

The Care and Feeding of Wolverines by Colin McEnroe

7 semi-effective rules for raising teenage boys

My son is 13, and I am... a) a loser b) a social liability c) unclean

My son's relationship with me is almost like an illicit affair. He wouldn't mind meeting me for pizza, but not in the town where we live, where people might see us. If we shoot baskets on a public court, it has to be across town, out of his school district. When I drop him off at school, it must look like an old-time Chicago mob hit, where the car keeps rolling as the body gets dumped onto the street. That's the way 13 is. I've lost count of the number of times he has simply turned to me and told me to walk farther away from him. Or 10 paces behind him. Somewhere along the way, I went from being a heroic figure to being the other kind of Untouchable. Unclean, unclean, unclean.

I've talked to other parents and searched my heart and the ancient texts. Buddhism and the 12-step movement are good sources of serenity and solace, particularly about accepting things you can't change. As the father of a new teenager, I have developed these rules of thumb, none of which I am following with any success right now.

1) Accept that all the things you've accomplished in your life can potentially threaten him rather than please him. You want him to be proud of you, and he is, at some deep, unknowable level. On the surface, though, he's trying to carve out a little space for himself in the world, and the fact that you still play a mean game of tennis or were recently named Man of the Year by the Loyal Order of Yaks is far from impressing him and may represent some new bar he's not sure he can clear.

2) Let him achieve and demonstrate mastery in areas where his gifts exceed yours.

3) Get out of town. Travel is the great equalizer. If neither one of you has ever been to somewhere, you're on a closer-to-equal footing there. He can see you get lost. You can ask him to look at the map while you drive. And best of all, he can set aside one of his greatest primal fears: being seen with a loser like you. You must be prepared, however, for one of the weird paradoxes of teenage life-forms. They are surging with hormones, with vital energies, with procreative force. But their idea of a vacation: They will sleep for 16 hours, trudge and stumble through the "morning" (2 to 6 P.M.), blossom into 4.5 hours of semi-productive motility, and then gradually lapse into the coma from whence they came.

If you do travel at this awkward age, it would be wise to build in contact with other people, preferably closer in age to your son.

4) Out source. No matter how good you are at something, accept that your teenager will more readily learn it from someone else. Drag him out onto the tennis court. Hit him a few balls. Let him know that you're available to hit with him whenever he wants, at a moment's notice. And then pay somebody else to teach him. Or he'll get stuck in the exact place where his resentment of you and his desire to impress you form mesmerizing cross hairs, and he won't progress very far from there.

5) Positive reinforcement is the key. Any kid will respond much better to those moments when you praise something he has done well. Sometimes, though, with a teenager, you really have to search. ("It was great how you didn't rob that convenience store.") I get up every day planning to use positive reinforcement as my main fathering tool, but in the words of the philosopher Mike Tyson, "Everybody has a plan, until they get hit." Some days, it's like trying to obedience-train a wolverine. You're looking for an opportunity to toss the wolverine a liver snap, but it never does anything nice.

"Thank you for making your bed. That was helpful."

"I didn't make my bed! What are you doing in my room? You're too controlling!"

"Well, no, you didn't exactly make your bed, but you kind of pulled the covers up in a semi neat fashion, and that's more than you usually do. I just want to give you some props and say it's a great start. . . ."

"What do you mean 'more than I usually do'? What's that supposed to mean? Leave me alone!"

6) Remember, the teenager's world is darker and more precarious than you will know. Assume that you are seeing only a shred of his real problems.

6A. It doesn't matter what you say or what he says, as long as you keep talking. Don't assume that just because you're both talking you're hearing more than one-fifth of the scary stuff

7) Be prepared to fail. We boomers learned a gospel that prepared us to do almost anything but fail. We grew up climbing ladders of success that could be scaled if we put in the effort and kept our wits about us. Being the father of a teenager is not like that. Your old tools don't fit the new situation, and you have to accept the fact that at the end of many days, the homework won't be done or the healthy snacks won't have been eaten or the car bumper won't have missed the guardrail. What you must tell your kid in those worst of times is this (in so many words): "You cannot lose me. I am your partner forever. We may hack at each other. I may not always like or condone your behavior, but you cannot lose me. There is not a force on earth that can sever this connection. P.S.-You're grounded until the dead rise from their graves."

He'll be listening somewhere under that bristling, defensive wild-boar hide. His drama is as old as a Greek tragedy: He needs to destroy you without killing you. He's worried he'll destroy you. He's worried he won't. He loves you. He hates you. He loves you. In other words, he's crazy. Just like you.