

How May I Use This?

Parents want their children to do well and be well. And we all parent pretty well when things are going smoothly. But how do we handle the rougher times? Imagine the following (frequently occurring) scenarios:

1. A seventh grade boy accesses pornography from his home computer.
2. An eighth grade girl talks constantly about boys and seems to need a great deal of attention from them.
3. A ninth grade boy treats his younger sisters and brothers unkindly.
4. A tenth grade girl talks to her mother disrespectfully.
5. An eleventh grade boy comes home after curfew with a flimsy excuse.

These aren't the biggest problems in the world, but they will help you think about the occasional rough times you have with your teenager. You may wish to select a scenario of your own to think about as you continue reading and keep your eye on the mirror: How are you during those difficult times? If I suggested that there were two general styles which would fit you better?

Let's call the first style "nip it in the bud." These parents have a very clear (but somewhat rigid and unforgiving) sense of right and wrong and feel upset whenever their child does something wrong. They come across as self-righteous and critical, sending the message that not only was the action wrong, but that it was so wrong as to warrant the parent's anger and disappointment.

The other style is best described by the phrase "how may I use this?" These parents approach every wrong action with a search for the teaching opportunity. They ask themselves - right in the heat of the moment, "How may I use this? What can I teach?" They believe that children and teenagers are flawed, developmentally still developing; therefore, ridiculously inappropriate actions are to be expected. Where the "nip it in the bud" parent wants to fix the problem right now, once and for all, the "how may I use this" parent looks for a way to teach something that will become their child's forever. There are still consequences to be given and values to be clarified, but the tone is kind and loving and understanding and more likely to keep the parent-child relationship close.

Sometimes the answer to the "what to teach" question is obvious. Other times there are many good possibilities. Perhaps most important is that we're likely to parent at our best when we pause for a moment and remember to ask the question.

Here are some of the ways that a “how may I use this” parent could deal with the examples above:

1. That pornography exploits women is obvious but we can also use this mistake to talk about masturbation, sexual arousal, dating, and the beauty of marital intimacy.

2. Teens need our help to determine what they should be basing their worth on. Is self-esteem a popularity contest? Are we only to feel good about ourselves if we have a lot of friends, get good grades, or contribute towards a winning season?

3. At the very least we can continue to use our lives as models (show him how we would like him to become), treat him the way we want him to treat his younger siblings. To talk to him harshly as we try to prevent him talking harshly is not likely to be effective.

4. They need our unconditional love the most when they are acting in a way that makes it hard for us to give it to them. It is a great gift to be able to teach them that they are instantly forgiven for their disrespectful tone, even as we give them a consequence.

5. While we are managing less and less of their lives by eleventh grade, safety issues are always ours. If we’re mad when they first come home with their alibi, we can certainly wait until morning to take their driving privileges away for a week or two. After all, it’s important for them to learn that expectations and rules are real and that they will need to deal successfully with authority for their whole lives.