

## **“Kids These Days”**

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*"Originality is independence, not rebellion; it is sincerity, not antagonism"*

- George Henry Lewes

Can you tell the difference between independence and rebellion? Let's be more specific. Can you tell the difference between independence and rebellion when it comes to your child? Do you ever find yourself saying "Back in my day..."? If so, is that statement usually followed by "I acted the same way" or "kids weren't like this"?

While the adolescent “experience” changes over time, growing up (regardless of time period) inherently has stressors. If those stressors are handled properly, an eventually resilient adult is the outcome. Daily stressors for adolescents can be amplified in a variety of ways, especially with the presence of the internet and social media; but, at the end of the day, the way they respond to that stress may look eerily familiar.

From a parent's perspective, it's possible that we have passed down our threshold for stress, biologically and behaviorally. Whether your child is your biological, step, foster, or adopted child, your child learns from you in more ways than can be counted. Your child may see you slump and shake your head in response to frustration, while his/her head may do something similar when frustrated with a sibling or friend. We, as caregivers, may exhibit excitable behavior when seeing old friends or family members, and you may see the same in your child when he or she sees a friend or family member. Whether positive or negative, and whether we like it or not, our behavior makes an impression.

Our children absorb and learn from our behavior, and pass it down to friends, peers, teammates, and even their enemies. Our job is not to *understand* the child, because we're not them, nor are they us. Our job is to model appropriate behavior for them. While it's not rocket science to suggest that our children learn from our behavior, it may seem like rocket science to know *when* to be concerned about our child's behavior, and *how* to intervene.



## When Should We Intervene?

Does your teen slam his or her bedroom door in response to being told "no"? If so, should you be concerned or is that typical adolescent behavior? Is a daily door slam typical? Is weekly typical? How frequently should a normal teen slam a bedroom door? The answer is...well, there isn't a clear answer. There's often a need to ask questions, and exhibit patience.

Sometimes, behavior change can be a short discussion and other times it can go on for months, if not years, and may require collaboration, sensitivity and a keen ear to pinpoint a relative solution for effective communication. All behavior is communication, even if it's a door slamming.

We are often left reading the tea leaves that contribute to our child's oppositional response. At times, it can be hard to recognize the difference between typical and atypical adolescent behavior and when we should be concerned. Here's a loose guide to follow:

<b>Typical Adolescent Behavior</b>	<b>Atypical Adolescent Behavior</b>
Increased moodiness	Intense, painful, long-lasting moods
Increased self-consciousness	Social phobia, perfectionism
Increased parental-adolescent conflict	Verbal or physical aggression
Experimentation with drugs, alcohol or tobacco	Substance abuse, selling drugs, nicotine dependence
Stressful transitions to middle and high school	School refusal, bullying or being bullied, skipping school, failing school
Increased argumentativeness	Constant conflict with authority figures
Sexual interest or experimentation	Sexual promiscuity, unsafe sex, pregnancy
Increased desire for privacy	Isolation from family, frequent lying, hiding things
Strong interest in technology	Many hours a day watching screens, casually meeting partners online, revealing too much via social media
Up all night	Sleeping most of the day on weekends, missing or being late to school due to sleep schedule

The change in behavior may be sharp or gradual; however, the atypical behaviors are cause for concern no matter when they happen and may warrant the need for an intervention.



## How to Intervene

There are a number of ways to approach a teen when he or she is exhibiting atypical adolescent behavior and, while the sentiment may be the same in our heads, the delivery is important. Here's a loose guide to follow:

<b>Recommended</b>	<b>Not Recommended</b>
Ask questions	Blame
Express concern and interest	Disapproval
Acknowledge differences and model conflict resolution	Argue
Discuss natural consequences and your role to keep him or her safe	Threaten Consequences

We must keep in mind that we often don't know half of what our child's friends know about them and can't always take the most direct route. The round-about approach may take longer and involves asking gentle questions, eventually getting to the intended point.

It's important for us to know the difference between what a child *won't* do versus what a child *can't* do. If we think they won't do something we're asking, we may become judgmental and frustrated. If we think they can't do something we're asking, we may become more curious and supportive.

Additionally, it is important to look beyond the action of slamming a bedroom door. Our teen could be irritable after a tough day at school. That day might have included being bullied, self-consciousness about appearance, ongoing self-doubt in a challenging class, and/or conflict with a peer. Lastly, keep in mind, slamming a door can be communication. All behavior communicates desires and needs.

If our attempts are met with opposition, he or she may be communicating that our approach was too strong or that he or she isn't ready to talk about the problem. Looking at it long-term, it's possible our teens may not trust us, or think we won't understand. Increasing trust can often take longer and requires more effort than simply delivering consequences. Increasing trust is harder than keeping our fingers crossed and hoping it's a phase. Being a parent takes work, patience, understanding, humility and respect.



## Still Struggling?

Have you used some, if not all of the aforementioned suggestions and are you still struggling to connect with your teenager? If so, are you worried about his or her safety? There are a variety of options to explore, ranging in complexity and intensity. Here's a list of services that are commonly available to children and their families:

- Individual therapy
- Family therapy
- Group therapy
- Inpatient screening/hospitalization
- Preventive services through your local department of social services

Remember, we are not admitting failure by seeking help outside the home, especially when it comes to the safety of our children. Sometimes, our child may just need a third party to vent to, someone that can appropriately assess his or her level of risk for harm to himself, or others.

It's fair to assume that we want to see our children flourish into independent, and appropriately rebellious, adults. If we can harness what we may perceive at times as rebellion and help our children channel that energy into healthy, independent and ambitious behavior, I don't think we can ask for more from ourselves or our children.

**Editor's Note:** Four Winds Saratoga understands the stresses that teens are under in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our child and adolescent therapy teams help them develop healthier means of coping with their stress, find additional supports and discover self-esteem building outlets in their lives. We take this into consideration as we provide psychiatric treatment to each teen and support to their family. For information about our Child and Adolescent Inpatient Services or our Adolescent Intensive Outpatient Program, please visit our [webpage](#) or call Clinical Evaluation Services at 1-800-959-1287.

