

John's January Columns:
Practical Approach, Marijuana Use, Vaping, Manners, Defiant Teen



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John Rosemond's January Columns

Use Practical, Not Psychological, Approach to Childrearing

One of the biggest problems among today's parents-especially mothers-concerns their tendency to think in psychological terms about their children's behavior problems. Mothers are more prone to this intellectual wandering than fathers not because of some gender-related characteristic but simply because mothers are the primary consumers of parenting material.

Unfortunately, the stuff mothers (and some fathers) read is largely baloney, written by professional parenting babblers who come, mostly, from various mental health fields. Consequently, they wind up believing (among other equally unhelpful things) that their children's behavior problems have arcane psychological meaning. (The alternative is to think of these problems as simply the inevitable consequence of raising offspring who, unlike those of any other species, are naturally inclined toward believing that what they want, they are entitled to have and that no one is qualified to tell them what to do.)

Take, for example, the parents I recently spoke with concerning the wild tantrums their seven-year-old son let fly when things-just about anything-didn't go his way. The parents were worried sick. They'd read all sorts of stuff that had led them to believe he was bipolar, autistic (or on the "spectrum"), manic-depressive, and/or maybe even a touch schizophrenic. They imagined him locked up in a mental institution by age 20, in a stainless-steel straitjacket. (It is significant to note that he functioned reasonably well outside the home with other adults and playmates.)

All this worry and apocalyptic thinking had induced what I term "disciplinary paralysis." This little brat's (my diagnosis) parents were afraid of him and also fearful that any firm discipline on their part would make matters worse and hasten his admission to the aforementioned looney bin. So instead of disciplining, they talked, reasoned, and explained...and got nowhere.

Not surprisingly, the more they talked, reasoned, and explained, the worse said brat's brattishness became. And the worse he became, the more his parents worried and the more paralyzed they became, and the more they talked, reasoned, and explained, and around and around and around they went. That describes the almost inevitable consequence of psychological thinking. To mix my metaphors, such thinking leads one down rabbit hole after rabbit hole.

The brat was in complete control of the family. Lacking insight, he had no idea that he wielded such power; therefore, he was not-as several therapists had naively suggested-being manipulative. Nonetheless, everyone in the family was dancing to his tune.

By the time I spoke with the parents, he was out of control. And when a person of any age feels they are losing or have lost control, one response (of several) is to try desperately and obsessively to control-other people, usually. This is not mental illness, but it sure looks crazy.

The parents needed to stop thinking psychologically and apocalyptically and take firm, resolute control of their son's life. They stopped talking and began teaching him-with calm purpose-that one bad thing deserves another.

Being reasonably intelligent, the little fellow learned this fundamental life principle fairly quickly. Begrudgingly, he began to accept that he was but a little fish in a big pond. Best of all perhaps, his parents reclaimed that which psycho-babble had stolen from them: common sense and a sense of humor.

How to Deal With Teen's Marijuana Use

Q: We recently discovered that our 16-year-old son has been smoking marijuana on a regular basis. At first, we intended to begin using an over-the-counter drug test but then learned that teens have figured out how to beat these tests. One of our son's friends, for example, was regularly tested at home and always tested negative despite the fact that he never stopped using. Also, do you think he should go into counseling?

A: You're right, many drug tests are not reliable and teens have learned how to fool them. I searched "fooling over-the-counter drug tests" and discovered that doing so requires no special expertise or anything more difficult to obtain than lemon juice or vinegar. Apparently, concealing marijuana use from OTC tests is almost laughably easy. As one expert commented, drug testing has turned into a "cat-and-mouse game." I'd recommend that you ask your son's physician how you can go about enrolling your son in a reliable, professionally-administered drug-testing program of the sort used by the airline industry and law enforcement agencies.

In the meantime, fulfill your responsibility to the community by taking away your son's driving privileges until he has passed at least one year of randomly-administered tests. Make no mistake about it, marijuana and driving do not mix. In May, 2016, AAA reported that fatal automobile accidents involving drivers who had recently smoked pot doubled after Washington state legalized the drug. The additional problem is that your son may be especially susceptible to marijuana's effects. It's been discovered that impairment levels vary widely from person to person. I can't emphasize enough: Get him off the road!

Obviously, your son is running with a bunch of like-minded peers in which case you should apply appropriate restrictions to his social life. The message you send to him should be "find new friends or we are your new friends." Yes, he will probably be able to go around your restrictions to some extent, but restrictions in combination with random drug testing will be fairly effective.

