

Hi Eddie,

Our eldest daughter has always had a determined and intensity-seeking temperament. I work in human services with a passion for working with people in ways that facilitate empowerment. Therefore it is probably no surprise that I adopted a democratic parenting approach. I read many books on parenting partly because I was not confident as I was a younger parent (years ago democratic parenting seemed to be the newest best thing). This style of parenting may have been okay for some but, as we have found out, coupled with being too available for my child with such a temperament in part led us to our current situation. Also, as things started to spiral out of control we quickly adopted punitive approaches (ie. grounding) which didn't help instead of consequences.

Our daughter was a bright and responsible child to mid teens. Then she started challenging me and button-pushing for reactions, which she got at times. As an emerging young woman she became competitive and disrespectful.

I often yielded to demands, especially if I was distracted, exhausted or felt guilty, because we have another child with special needs. She had some good friends and we often had them stay, drove her to parties and boyfriends places etc. She became very popular and around this time interested in hanging around rougher kids at the shopping mall, being curious. We were concerned and tried to divert her into sports and other friendships, and limit time to hang at the mall.

Her button pushing and intimidation started getting more regular the more she hung out with the new crowd. My mum and best friend started telling me I was sounding like a woman in an abusive relationship ("I shouldn't have said that, I think I made her angry" etc) and my health was suffering due to the stress. She started bringing home kids that 'didn't have anywhere to stay cos they got kicked out'. We told her to no longer bring them home as they did have homes but didn't like the rules. She agreed. It was about this time that she was jumping out the window after her curfew (1pm) to party all night with this crowd and wagging school. She disappeared for a weekend with no contact at all leaving us distraught as we'd never experienced anything like this before. After that she became colder and verbally abusive, targeting me when other adults were not around. I suspect she had discovered the power she held over us when she ran off and we were worried sick. In this time I lost a lot of confidence in my parenting and self in general. I sought help for her from a psychologist as I thought she may be depressed. She went once.

After meeting her current boyfriend she took off in the middle of the night. She couch-surfed for 7 weeks among out of control kids, a behaviour she had learned from this group. During this time she dropped out of her good school, ignored all our texts, got into more drug usage with rough young adults in Department housing, got arrested for stealing, got her sister out of school to get house keys and rummage through our stuff with a rough guy, bullied her sibling to get the holiday house keys, came home a couple of times 'because we were so worried about her' but

demanded money (which we wouldn't give her so she'd take off again for days with no contact). She has lied to people about us. She brought home a rough girl to collect clothes and 'have her back' in intimidating me while yelling and swearing at me leaving me shaking. I had cried telling her how much we loved her and wanted her to live at home and were sorry for whatever we had done etc. She has used stand over tactics and intimidation (swearing, threats, etc) when her father is not home to get what she wants,

Frankly, I've been scared of what she can do to us emotionally.

The younger kids were scared too from the yelling between us when I would finally break. I contacted an agency and my husband and I have been seeing a social worker who works primarily with kids from the 'Lad' subculture. At first I was distraught because I believed we must have abused her terribly for her to have run away, that telling her she had to change her smoking or clothes was abusive. All our daughter had told us was she 'hated living at home and I don't have to have a reason'. I played over conversations in my mind and read parenting books to work out how we had damaged her so much.

Especially since she was telling everyone she was so unhappy at home. The social worker told us our daughter was not abused but chasing getting 'high' and partying and that I had experienced domestic abuse in the form of emotional violence.

She came home, then left again a few times. Then with the help of the agency and Parentline we had a power shift in our household. Until that point we were paralyzed by our parental emotions of care and concern and were too reactionary. We felt at ransom. We would do anything to have her back home and she knew it (even though our other kids were emotionally safer without her there). She would keep us hanging saying comments like 'I haven't decided whether I want to live at home, I hate living there'. However, she did get some real life boundaries out there. A friend's mother told her she would have to pay rent and see her boyfriend (who is older and a bad influence) only twice a week. Furious, she came home saying maybe it's not so bad here and she could 'put up with it' (probably since at that point we had every boundary shattered and she could almost do as she pleased).

The power shifted at that point. We had been broken and had already started the grieving process so we were not as desperate to have her home anymore under any circumstances. In a sense we let her go. She wanted to live at home though (even though telling everyone 'it's still sh*t') so we said, 'You are welcome to live here but not under just any conditions. If you want to live here these are the conditions and the consequences for choosing not to comply.....'.

She broke a major one in 48 hours - received consequence. Broke the friends over one - does not have a set of keys anymore. Started intimidating me in front of the kids again - this time my husband dealt with it so it's not hidden.

Finally, we are making boundaries about the rest of the family. Our daughter is not the centre of everything. She can't bring this 'Lad' culture into the house. We let her know that we have no interest in controlling her anymore so if she chooses to live with us under our rules she can, otherwise she is choosing to live independently and we will help her pack. I keep conversations light and her father does the boundary setting at this point since we still don't trust her with me yet. Frankly, I need the break. If she becomes abusive I tell her 'I don't speak to you that way so I am choosing to end this here, if you want to fix the problem we can talk later', then I walk away. I also keep a poker face when buttons are pushed or I feel manipulated so I am no longer reactionary. She is starting a course tomorrow until high school resumes next year. This is progress, small steps.

I have had so much support from the agency and Parentline and believe we couldn't have done it without being educated in 'tough love' principles such as 'parents have rights too'. I feel so much more confident to not allow behaviours such as running away and 'Lad' behaviours like stealing and dropping school to have such psychological power over us, these are HER choices and she has to own the consequences. We told her that if she chooses to disappear again for a week we will consider her to have chosen to have moved and in respecting her choice will pack her belongings and she can pick them up. At least now we are educated and the younger kids are watching the example before them. We still love her but we have a long way to go to rebuild trust in our relationship. Maybe she will stay, maybe she will go. As long as she knows she could come to us if she really needs help and we keep firm boundaries in place either way it's better than before.

I think the work you do is so valuable to bring to light this hidden problem facing families. Many parents may hide it because it feels like such failure but sometimes the right education makes all the difference.

Cheers

p.s. Also, I just wanted you to know that we found an online program very helpful in giving us the basics we needed to turn things around (before I had your details). It is called myoutofcontroteen.com and was pretty good. Similar principles to what you have been saying really. The only problem was that in the US there appears to be more support from the juvenile (?) police regarding wagging and running away than in Australia so some advice wasn't applicable. Overall though basically about helping the kid take responsibility for their own choices.