

Paying Attention to Your Teen's Good Behavior

Like all people, your teenager (let's say a boy) wants to be appreciated for the work he contributes around the home as well as the good behavior he displays to other family members. But, like many of us, he may come to feel taken for granted, that no one really appreciates the positive things he contributes to family life or his unique qualities as a person. Although you may feel that your teenager does little that is deserving of appreciation, when you take a more careful look at all of the things he does over the course of a day, you will probably find that not to be true. The purpose of this handout is to help you develop better skills at attending to your teenager's appropriate behavior in the hope that, by doing so, it will increase. When good behavior increases, there is always a corresponding decrease in bad behavior.

Learning to pay attention to the good behavior of others is not an easy thing to do. Many of us do not know how to supervise, manage, or interact with another person so as to increase their desire to work harder for us or follow our rules. Certainly we know how to talk to others, but simply talking to someone may not be very effective at improving our relationship with him/her. It is important to pay attention to how we talk to them, *when* we do so, and *what* we say. Effective supervisors have learned skills that make them better able to motivate their employees to work well for them. Like such supervisors, you may need to learn better ways of "supervising" your teenager to improve his motivation to obey and work for you. Here is a list of things that you should try to do to improve your attending skills to your teenager. Your therapist will discuss them in detail with you.

1. Spend at least 15 minutes, three or four times per week, doing something one-on-one with your teen (let's say a girl). The activity should be something enjoyable to the teen, preferably her choice (as long as it is within reason), such as taking a drive to the mall, shooting hoops, playing a video game, and the like. During this limited period of time, **ask no questions, give no directions, make no corrections, give no instructions.** Either make positive comments or neutral descriptive comments. Ignore minor misbehavior. Terminate the activity if the teen becomes disrespectful or violates household rules.

Alternatively, there will be times when your teen is doing some activity that she enjoys, such as playing a game, building a model, or watching television. Provided her behavior is appropriate, take a minute and go to her to provide some positive attention. When you do this, be sure to be relaxed and casual. Reflect what you think she is doing, such as "It looks like you've got an exciting football game on TV there" or "I see you have started that model car you bought last weekend." Thereafter, look for positive things to say about what the teen is doing, how well she is accomplishing it, or how quiet and well behaved she is.

If you ask questions, do so only for information about what the teen is up to or how she likes what she is doing. Don't ask questions that imply disapproval or criticism, such as, "Couldn't you be doing something more useful than watching that boob tube again?" Show interest in what your teen is doing and ask whether you can join your teen in this activity. Observing your teen doing a fun activity, praising her, and asking to join in the activity is especially appropriate if your teen refuses to select an activity and spend 15–20 minutes engaging in it with you.

2. At times when you are busy and your teen is not bothering you but behaving well, interrupt your activity to go to him and state how much you appreciate his not disturbing you while you work.

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Paying Attention to Your Teen's Good Behavior *(page 2 of 2)*

Done frequently, this will increase the teen's willingness not to disrupt your work when you are busy. Similarly, if he is getting along well with a brother or sister, stop what you are doing to notice it and praise him.

3. Whenever your teenager volunteers to help you do something or performs a helpful task around the home without being told, be sure to acknowledge her help and appreciate her effort. It takes only a few seconds to say, "Thanks for helping out with . . ." or "I really appreciate it when you. . . ." Although such things may not seem worthwhile to say, done frequently over time they do produce a significant improvement in your working relationship with your teenager. Don't expect your teenager to show any gratitude for your attention initially, but don't be discouraged. Your teen has heard you and it will have an effect on her behavior.
4. If you ask your teenager to do something, be sure to take a few moments and immediately praise him for beginning to start the task. Giving such positive attention to compliance will eventually increase it.
5. Whenever you praise or appreciate your teen's behavior, do not use sarcasm or back-handed compliments (for example, "It's about time you cleaned your room."). You may think you are being positive, but you are actually decreasing the odds that she will do this job again for you. Instead, make your statements positive yet accurate. Say precisely what you like about her behavior and even why you like it. Don't exaggerate your praise, as any teen can sense false flattery.
6. The whole secret to being a good supervisor is learning to be attentive to even the small things that others do for us. Be honest, positive, and accurate in your feedback. By noticing the little things your teen does for you, you may notice a positive change in your relationship with him and an increase in his desire to work for you. If your teenager rejects your initial positive statements with sarcasm, coolness, or disrespect, don't get discouraged. He probably thinks you have an ulterior motive or want something from him. In time, this reaction should pass and he will come to appreciate your attention.

Remember!! Practice these skills every day as often as you can to improve your relationship with teen!!