

Sent: November 2006
Subject: My story of parent abuse

Dear Eddie,

Sorry this is so long. I guess having found someone who seems to really “get “ what we have been going through I want to tell you everything!

I realised some months ago, that my husband and I could no longer function the way we had for so very long in relation to our daughter, Maddy’s behaviour, and her level of disrespect and disregard of the people around her, and of herself. This has also affected the rest of our extended family in ways we could never have conceived. We have all been making excuses and trying so hard to be understanding and in the process we have created a monster.

When Maddy was born, nearly 16 years ago, I wanted her to grow up being resilient, honest, and proud of who she was. I wanted her to do things that would make her happy; I didn’t care whether she was a lawyer or a hairdresser. When my marriage broke down, less than a year after she was born, I figured I had to do the best I could for both of us. She hasn’t seen or spoken to her biological father for almost 12 years (his choice) and in fact we don’t even know where he lives. I made sure she maintained a relationship with his parents though, even though he doesn’t see or speak with them either. I made sure we always lived in nice homes, and that Maddy lacked for nothing that she would have had if we had still been a two parent family.(good clothing, swimming lessons, school camps, toys, the latest gadgets) Friends and family have commented in the past that she had more time and attention lavished on her than most kids in two parent families. I always took this as a compliment. Now I see that wasn’t a good thing. My work hours were tailored so that she only had to spend minimal time in childcare, and I seldom went out because I figured she was my priority.

Six years ago I met Rob, a wonderful man. (never married before, no other kids). We took the relationship very slowly because I didn’t want Maddy to feel squeezed out, and made it clear to him that we were definitely a package deal. The steps we took to blend our relationship into a family were all carefully measured and considered. When I think of the effort and caring Rob put into making Maddy feel like it was always the three of us, instead of him and me, in the relationship I feel incredible sadness that his only experience of parenting has netted him very little joy and a lot of heartache. A year after we started seeing one another we all moved in together; again, all carefully measured. Suddenly she had two adults who adored her. Three years after we moved in Rob and I got married. The wedding was all planned around Maddy, and was a truly beautiful day. She finally had the family she had told me she was waiting for. Meantime she decided long before that to call Rob “dad” so it all seemed to be working out for all of us.

About a year ago, 6 months after the wedding, Maddy started acting out; little things at first, like deliberately doing things she had been asked not to do. Over time things worsened. She was being very defiant, lying, stealing small amounts of cash (despite a generous allowance) and being very rude, using profanity, constantly pressing house rules to the limits, hanging out after school at the shopping centre, hanging out with “questionable” kids at school, not trying with school work, fighting with everyone, threatening to bash or stab people who angered or annoyed her, and countless other

things. We figured it was all “normal” adolescent testing behaviour to a degree, and varied our approach with being lenient, using natural consequences for things like homework not being done, ignoring some of the negative behaviour and using a load of non-aversive strategies as well as loads of positive reinforcement for things done well. Just over 13 months ago, we hit our first big wall, and to be quite honest its been all down hill from there. Since October of last year , she has run away from home at least 4 times, broken back into our house twice, verbally and psychologically abused us, intimidated and threatened us and frankly we are exhausted. She engages in highly risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol taking, unsavoury inappropriate relationships, highly sexualised behaviour, associates with people who have criminal backgrounds, ditches school, lies, and then blames us when we catch her out. That’s usually when she runs away for days at a time, and comes home when it suits her. Ive lost count of the number of times we have done missing person reports with the police. I’m tired of the school, police and other authorities blaming us and not helping. This helps her excuse her behaviour in her own mind. To this point the only thing she hasn’t done is become physically violent and there have been times when I thought she might do that.

We have been in and out of family counselling (she refused to go with us after 2 sessions), she has seen a private counsellor (and refused to go after 4 sessions) and we have been on a merry go round of emotions that simply cannot continue. I have wondered if she has a psychiatric disorder, but came to the conclusion that she can control her behaviour when it suits her.

