immediately shot back, "Well, then you're fat!"

My first thought was to grab her and make a break for the door. However, I knew that the woman deserved an apology. I pulled Mary aside and explained that it was not a kind thing to say and that she had embarrassed

and humiliated this stranger. She went over afterward and apologized, but I'm sure my face as still red when we left the post office.

In contrast, the compliant child wants to please everyone—because he needs their approval. A word of displeasure or even the slightest frown from his parents can be disturbing to him. He is a lover, not a fighter.

I saw the contrast quite clearly when I took the child of a friend of mine shopping. This little girl, who was compliant by nature, just stood next to me the whole time I was out—she never moved away or talked.

Finally I asked her, “Honey, are you sick? Do you have a fever?” She shook her sweet little head side to side, and I had the shock of my life. She was content to just stand there, doing nothing, and wait for me! My precious, strong-willed child would have been swinging from the clothing racks, and we would have had at least one visit outside for either a strong talking to or a pop on the bottom.

Lessons I Have Learned

How do you know if the behavior a child is exhibiting is true rebellion? True rebellion is determined by intent. The child makes a conscious choice not to do something he is told to do—or to do something he is told not to do.

Although all rebellion needs to be attended to and disallowed, I have learned that not all of it stems from a

heart that purposes
to hurt you, the parent. Sometimes the children act up because
they themselves
are hurt or frustrated. They may have had a terrible day at
school and feel
safe taking it out on you because you are a familiar person.
Although it is
important to let them know that their behavior isn't
acceptable, it is even
more important to find out if something is bothering them—and
what it might be.

I have also learned to major on the majors, not on the
minors. If a child is going through a particularly hard time
at school or in
relationships, it is wise not to ride him about less
significant
matters—keeping his room perfectly clean, for instance. Just
help him get past
the difficult season.

When Mary was coming out of her teenage years and our son,
Daniel, was just going into them, John and Paula Sandford
taught my husband,
Mike, and me about something called “individuation.” They
explained that each
child has to cut free, or establish his own identity separate
from his parents.
If he can't do this in small ways, he will do it in big ways.

What does this mean? For us, it meant letting Daniel grow
his hair longer than we liked and painting his room with
murals. It wasn't our
taste, but he liked them that way. As a result of our
releasing him to be
himself, Daniel avoided some of the testings Mary faced. We
gave him space and
didn't watch him like a hawk for signs of rebellion.

We were subject to criticism for our decision to extend some liberty, but it has brought great rewards. Daniel's hair is not short, he has stopped wearing extremely baggy pants, and he is solid with the Lord.

It is good to put boundaries on teenagers as they individuate, but their wearing different styles than you prefer, as long as they are decent, is not bad—it frees them to become their own persons.

Ministers especially need to understand this because the stronger the parents, the harder it is for the child to establish his own identity.

Many times my kids would do something really strange, and the Lord would say to me, "Cindy, this is all temporary." It is interesting to see how much Mary is changing now that she is married and has turned 21. She is happy and satisfied with herself and no longer rebels against what she once saw as restraints.

Overseeing Relationships

One area in which kids need definite boundaries is in the area of relationships. Don't be afraid to tell your children you don't like the people they are associating with. God gives parents a natural alarm system concerning their children's friends. Some of them are just bad news and will draw your kids into rebellion.

Once our daughter was dating a boy who wasn't a good influence, and many people told us not to insist that they break up because it

would only make them more rebellious. However, after we prayed and came into agreement, we told her she would have to choose between him or us (she was still under-age). Thankfully, she broke up with him. But we should have issued the ultimatum two years before.

When a teenage child has a friend that you think is not a good influence, pray for the child. Ask God to reveal to his heart the need to break the friendship. If this doesn't bring about a change, sit down and talk with him and explain your feelings. Then pray with him, asking God to show both of you His will. If the situation is bad enough and your child doesn't see the danger, you might need to do what we did and ask him to discontinue the relationship.

He might surprise you and express relief at your intervention. We found that our children at times became entangled in relationships from which they actually wanted to be released—but which they couldn't break on their own. Their friends had become controlling and manipulating. In such cases they were grateful that we stepped in.

One word of caution: Don't be too quick to cut off a diamond in the rough. Our son-in-law fit this description when Mary first met him, but I led him to the Lord, and he is a wonderful young man. Pray and ask God to show you His will rather than judging externally.

A Mother's Tips

Here are a few tips to help you—and your children—survive their teenage years:

1. Establish
clean-cut rules.
2. Don't
make threats you aren't ready to carry out.
3. Listen
to your children. Be willing to modify your position if
you have meted out
punishment or rules in anger.
4. Apologize
when you are wrong.
5. Be in
agreement with your spouse (if you aren't a single
parent) about what kind
of disciplinary action you will take when necessary.
Children love to
conquer and divide.
6. Pray,
pray, pray. Pray for them and with them.
7. Claim
God's promises, such as this special one from Isaiah
59:21, for all your
children: " 'As for Me, this is my covenant with them,'
says the Lord. 'My
Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in
your mouth will not
depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your
children, or from the
mouths of their decedents from this time on and
forever,' says the Lord" (NIV).

If, in spite of your best efforts, you find yourself the parent of a prodigal child, don't lose hope. The devil will try to pour shame

and condemnation on your head. If you have made mistakes, ask God to redeem them and to restore your family.

Then trust Him to intervene in your child's life. We are in a war for the souls of our children, but we serve an awesome God who created the universe, and He loves our children more than we do. Place them in the Father's hands—and trust Him to bring them home.

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