

# The real reason your teen misbehaves

## Parents' feelings are clues to what is troubling child

BY RHONDA RABOW, THE GAZETTE MAY 9, 2011



ROBERT NAYLOR and CLAUDE LEGAULT in the film 10 and a half.

**Photograph by:** Alliance Vivafilm, Gazette

One of the most common questions I hear from my clients is, "I am having problems with my teen's behaviour." I know how frustrating it is for parents who want the best for their children yet feel that they hit a brick wall with every dialogue they attempt.

It may help to know that very often teens themselves don't even know why they react the way they do. It can often be because of an unconscious need that the teens don't know how to express.

This "secret" can help parents understand what their teen is trying to convey; and with effective communication skills, it is possible to change the relationship with their teen from discouraged to inspired.

As children mature, they develop coping tools for meeting their needs. One of their most important needs is to feel that they belong. The family environment, the child's position in the family (eldest, middle, youngest, only) and the methods of child training the parent uses, as well as the child's unique characteristics and outlook on life, will all affect how a child behaves. These factors help shape a personality, and they have an impact on the ways an individual seeks a sense of belonging and expresses when this need is not being met.

Children who misbehave usually do so for a purpose, with goals that are caused by a faulty belief system. These goals are set on a subconscious level in an attempt to find a place in the family.

U.S. psychiatrist and educator Rudolf Dreikurs says the goals of misbehaviour include attention, power,

revenge and display of inadequacy as a way to discourage parents from having expectations the teens don't feel they can meet.

How do you, as a parent, recognize which goal your teen is pursuing? Your feelings and your teen's response to what you do or say are your best guide to understanding.

When your teen misbehaves, consider first your own feelings. Are you annoyed? Angry? Hurt? Depressed? Second, look at how your teen responds when you react to his or her behaviour. Does your teen ignore you? Scowl at you? Argue? Stop the behaviour only to start again later? Examining your feelings and your teenager's reaction to your attempt at correction will help you identify what your teen is after.

For example, if you are feeling annoyed and need to remind your teen to do things because he is clowning around, getting into mischief, forgetting or neglecting things, this could easily be caused by his need for attention because he may be feeling ignored.

If you are feeling angry, provoked by your teen's aggressive, defiant or stubborn behaviour, it usually means you are in a power struggle, and your teen may be feeling controlled.

If you are feeling hurt and angry toward your teen because of rude and hurtful behaviour, it may mean that he is subconsciously seeking revenge because he is not feeling loved or lovable.

If you are feeling hopeless and discouraged about your teen and his reaction is to quit, avoid or drop out of school, he may be subconsciously displaying his feelings of inadequacy or feeling unable and helpless.

Before you can help your teen to change his behaviour, you and he need to know what stage he is in, recognize it as a need he doesn't consciously know how to express and then help him find constructive ways to communicate his need so that maladaptive behaviour can be extinguished and a healthier communication can be forged.

If you pay attention to how your teen affects your moods and feelings, it is much easier to figure out which stage he is in, and then lead to a calm discussion exploring what he is really trying to express and then, sometimes with help, negotiate how to meet his needs and maintain harmony.

Remember: Responding to bad behaviour driven by the need for attention will only reinforce negativity. You need to show him that it won't work.

Remove yourself from power struggles. Parental force invites resistance. Let your teen experience the consequences of the misbehaviour.

Don't try to get even. Try to see the teen as feeling hurt himself and not knowing how to ask for help.

Don't focus on your teen's inadequacies. You might think you are being helpful, but the teen hears your comments as criticism and feels discouraged. Focus on positive efforts.

Work toward creating a relationship where teens are encouraged to pursue the positive goals of co-operation, responsibility and selfreliance, and watch the misbehaviours disappear.