I think we confused “good” parenting with being open and honest and giving her too much of a say. She has never lacked for material possessions, all our time and attention, and whatever she wants or needs. I see now she is a classic “over entitled child” who is “under responsible”. We have never really expected her to take full responsibility for her actions, and have constantly made excuses and bailed her out, each and every time.

Three months ago, we decided that we would no longer do this and took a stand when she calmly announced she was moving out, basically, she said, because we were awful parents (this had followed her being caught out in a lie). She also screamed at me that she hoped I would die. For two weeks we asked her each day what steps she had taken to make the move out of home. In the end she stayed, after breaking down and saying she only said she was moving out because she thought that was what we wanted. This is another things she does - tries to make it all about us. She has used this technique in the past to get her own way because honestly I would allow almost anything if it meant my daughter would remain safe within our care. I calmly informed her when it appeared this latest crisis had been averted that we had really had enough of this behaviour, and the next time she announced she was moving out of home we would take her at her word, and that she wouldn’t be staying here for two weeks while she made arrangements either.

We found out she skipped 8 days of school last term, and have negotiated with the school for her to do a modified curriculum for the rest of the year to catch up on core subjects. Then Maddy decided to start wagging the free lessons she was supposed to be catching up in and two weeks ago following repeated warnings by the school, she was suspended. When we questioned her about it that night she screamed profanity at us, and told us she was moving out of home to go live with her father (the father she hasn’t seen in 12 years). I calmly stated she should go ahead with that plan and went

and got some boxes for her to start packing. She left our house the next morning and is currently living with a friend and her mother, and has informed us she does not wish to come home. We have finally decided to get real about what we will accept as OK behaviour in our home. I would dearly like her to come home with us and try to work this out but she is very angry, and is upping the ante in regard to her behaviour because this has worked in the past in getting us to allow her to do what she wants. I have realised I want a relationship with my daughter but not at the cost of my relationship with my husband, or my sanity!

Standing up to my daughter and imposing limits on her behaviour has not come easily to me. For a long time, I blamed it on normal adolescent behaviour, attachment issues stemming from her father abandoning her, hormones, a possible psychiatric disturbance and all sorts of things. Some of this may still be true, but Maddy needs to accept responsibility for treating us with the respect we deserve, and with which we have always treated her. I am prepared for the long haul here, in terms of her not returning home for some time (if ever). Ten months ago when she ran away, I fell to pieces, had three weeks off work and was on medication. I am a wiser woman today, even if the situation hasn't resolved itself in the way I had hoped, at this moment. Maddy knows she can come home anytime if she wants to be an active part of this family, but that we are no longer here to be abused and treated with contempt. Rob and I are moving on with doing everyday things (10 months ago I sat in a chair for three weeks, not eating, not sleeping, waiting for the phone to ring so I could go pick her up). Today, I went about my usual business, have been going to work since all this blew up, we got a message bank so she can call and leave a message and I don't have to sit waiting for that phone call.

Im not sure our story will have a happy ending. All I know is that I just need to take this one day at a time. Our family and friends who know the situation are 100% behind us, which really helps in terms of giving us the support we need and the resolve not to fall back into old patterns.

Thanks for listening, and thank you for your website. A friend forwarded me the link to your website two days ago. I cannot express to you how glad I am that they did. Reading through everything on your site, I experienced a range of emotions. I felt relief (so we aren't the only one's experiencing this and we aren't alone!), validation, for the responses to the behaviour we have recently implemented, sadness, at our personal situation, and most of all I felt that someone out there understands what we have been going through.

