

Advice from an Expert

Why do we helicopter? Because we love our teenagers and, at times, we're afraid for them. But, says Deborah Gilboa, MD a.k.a. Dr. G, a Pittsburgh-area physician who also dispenses parenting advice on HuffPost Parents and Twitter, we need to get over that. Letting our teenagers stumble is just what they need.

What do you think of the term, "helicopter parent?"

I prefer to say "enmeshed parent." It is honest, but not as condemning.

What are we doing when we're enmeshed with our teenagers?

We're not building resilience. Our goal is to raise our teenagers so they can leave us; we're important, but temporary. When we don't teach our teenagers to manage problems on their own, they don't learn resilience. And, if we don't teach resilience, then we rob them of the self-esteem that comes from learning that they

are resilient, that they can solve their own problems and make their way in life on their own.

So what's the alternative?

Be engaged, but not enmeshed. Listen much more than you give advice. I read this great article years ago where the writer described how her dad responded when she came to him with a problem. He would say, "Wow, that's a tough fix. I'll be interested to see what you do about it." And, he was not being patronizing. He was saying, "I'll be interested to see how you solve this problem. I have faith in you,

and I want to hear how it goes." Listen, listen, listen, so you can be engaged, but bite your tongue. Offer advice only a fraction of the time, even though you have the perfect piece of advice. Because the message when you don't offer advice is that you have faith that your teenager has some good ideas about how to fix this problem on his or her own.

Even if they mess up?

The biggest gift we can give our teenagers is NOT protecting them from consequences. If your teenager is going to get benched because of a C in math,

you should not argue with the coach or the principal or the math teacher; you should say, "How are you going to improve your grade?" If we protect them from consequences when they are teenagers—and don't teach them resilience—they will be shocked and betrayed by the real world. We are not doing them a good service. That's the danger of being enmeshed with our kids. We're setting up false expectations for how they will be treated in every aspect of their lives.

That's hard to do for enmeshed parents.

Yes, it's hard but not impossible. It is very difficult to change how you feel, but how you feel is not as important as what you do. Parents can change their actions without changing their feelings. Change your goal from raising a teenager who is protected to raising one who is resilient.

Okay, so say my teenager never gets up on time for school?

I would say, "Your ride to school leaves at this time. But I'm not going to yell anymore, because it ruins my day." If they miss the bus, they miss the bus. However, you and your teen must agree on the consequences if school is missed. By high school, you can wait for the school to give consequences, but be cautious about inserting yourself between the child and the consequences. Your teenager may get an unexcused absence; they may have to take a grade hit. But, high school is a much bet-

ter time to understand the cost of consequences rather than in college or at a job. I would also recommend you give your teenager three pieces of paper: three no-questions-asked rides to school. This can help you and your teenager ease into the program.

A big project is due, but my teenager is doing a terrible job. What now?

When it comes to a younger teenager, I encourage parents to think of themselves as a project manager, but not an employee. You can talk to your child about timelines and resources, but don't do the work for them. Doing these projects is not really about, say, learning all the names of the planets in the solar system. They're about learning how to manage timelines, manage frustration, etc.—all the tools we need to become competent adults. And, if you do the project

for them—and especially if they get a good grade—they are not going to feel good about it. So, yes, let them fail if necessary. You are saying: "This is your work." And, you let them see that one grade is not a reflection of who they are and that they have what it takes to fail and recover. For an older teenager, do much less. They should handle most of this on their own. Again, let them experience the consequences of their actions.

What about the teenager who is not handing in homework day-to-day?

This could suggest that your teenager has an organizational problem. But, it could also be something else, like anxiety or social pressures. I always tell my patients that if they see a dramatic change in their child, that is not a time to be hands-off. So, if you see a dramatic change in

grades or their friends, then in a very non-accusatory way, sit down with your teenager and say, "You need something you are not getting. There is a missing link for you, and we need to figure it out." Promise yourself that you will not try to fix it in that first conversation, just be empathetic and listen. Walk away and sit with it for a few hours, then go back and say, "I've been thinking about what you said." Then, you can start a conversation about next steps. ■



For more advice from Dr. G or to ask a follow-up question, visit her website at askdoctorg.com or tweet her @AskDocG.

Interview by Diana Simeon

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