

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# **Rebel With a Cause: Rebellion in Adolescence**

*Teenage rebellion plays an important part in adolescent growth*

By Dr. Carl Pickhardt  
2009

*Psychology shows us patterns in human behavior. According to psychologist Dr. Carl Pickhardt, adolescence is a time of rebellion. In this article, Dr. Pickhardt outlines the stages of adolescent rebellion from ages 9 to 23. As you read, take notes on the reasons behind each stage.*

- [1] It's the poster characteristic of the teenager years: adolescent rebellion. And it's one that causes many conflicts with parents.

Two common types of rebellion are against fitting in socially (rebellion of non-conformity)<sup>1</sup> and against adult authority (rebellion of non-compliance).<sup>2</sup> In both types, rebellion attracts adult attention by offending it.



*"Youth Culture - 1980s - 1990s" by Paul Townsend is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.*

The young person proudly asserts individuality from what parents like or independence of what parents want and in each case succeeds in provoking their disapproval. This is why rebellion, which is simply behavior that deliberately opposes the ruling norms or powers that be, has been given a good name by adolescents and a bad one by adults.

The reason why parents usually dislike adolescent rebellion is not only that it creates more resistance to their job of providing structure, guidance, and supervision, but because rebellion can lead to serious kinds of harm.

- [5] Rebellion can cause young people to rebel against their own self-interests — rejecting childhood interests, activities, and relationships that often support self-esteem.

It can cause them to engage in self-defeating and self-destructive behavior — refusing to do school work or even physically hurting themselves.

It can cause them to experiment with high-risk excitement — accepting dares that as children they would have refused.

It can cause them to reject safe rules and restraints — letting impulse overrule judgment to dangerous effect.

1. **Non-conformity (noun):** a refusal or failure to behave in accordance with socially accepted conventions or standards  
2. **Non-compliance (noun):** a failure or refusal to follow a rule or direction, or to obey authority

And it can cause them to injure valued relationships — pushing against those they care about and pushing them away.

- [10] So adolescent rebellion is not simply a matter of parental aggravation; it is also a matter of concern.

Although the young person thinks rebellion is an act of independence, it actually never is. It is really an act of dependency. Rebellion causes the young person to suspend self-definition and do the opposite of what other people want.

That's why the antidote for rebellion is the true independence offered by creating and accepting a challenge — the young person deciding to do something hard with themselves for themselves in order to grow themselves. The teenager who finds a lot of challenges to engage with, and who has parents who support those challenges, doesn't need a lot of rebellion to transform or redefine him or herself in adolescence.

To what degree a young person needs to rebel varies widely. In his fascinating book, *Born to Rebel* (1997), Frank Sulloway posits that later born children tend to rebel more than first born. Some of his reasoning is because they identify less with parents, do not want to be clones of the older child or children who went before, and give themselves more latitude to grow in nontraditional ways. So, parents may find later born children to be more rebellious.

From what I have seen in counseling, rebellion tends to have different roles in a young person's growth depending in which stage of adolescence it is expressed. Stage by adolescent stage, then, here is how rebellion seems to function.

## **Rebellion in Early Adolescence (9-13)**

- [15] Serious rebellion typically begins at the outset of adolescence, and when it does many parents think this opposition is against them. They are usually mistaken. Rebellion is not against them; it is only acted out against them.

Rebellion at this age is primarily a process through which the young person rejects the old child identity that he or she now wants to shed to clear the way for more grown up redefinition ahead. Rebellion at this early adolescent age proclaims: "I refuse to be defined and treated as a child any more!" Now he knows how he doesn't want to be, but he has yet to discover and establish how he does want to be.

How should parents respond to strong rebellion at this stage? When requests are met with delay, use patient insistence to wear down resistance. (See 9/15/09 blog, "Nagging the adolescent.") And try to move the early adolescent from acting out to talking out. Begin by asking, "can you help me better understand what you need?" See if you can get the young person to put their feelings into words. Having been given a full hearing and having had his or her say, the young person may now be more inclined to let parents have their way.

## Rebellion in Mid Adolescence (13-15)

In mid adolescence, during the late middle school and early high school years, most rebellion is about creating needed differentiation to experiment with identity and needed opposition to gather power of self-determination.

When parents feel hard-pressed by these acts of rebellion (breaking social rules, running with wilder friends, for example) they are best served by allowing natural consequences to occur and by repeatedly providing positive guidance. They do this by continually making statements about, and taking stands for, choices that support constructive growth.

