

Encouraging Teens to Gain Responsibility Through Independence

By Jay D. Rohman

So you're having a tough time because you have a 13 year old going on 30, aye? You're wondering what ever happened to that pre-teen phase where they thought you had all the answers. Now they are a teen, and they think you have absolutely no idea how the 'real' world is. The bad news is that this phase will probably last until they are in there 30's before coming to realize that maybe you really do know what you are talking about. The good news is that you are only experiencing what all parents before you have endured and what all parents after you will endure. The other good news is that this is a ripe time to help them with their independence and even teach them something at the same time.

What can you teach a child that seems to know everything? The hard fact is practically nothing. But because they seem to know so much, you can allow them to teach themselves. By providing them the proper incentives and let them set the rules, you can allow them their independence while at the same time teach them responsibility. It seems like too many parents now a days just throw up their hands in surrender because they don't know how to cope with their child's behavior. The old saying goes that you can drag a horse to water but you can't make them drink. That is most certainly true with kids. No matter what age they are, you can tell them what to do but that doesn't mean that they are going to do it. Then when you try to punish them for their disobedience, it's almost like they are surprised beyond belief that there are consequences. But what if you could get your child to *decide* to do what they are told, and *agree* to the consequences in advance if they don't? Think this might be something out of the realms of fantasy or even science fiction? It's not!

Many parents are using a technique called the 'board system'. The 'board system' has gained a lot of exposure recently through the writings of a gentleman by the name of Monty Roberts, best known for his book "The Man Who Listens To Horses". He is a horse trainer and has been an unofficial foster parent to many children. Unofficial means that the children he raised were not provided to him by the state, but were brought to him independently by parents that were at a loss of how to control their children. He calls his teaching method the 'blackboard system' because he started it by using a blackboard and chalk. Most certainly you can replace this with the newfangled invention of the white board and dry eraser if you want. The principle is still the same. What Monty learned was that it is important to give the child the opportunity to be independent by giving them a part in choosing what their own consequences will be. This will give them an understanding of what their own responsibility is for the actions they choose. In the end they cannot blame you for the punishment that they must endure, because ultimately they had decided their own fate well in advance of their actions. On the other side of the coin, they can experience the thrill of reward and take pride in accomplishing something they wanted by exercising good behavior. So how does this win/win technique work? I'm glad you asked!

Each child will have their own board. The standard size is approximately two feet by three feet. You will need to place them in an area where they can be seen easily by both you and the child. An excellent place is on the wall opposite of or next to their bedroom. Or even on the outside of the bedroom door. An additional idea is that both boards would be a different colors or the chalk or markers would be different colors. You are going to mark one board as *positive* and the other board as *negative*. Also place the name of the child and each parent on the board. This in essence becomes a contract between your child and you and will deal with the positive and negative factors of the child's life. What you are trying to do is teach your child that their word is their bond. There was a time when a simple handshake meant something in society. Somehow we have gotten away from that concept and now it is up to our generation to turn the tide back toward truth, honesty, and integrity.

The next step is for you and your child to sit down and calmly talk about what the procedure is. You don't want to appear that you are grasping for straws in trying to bring your child around to your way of thinking. But let them know that you feel it is time that they were given some responsibility in running their own lives. These are words that all children love to hear. Visions of all night TV and not having to take baths come flashing into their heads. These certainly are not outcomes that you want to see come about, but they can dream for a little while, can't they? After you have established a negative behavior that each of you would like to see changed, come up with a negative and a positive consequence for the action. Make sure that you solicit input from your child and make them feel as if they are helping in the decision process for the consequences. That way they can't come back to you and say that they really hadn't agreed to what was going to happen to them if they chose to act inappropriately.

Here's an example. Lets say that little Johnny has a bad habit of not putting his toys away. On the positive board you will write '*Will put toys away every night for 5 days and we will go out for ice-cream cone.*' On the negative board you will write '*If toys not put away every night for 5 days, Johnny will sit in corner for one hour with no toys.*' After you have read the positive and negative consequences of the behavior, each of you will sign it and shake hands. You will then make eye contact and tell the child that "we now have a contract".

Seems pretty simple? It really is. Your child now has an understanding of what is expected of them and they know what the consequences are for complying or not complying. Not only that, but they helped decide what the consequences were going to be. This simple technique will make them think before they act and start making wise choices based upon established consequences. The true success of this program however lies in your consistency. Make sure that any consequence that is decided on for the behavior is enforced. By failing to follow through at any time will break the trust factor and make the program worthless.

By establishing this process, good behavior will become the norm and independence can be taught rather than you feeling that you're being forced into letting them have it when they aren't ready for it. It becomes a win/win situation. And that makes for a healthier family!