Last but certainly not least, take away his lifeline to his current peer group. I'm talking about his smart phone. As I've said many, many times in this column and on my weekly radio show (American Family Radio, Saturdays, 6:00 PM ET) there is no rational justification for giving a teen a smart phone. They are anti-social devices and researchers have discovered that they induce physiological effects that are similar to those induced by addictive drugs.

Confiscate the current phone. Obtain a basic cell phone (believe it or not, most providers still carry them) that can't access the Internet and doesn't facilitate easy texting. Give it to him only on those occasions when you want to be able to get in touch with him or vice versa. That is all the phone any teenager needs anyway.

As for counseling, I don't put much stock in it, especially when the patient is a teen who doesn't want to be counseled in the first place. Don't waste your-or your insurance plan's-money.

None of this is going to be easy, but the eventual payoff is a child who is drug-free, whose friends are drug-free, and because of no smart phone, has greatly improved social skills. Hang in there!

Stay Approachable During Teen's Experimentation With Vaping

Q: I found a vaping pen hidden in my 13-year-old son's room and am at a loss as to how to deal with it. He is very susceptible to peer pressure and wants very badly to fit in with the "cool" kids. Any suggestions would be appreciated.

A: This is one of those occasional questions that no matter how I answer, some group of people buys pitchforks and torches and tries to find my house.

At the risk of being pilloried anyway, I will share some objective facts, starting with although there has been plenty of speculation, medical science has yet to find any specific long-term health risk reliably associated with vaping other than the obvious: nicotine addiction. Undoubtedly, some folks are apoplectic already because they think nicotine causes various cancers, most notably lung cancer, but-and again, this is a fact-smoking tobacco is bad because tobacco tars become carcinogenic when burned and inhaled. Nicotine does not cause lung cancer.

Nicotine is an addictive drug (but the strength of its addictive effect varies from person to person). However, if one removes tobacco from the equation, garden-variety nicotine addiction is not reliably associated with any specific health or behavioral risk. Nicotine addicts are not known, as a group, to rob convenience stores or snatch elderly women's purses to feed their habit. Drive-by shootings are not associated with nicotine addiction. There's no South American nicotine cartel. As addictions go, it's relatively benign. However, and hopefully needless to say, no addiction is a good thing, and it is possible to overdose on nicotine, so please hold off on the pitchforks and torches for now.

Third, valid, replicated, peer-reviewed research has discovered that nicotine has positive effects on cognitive functioning and appears to be a "brain vitamin" of sorts. For example, nicotine use is associated with lower rates of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other forms of neurological degeneration.

Perhaps the most immediately worrisome thing about e-cigarettes is they've been known to set clothing on fire and even explode. As with anything else, the cheaper the e-cig, the more likely it is to malfunction. Needless to say, your son is probably using a fairly inexpensive unit.

By no means am I dismissing your concerns. I'm simply saying that if

you do all you can to stop your son from using e-cigs and he figures out how to get around your prohibition, the world isn't coming to an end. After all, he could have fallen in with a peer group that self-medicates with alcohol, marijuana, or other illicit and even prescription drugs. If you don't see an alarming change in his mood or behavior, then he's not likely to be doing anything but nicotine.

When it comes to teens, parents do well to accept that the limits of their influence have waned and trust that the discipline they've provided to that point is going to effectively deter anti-social and self-destructive behavior. Some experimentation is likely during the teen years-especially with boys. In many if not most cases, the experimentation goes no further than that: experimentation.

Above all else, you want to approach this issue dispassionately. You can and should confiscate your son's smoking equipment and let him know that until all the facts are in concerning e-cigs, you would be irresponsible to allow him to vape. Let him know that there will be consequences if you find another e-cig in his possession. Try to discover if the peer group in question is doing anything riskier than vaping. If they are, then you should do what you can to limit contact, knowing however that attempting to prohibit teenage relationships carries its own risks.

As your question illustrates, sometimes the only thing a parent can do in the face of a problem is to stay calm and continue to be "user-friendly," as in always loving and always approachable.

Manners More Important Than Resentful Child

"People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive."

So said 17th Century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal. He meant that people are more likely to form opinion based on emotions than evidence.

I thought of Pascal's insight as I read several excerpts from "PARENTSPEAK: What's Wrong with How We Talk to Our Children-and What to Say Instead" (Workman, 2017) by California parent educator Jennifer Lehr.

The gist of "PARENTSPEAK" is that seemingly innocuous things parents often say to children-"Say thank you," for example-are actually psychologically harmful. Other such apparently toxic comments include "Say you're sorry," "Give Grandma a kiss" and "Be careful!"