Karen

Hi Karen,

You sound similar to many of the very decent parents who have kids who turn against them for no apparent reason. We may never know the reason! Certainly kids with an absent parent are a bit more likely to have such problems but these are certainly not the majority, and your story would not sound unusual if the step-dad was a natural dad. We tend to assume that such things are relevant but they may not be. Your child certainly seems to fit the over-entitled category. One thing I have become more clear about since I wrote the 2 articles on my web-site is that parenting does not have to be in any way extreme for children to develop these problems. Although most of the parents with abusive children lean towards an involved and permissive (or indulgent) parenting style, they don't have to be far from the norm given unusual combinations of child temperament and circumstances. The "circumstances" are not necessarily

dramatic as teens sometimes go one way or another on the roll of a metaphorical social dice, i.e. which friends are being bitches and which boys, or girls, fancy them, or even which teachers are being mean or encouraging. Such influences may not be apparent even to highly involved parents, and the young person may not even be consciously aware of them. In other words there is a lot of luck involved in how things turn out.

You seem to be taking a very sensible stand. Allowing a teen to be irresponsible, and especially to allow them to be abusive, is not doing them any favours at all in the long run. You also can't help them if you go to pieces.

I'd put the chances of a good outcome as pretty high in your case. As a general rule the quicker and more dramatic the onset of problems the better are the chances that they will go away quickly. A child who has always had behaviour problems is far less likely to settle down than one who had many years of reasonable behaviour. There are, needless to say, no guarantees but I've often seen things turn about pretty fast. So never give up hope and keep the door open but with a clear insistence that you are not going to be abused.

I'm really glad that my web-site is reassuring to parents - though it's a bit scary that there is so little available. I also got an e-mail today from someone in New York saying that the police believed the violent, substance-abusing, young person who told them that the mother had made the holes in the wall herself!

Best of luck, Eddie

3 months later

Hello Eddie,

I just thought I might give you a bit of an update about our situation.

It has been three months since we corresponded and at that time our daughter had moved out of home. It seemed unlikely that she would be moving back in anytime soon. We had to deal with Centrelink (she applied for an allowance to leave home permanently citing we had thrown her out) and when that was rejected the mother of the girl she was living with applied for Family Assistance to enable our daughter to remain out of home.

All this aside, my husband and I decided that our rules would remain in place and we would stand firm about being treated with respect. Our daughter would call us every few days at first to pick arguments. I think she was trying to get us to back down and also trying to get me to break down emotionally as I had done in the past. Somehow I think she thought it would validate in her own mind that we did love her, and that we wanted her to come home. I remained calm at all times and when I felt I could not deal with her verbal tirades we simply did not answer the phone and let it go through to voice mail, If Maddy left a message I would always call her back, but after I had had time to compose myself and plan how I was going to react if things got ugly. I set the ground rules for phone conversations and contact and advised her that if she became abusive I would hang up. Twice I actually did that. I made her be responsible for her own behaviour and to accept the consequences of her actions. One example of this was when she told us to send her the rest of her things.(8 packing crates of them!) I calmly stated it was her responsibility to arrange for her things to be collected. We even went so far as to put them under the car port and advise her they were there to be picked up. Of course she never did get around to getting them.

My husband decided we needed to get away. We figured that if Maddy truly wasn't coming home we needed to spend some time together adjusting to it being the two of us instead of the three of us, and like many parents in this situation after 18 months of this we were physically and emotionally exhausted. To be honest I think we also knew there was a storm coming and we didn't want to be too easily accessible. In the past Maddy has manufactured crisis situations to gain our attention and we have always responded immediately. In this way in her own mind the balance of power is restored in her favour.

To cut a long story short, while we were away Maddy made contact and advised us that she wanted to come home. She was told that we would discuss it when we returned home from holiday and until that time she was to stay where she was, or to go to her grandparents to stay. She elected to stay where she was. Three days later we got an emergency phone call from her stating she had to leave as the adults in the house where she was staying were taking drugs. (see what I mean about manufactured crisis- she had been living there at this point for 5 weeks and this was the first mention of drugs) She demanded to be allowed to return home in our absence (Not likely!) I calmly re-stated she needed to contact her grandparents and ask permission to go stay there for 2 days until we returned, which she grudgingly did.

