



FIRM HAND, NOT HAND WRINGING
John Rosemond, Parenting Columnist
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Over the past few months, quite a number of parents have asked my advice about teen-agers who are smoking pot, using hallucinogens and/or drinking. Typically, the parents tell me they've tried "everything," but nothing has worked.

In these parents' minds, a parental response qualifies as having "worked" only if it ends the problem. That's a tall order. Not unrealistic, mind you, because lots of teens have stopped substance abuse. But a tall order requires parents who will stand tall and be willing, furthermore, to stand tall for as long as it takes. But some teens are unimpressed by parents who stand tall, no matter how long or tall they stand.

This is why I recommend that parents modify their objective. Instead of trying to get the child to stop using intoxicants, I recommend they simply try to help the child understand that choices result in consequences. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst choice a teen-ager can possibly make, this sort of self-destructive behavior is a nine. Therefore, the consequence must be a least a nine, with 10 being the worst consequence the teen can imagine.

Unfortunately, some parents will go no further than hand wringing. When I suggest a consequence to the ninth power, some parents just look at me like I'm nuts. Or they tell me why they can't go that far. For example, when I suggested to the parents of a 16-year-old drug user that they sell his car, they stared at me a few moments, and then the mom told me that selling his car would inconvenience her.

Never mind that she drove him around for 16 years and that there are such things as school buses. Driving him now is an inconvenience. Never mind, too, that it is completely unconscionable to let a child behind the wheel of a car when said child is known to use drugs and alcohol. Apparently, at least in this case, the inconvenience of having to drive the teen to his necessary appointments (school, the doctor, perhaps a job) outweighs even responsibility to one's fellow citizens.

How about turning the child and the evidence over to the police? Another set of hand wringers told me they "couldn't do that." In a roundabout way, they confessed fear that their daughter might resent them for life. Unsaid, but what I suspect, is they also fear social embarrassment. Here's a child who is using drugs to escape reality, and parents who are afraid to hit her over the head with it. Their primary concern is their reputation. They wish she'd stop, but wishing and hand wringing are as far as they're willing to go. Perhaps David Copperfield can help them.

Occasionally, my spirits are lifted by stories of parents who are willing to stand tall, go the distance, fight the good fight---parents who are willing to face reality on children who want no part of it. One such couple discovered that their 16-year-old son was using pot. They found the evidence in his room and his car. They informed him of their find. He promised to stop. Several weeks later, they found more evidence. They impounded his car and removed a part that is essential to ignition.

To get his car back, he had to stop all association with three accomplices, bring his grades up to their pre-drug level and submit to weekly drug testing. If he managed to stay clean (of said accomplices and drugs) for a month, he would get his car back but would still have to submit to random drug tests and maintain good grades. He got his car back. One week later, he came home smelling like pot.

The parents said nothing. The next day, they checked with the school counselor and discovered he was again eating lunch with the certain criminal crowd. The parents seized his car from the school parking lot, drove it to a used-car dealer and sold it. Can you just imagine his shock?

They will never buy him a car again, they told him. However, if he abides by the rules and passes his drug tests for three months, they will allow him to use one of their cars. If he earns back his driving privileges and subsequently slips over the line, then the next time he drives will be in a car he buys, post-
emancipation.

Said prodigal is in month two of his new life, and all seems to be going well. But who knows what the future holds? In any case, he has learned that his parents will not fool around with this issue. They will not wish and wring their hands. They will stand tall and continue to do so for as long as it takes. I invite you to join me in giving them a standing ovation.

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