

The Teen Tightrope

Parents can help their children gradually assume responsibility for schoolwork.

By Natalie Kramer

It seems like just yesterday that I left my timid kindergartner in his new school for the first time. I stood outside the classroom, peering into the window, teary-eyed, and he turned his head to make sure I was there “just in case”.

It doesn't seem like that long ago that I made the English teacher miserable by demanding phonics, spelling, and sentence structure. Then came the early middle-school woes with lockers and peer pressure. Puberty wasn't far behind. And then — he learned to drive!

Now my son is a teenager and, like all parents, there are times that I have to cope with his often-volatile moods. This is the time when separation begins in earnest, exacerbated by a desperate need for independence tempered by an equally desperate (though less acknowledged) need for guidance.

Striking a balance is tricky, but it is critically important at this stage to know how much control of school matters to relinquish and how much to hang on to.

Some parents hand over complete control to their teen, unwilling to endure the never-ending confrontations. Others hold on to the reins for dear life, unable to accept that their cute little toddler is now ready to assume some responsibility for his life.

Either extreme can be detrimental to children and their future relationships with their parents.

Guiding teenagers, albeit frustrating at times, can be enjoyable and rewarding. Despite all their bluster, teens feel safer if they know there is a safety net in place. Deep down, they are still unsettled and filled with self-doubt. A recent experience with my son illustrates this point.

Alex came back from his Easter break trip to Egypt on a Saturday, and on the first day back (Monday), the school had scheduled a test.

By way of background, there had been a great deal of discussion between parents and teachers at the school about the appropriateness of tests on the first day back, and this issue had never been satisfactorily resolved. Accordingly, I was prepared to sign an excuse note for my son, allowing him to skip the test on the grounds of jet lag and fatigue.

On Sunday, my son took the car and went to spend some time with his girlfriend. I called him on his cell phone and asked him what his plans were for the rest of the day.

Alex informed me that, after his girlfriend, he would be visiting some other friends. After all, he said, he had the “right” to unwind after his grueling trip. I mentioned the test and was immediately invited to mind my own business.

Two hours passed.

I called Alex on his cell phone again and asked him when he was planning to study for his test. He was clearly annoyed but, in an I'm-going-to-rise-above-this-petty-harassment sort of way, politely fobbed me off. Obviously, he was counting on me to sign the excuse note.

So then I broke it to him. I told him that I was not going to sign a note for him because it was his social life, not jet lag, as far as I could tell, that was the reason for his lack of preparation for the test. In my view, it was his job to prioritize and make time in his busy unwinding schedule to study for the test.

Shortly after that, Alex came home, mumbling that he was “grown-up enough” to be trusted with such decisions. I explained that I was not trying to make this decision for him at all. Rather, I wanted him to know that if he was counting on using my written excuse, he should make alternate plans.

An argument was about to erupt about hypocrisy and other related — or not so related — abstract concepts (my son wants to be a trial lawyer), but I chose not to participate.

My son pouted a little more just to make sure that I didn't think he had given in without a fight, and then he went off to his room to study for the test. Before long he fell asleep — but he *had* set his alarm for 6 am in order to do a little more studying. The test didn't go very well, as it turned out, but it wasn't a disaster.

I believe that this incident, although insignificant in the larger scheme of things, is an example of parental guidance that helps teens chart their course on the path to building necessary priorities and learning to uphold them.

Do I never sign excuse notes for reasons other than true incapacity? Well, no. On one occasion, for example, I wrote an excuse to allow my son to skip a “useless” Spanish class so he could finish an important paper for his “awesome” history class.

The extenuating circumstance was that Alex had several difficult tests that week and had not organized his time well enough to fit everything in. I pointed out that prioritizing and planning should allow him to accomplish everything, but everyone makes mistakes. As long as he learned from this, I was willing to lend him a helping hand.

Like everything involving teenagers, helping them to handle the responsibility of their school work is a constant exercise in thought and flexibility. Parents make mistakes too, but their efforts are crucial and one day will be remembered and valued by our children.

(Mrs. Kramer is the parent of a teenager whose emerging views are original and interesting and who, most of the time, is witty and sweet.)