Lehr asserts that comments and instructions of this sort "are all about control." Rather than taking time to understand children's feelings, thoughts, and motivations, parents focus on obedience. What's to understand? Children do not know what is best for them. Their feelings and thoughts, often a muddle, require as much direction as their behavior. They need adults who will take charge when taking charge is called for.

Lehr relates an incident when she instructed her 4-year-old daughter to thank a friend for having her over for a playdate. Although she did eventually mumble thanks, the daughter looked "kowitzed." Lehr is convinced she caused her daughter to feel "demeaned and resentful" and to conclude that how Lehr looks to others is "more important than her [the daughter's] dignity."

How does Lehr know this? She doesn't, of course. Pascal would say that Lehr's psychoanalysis of her daughter's response to "Say thank you" is based not on evidence but rather nothing more than Lehr's own emotional state. Furthermore, it's the sort of thing that often reflects a lack of emotional boundary between parent and child, also known as co-dependency. My mother—definitely not the co-dependent type—gave me similar instructions when I was a child. I don't recall feeling demeaned or resenting her for lowering my sense of personal dignity. The simple fact is that when it comes to proper manners, children require tutoring until the manners become habit. Proper manners demonstrate respect for others. Therefore, instructing a child in proper manners is good and more accurately called direction, not control.

Besides, there's nothing wrong with obedience to legitimate authority, no matter one's age. Research finds what commonsense confirms: obedient children are happy children; disobedient children are not. In other words, obedience is of great benefit to a child. The inescapable, albeit shocking (to some), conclusion: Children should do what their parents tell them to do, including saying thank you and giving Grandma a kiss before she goes home.

On her website, Lehr identifies as one of her influences the "democratic decision-making principals (sic)" of psychologist Thomas Gordon, author of "Parent Effectiveness Training," published in 1971. Yep, the professional community has been recommending this sort of hogwash for more than forty-five years, during which time child mental health has gone down the tubes. Ironically, the more parents have focused on their children's feelings, the more difficulty children have had keeping their feelings under control.

How To Calm A Screaming...Teen?

Q: Our 15-year-old daughter has become, over the past year or so, quite a disruptive influence in our normally peaceful home. She was a gem until she entered high school when she almost overnight become disrespectful and combatively argumentative. If she disagrees with a decision we make, she will begin screaming at us, calling us names, and the like. Despite the fact that her face is in her smart phone almost constantly, her grades at the secular private school she attends are still good to excellent and she's not, to our knowledge, hanging with a bad peer group. We're at somewhat of a loss to figure this out. Do you ever recommend boarding school in situations of this sort?

A: Sometimes, the sudden emergence of pronounced problems with a previously well-behaved teen are indicators of drug or alcohol use, the influence of undesirable peers, problems at school of one sort or another, or problems in the home. And sometimes, none of those factors are in play. Sometimes, there's no explaining a flip-flop of this nature-it just is what it is.

Today's teens, and especially the female of the species, seem drawn to the opportunity to create drama out of their lives. These dramas run the gamut, but usually whirl around conflicts with peers. If no other drama presents itself-if everything is hunky-dory in the child's life socially and otherwise-then the default theme is "my parents are, like, idiots and, like, don't understand me or my needs and I am, like, pitiful." I must stress that these dramas do not necessarily reflect any reality outside of some idiosyncratic "reality" that exists solely in the teen's smart-phone-addled brain.

Which is, in fact, a possible solution: to wit, take away the smart phone and get her a flip phone from a box store; one that requires three minutes of concentration to send a five-word text, doesn't access the internet, and doesn't take photos. And no, I'm not suggesting you do this as punishment for her disrespect; I'm suggesting that this be your new and very enlightened policy.

I have spoken of late to more than a few parents who have done exactly that. Without exception, they report that their children become more relaxed, respectful, and sensitive to the needs of other family members, including siblings. "She's fun to be around again," said one such parent. Some have even told me that their kids have testified to feeling generally better, less stressed, less "prickly," and the like. And speaking of that word, one parent told me that after the

loss of her smart phone, her teen daughter stopped using "like" every fourth word. Hallelujah!

On the matter of boarding school, I'd try cleaning out the smart phone addiction first. (Beware! The first week of withdrawal is akin to living with Satan-on-methamphetamine.) If you see no change in a few weeks, if she continues to be a constant disruption, then boarding school is certainly an option. My general feeling is that at some point, it is best to find other living arrangements for a disruptive child than for the entire family to continue feeling daily emotional torment as the result of his or her presence.

You might also consider helping her get a job as a summer camp counselor.



"BECAUSE I SAID SO!"

John's radio program airs Saturdays at 6pm EST on American Family Radio.

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Do you agree that there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to parenting?