She has been home now for 10 weeks. We made it very clear before she came home what the rules would be. She hasn't faltered once. I believe she is being open and communicative. She is seeing a private psychologist and working through some of the things that may have led her to engage in self destructive (and parent destructive!) behaviour. We have our GP on board with a mental health care plan. She has returned to school and she made the decision to repeat Year 10 because she spent most of it wagging last year. We arranged a mentor and school support program for her through a youth-work organisation so she has someone else to help her if she needs it. She was really receptive to this idea and likes the mentor a lot. She is attending school every day and doing required homework. Her grades are actually pretty good! This week she brought home a B for an assignment and was genuinely peeved a couple of weeks ago when she got 1% off a B for Maths ("I should have tried harder mum" was what she said instead of something like "stupid teacher marked me down". She has made some new friends. Im not saying she doesn't have her moments ...all teenagers do, but things are so much better than they have been in a long long time. I am so proud of the gutsy way she has tackled decisions over the past couple of months, I could burst! She helps out around home and is a genuine pleasure to be with. She actually wants to talk to me about things that matter to her and will often creep into my bed for a chat before I go to sleep. I ran for governing council at her school and got elected and she didn't even tell me how embarrassing that would be for her!

Today is her 16th birthday. Sixteen years ago tonight I thought I was the luckiest woman alive. A year ago, I despaired that she would even make 16 and still be living under our roof. I know we have a long way to go but it seems we are on the right track. (fingers crossed). There will be more dips before she grows up, but I think Im prepared for them this time.

I'm happy to share our experience if you think it would be helpful at all.

Kind regards,
Karen

One Year Later

Hi Eddie,

As it has been some time since we last communicated I thought it might be time for an update.

2007 has been a good year! How different things are now compared to when I communicated with you a year ago.

Things at home have been very normal and by normal I mean we occasionally disagree, have slammed doors, swearing, pushing boundaries and rules and all the very typical teen stuff. I have to say that when people grizzle about their normal teen kids behaviour I have a chuckle and think "well I actually welcome that level of behaviour in my own child". I know things could be and have been so much worse in the past. On the whole she is a different child. Setting limits really worked for us, and not responding to her behaviour in the sense that we made her responsible for her actions was the best thing we ever did. I'm not saying nor expecting her to be perfect (we had a severe curfew breach a few weeks ago) but everything is really positive. She really is a typical teen.

Maddy landed a dream part time job recently through all her own hard work, and is loving it. Everything she has achieved has come to her through her own motivation and with the support of those around her. She realises now she makes the choices which shape whatever life she chooses to live. And whatever choices she makes she will have to deal with the outcomes (good or bad) I think I am most proud of how she handled adverse events this year, because it isn't always smooth sailing for her. On the whole she is a happy and confident young person, which is all we ever hoped for.

She has now successfully finished Year 10. She is planning to do Year 11 next year and wants to go on to uni but we are taking it one year at a time.

She is still seeing the psychologist every so often. The school mentor program ended last week because Maddy finished the year and she will not be needing that next year because she is longer deemed at risk of leaving school. My daughter was actually one of 18 students from 200 selected by the school to be a Peer Leader for next year, mentoring Year 8 students for the 2008 school year. She nominated herself initially (I was so proud!)

Eddie, I still think that it was your website that gave us the confirmation that we needed to take a stand and try a different approach to responding to our daughters behaviour. Twelve months on the philosophies and ideas are still working for us. I pass on your website details to other parents that I know could use your help just to realise they aren't alone in this, and that there is time and place for setting reasonable boundaries and limits, regardless of possible responses by their children. I hope that they are able to take away as much from it as we did. Sadly, I know not everyone will have the outcome we had.

You will always have my sincere thanks and respect.

Kindest regards,

Karen

[names have been changed]