

The Parent and the Pendulum

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In today's society, permissive parenting is on the rise—and good behavior is on the decline. According to 70 percent of 1,130 adults surveyed in a 2003 E-Poll conducted by American Demographics, children's behavior is not improving or is getting worse.

These survey results are not surprising. When rules aren't clear, consistently enforced, and fair, teens will push the limits to see where parents draw the line. Here are three parenting styles that swing far to the left, and some tips to help you achieve the best parenting style—one that meets your teen in the middle.

The Pal Parent

Carol is a “pal” parent; her desire is to be a great friend to her teenage daughter Emma. As a pal parent, Carol hesitates to upset Emma by enforcing rules; she tends to give in to most requests. Carol's worth is often determined by how Emma responds to her.

A Look Ahead: What kind of young adult will Emma become if Carol continues this permissive parenting style? One who is used to getting her way. One who knows how to manipulate others. One who won't take responsibility for her own actions. One who bases happiness on what you have and what you do. One who thinks God exists to answer every request. One who wishes she had parents who loved her enough to set and enforce rules and boundaries.

Vital Truths: A parent's job is to raise responsible young adults who make decisions that honor God. Helping teenagers learn to make those kinds of decisions requires guidance and rules. Enforcing rules seldom produces great joy in teenagers, but happiness is a choice your teenagers must choose for themselves no matter what their boundaries are at home.

Dr. Kevin Leman, author of *Adolescence Isn't Terminal*, dubs permissive parenting the “good parent complex.”

“These parents have a difficult time enforcing rules and regulations for fear their children might reject them. In fact, it sends the opposite signal,” says Leman, the father of four daughters and one son.

“Guidelines are important because they communicate to our children that we care what happens to them. The kids may not always agree with our guidelines, but that's all right,” Leman explains. “They also need something to bounce off of, to resist, if you will, because resistance is what builds strength. Regulations that teenagers resist will help keep them on a course that is instructive, not destructive, and will help them build muscle they will need when they are on their own, making their own decisions. For their own sake, children must be taught to respect and obey parental authority.”

The Cool Parent

Patrick lives vicariously through his son Taylor. In an effort to hold on to his own youth, Patrick mimics youth styles and culture. He wants to hang out with Taylor and his friends. He gives in to requests that are too daring or promiscuous so he'll be liked and continue to be part of the young crowd. Patrick's parenting philosophy is, "Too many rules are not cool."

A Look Ahead: What kind of young man will Taylor become under this parenting philosophy? One who thinks how he looks and acts is the most important part of who he is. A young man who is highly critical of himself and others. One who thinks life is about having fun. One who has trouble accepting responsibility. One who longs to have a mature adult to turn to for advice and encouragement.

Leman strongly cautions parents not to act like teenagers. "It's a temptation for many of us to feel that by not acting our age, we identify with our children and make them feel comfortable with us. Actually the reverse is true. ...Most adolescents want us to act, look, and talk like parents. That's our role. They have plenty of buddies; they need parents. There is a difference."

The Parent with Strings

Kevin and Janet are permissive parents who say yes to requests and give special gifts in exchange for their daughter Carrie's compliance with certain demands. The bribes are often used to motivate actions that make the family look good. Or, they're offered when Kevin and Janet don't have the time to attend one of Carrie's school events. The rewards aren't always monetary in nature. Kevin and Janet allowed Carrie to drive the car before she had a valid license and to date a year before the rest of her friends. Kevin and Janet often overlook Carrie's bad decisions or acts of disobedience to get something in exchange—usually a commitment not to embarrass them at social functions.

A Look Ahead: What kind of young woman will Carrie become? One who has trouble accepting the grace of God for herself and others. One who thinks love can be bought or controlled. One who has trouble in the professional world with real rules and expectations. One who longs to be loved just as she is.

Vital Truths: Unconditional love does not have strings. How you look to others is never as important as how you look to God. Your teen needs to learn the difference from you. At some point, your teenagers will embarrass you. They will make some good decisions; and they will make some rotten ones. It's a process that gradually brings them into adulthood. If they aren't allowed to experience the process, they'll be crippled in adulthood.

Your home is a learning laboratory. Help your teens learn that integrity cannot be manipulated or bought. Help them understand forgiveness and the grace of beginning again. Help them learn to make good choices because it pleases God, not because they're playing a part that looks good to others.

There will be times when you talk with your teen just as you would a close friend. That doesn't make you a Pal Parent. There will be times when your teen wants you to hang out with him and his friends. That doesn't make you a Cool Parent. And there will be situations when you want to be a little permissive to help your teen through a rough time. That doesn't make you a Parent with Strings. But being aware of the tendencies that characterize these types of parenting styles will keep you from centering in on one style too often. Understanding the results of permissive parenting will help you think about the long-term impact of your actions.

Pendulum Point Check: Let your teens know that you're willing to re-evaluate boundaries when cooperation and responsibility have been consistently demonstrated in attitude and behavior.

Action Plan:

- Make a list of the areas where you think your teens need boundaries or areas where you are most likely to disagree with your teens.
- Ask your teens to make their own lists.
- Compare your list to theirs. First talk about the common areas listed. If their ideas are too permissive, remind them of the boundary equation. If they want curfew to be 11:30 on Friday nights, tell them you'll consider re-evaluating the curfew time if they come in at the present curfew time of 11:00 every Friday night for the next three months. Make sure your teenagers understand the consequence for breaking a rule. If they are late any of the nights in the three-month time period, they must start the process all over.

The real key for parents is consistency. No matter how frustrated you may feel at times, begin each day with the end in mind: Your teenagers will grow up and become amazingly like you. What kind of you do you want them to become?