- [20] Each time they do so, they provide the young person a fresh choice point to cooperate with them. Particularly when rebellion pushes hardest, as it usually does in mid adolescence, it is the responsibility of parents to keep communicating a reference that will guide the young person down a constructive path of growing up. In the words of one veteran parent who had shepherded two adolescents through periods of high rebellion, "what it takes is the gentle pressure of positive direction relentlessly applied."

Just because they won't heed what parents say and want at the moment doesn't mean that reference is not worth giving. Since rebellion is often reinforced by messages from peers, parents should keep getting their message in there. The son or daughter who ignored that direction today may decide to follow it tomorrow. Why? Because young people know that is their parents and not their peers who ultimately have their best interests at heart.

## Rebellion in Late Adolescence (15-18)

Many high school rebellions that I see occur as a result of delayed adolescence, the young person dramatically rebelling at last to liberate himself or herself from childhood dependency on parental approval for always being the "good child."

For example, only children are often slower to separate from parents because of strong attachment and protracted holding on by both sides. Finally in high school these young people, with graduation into more independence looming a year or two ahead, may need to initiate late stage rebellions to get the separation and differentiation and autonomy they need to undertake this next momentous step.

This is painful and scary for parents. At this older age, risk taking can be more dangerous, while they miss the loss of closeness and compatibility with their son or daughter that they have enjoyed for so many years.

- [25] What parents need to remember at this point is that the young person is just as scared and pained as they are. So their job is to allow more independence while expecting commensurate responsibility, staying empathetic during disagreements, and providing calm and clear guidance about any significant risk taking that may be going on.

## Rebellion in Trial Independence (18-23)

Rebellion starts in early adolescence with the young person resisting parental authority by saying: "You can't make me!" Rebellion ends in the last stage of adolescence, trial independence, with the young person resisting personal authority by saying: "I can't make me!"

Having dethroned parental authority for leading her life and supplanted it with her own authority, she finds herself rebelling against it. It's like the young person is saying: "Nobody is going to order me around, not even me!"

For example, the young person knows he has to be on time for a job, but he can't make himself get up in the morning. The young person knows she has to study, go to class, and turn in assignments, but she can't make herself do the college work. Both he and she know they shouldn't drink so much at parties because of how they act and what they let happen, but in the company of friends they can't make themselves stop. The old Walt Kelly quote really captures this conflicted age: "We have met the enemy and they are us."

What can parents do at this point? They must let the consequences of the young person's resistant choices play out and not interfere. How to end this rebellion against self-interest and accept their leadership authority in life is the last challenge of adolescence. It must be met before young adulthood can truly begin.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. According to the article, what is the author's point of view toward rebellion in adolescence (i.e. good, bad, necessary evil)? Cite evidence from the text in your answer. [RI.6]

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2. According to the article, what are the main reasons for why teenagers rebel? [RI.3]
- A. Teenagers use rebellion as a way to get back at their parents.
  - B. Teenagers use rebellion to push boundaries.
  - C. Teenagers rebel mostly for attention, like younger children compete for parental attention with older siblings.
  - D. Teenagers rebel as a means to assert independence and individual identity.

3. PART A: What does the term "latitude" most closely mean as used in paragraph 13? [RI.4]
- A. Restriction
  - B. Space
  - C. Boundary
  - D. Orientation

4. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph provides the best support for the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "To what degree a young person needs to rebel varies widely."
  - B. "later born children tend to rebel more than first born"
  - C. "do not want to be clones"
  - D. "to grow in nontraditional ways"

5. How does the structural organization of the article support Dr. Pickhardt's concept of adolescent rebellion? [RI.5]
- A. Dr. Pickhardt's concept of adolescent rebellion is broken down into stages, and the article reflects these stages in its structural design.
  - B. Dr. Pickhardt's concept of adolescent rebellion is broken down into types of rebellion, and the article reflects these types in its structural design.
  - C. Dr. Pickhardt's concept of adolescent rebellion follows a consecutive order, just as the article is ordered by introduction, body (i.e. the stages), and conclusion
  - D. Dr. Pickhardt's concept of adolescent rebellion consists of four perspectives, just as the article includes four different perspectives on the subject: author, psychologist, parent, and child.
6. Which of the following does NOT constitute an example of Dr. Pickhardt's advice to parents when responding to adolescent rebellion? [RI.3]
- A. He advises parents to talk to their children and keep lines of communication open.
  - B. He advises parents to give their children stricter boundaries but to avoid harsh punishment.
  - C. He advises parents to allow their children make their own mistakes, while maintaining a position of support for their children.
  - D. He advises parents to let children meet challenges and have a certain amount of responsibilities, depending on their age.

