



EMPLOYEE COUNSELING SERVICES

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A Division of Family Counseling Services of Greater Miami, Inc.

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Breaking Away

When it was over Maria could feel the stinging sensation in the palm of her hand as she clutched her gold medallion. The baby's cries were barely audible over the sound of water running in her daughter's shower. A plate lay broken at her feet, and Susanna's school books and papers scattered hurricane style across the dining room table. This time the argument had gotten out of hand.

She looked at the locket--a gift from her grandmother and her only memento from the country of her birth. Maria remembered the day she left her grandmother's house, defiant and determined never to return. She was only fourteen and her boyfriend was her ticket to freedom--or so she thought. Now, some twenty years later, her own daughter's growing defiance frightened her. So Maria forbid Susanna to see Mark again. Why this sudden interest in a boy whose family had nothing in common with hers? A boy whose father gave him a car for his sixteenth birthday! Hadn't Maria worked for everything she ever had? And what about school? Susanna's grades began dropping as soon as she met Mark. Now she was lying and sneaking out to meet him.

Susanna emerged from the bathroom, her face still red from her mother's hand. Defiantly she turned away and slammed the door to her room behind her. Within seconds the stereo blasted a rock and roll sound so intense that the floor seemed to move to its beat. The baby's cries grew louder.

The following week in the EAP counselor's office, Maria broke down. The picture she painted of her family was the color of hopelessness. Clearly she was a failure as a parent. Her older son had already dropped out of school, and worked a series of fast food jobs. He was home infrequently. Her daughter had been an "A" student until she discovered boys. Now she was not only dating, but lying about it. The baby was barely old enough for day care. Her ex-husband and she were reconciled, but he was of no help disciplining the older children because he was not their father. Maria's salary barely paid the bills, let alone saving for the future. But worst of all, the relationship between

herself and Susanna had deteriorated into a string of explosive arguments separated by periods of total silence.

Maria's counselor listened empathetically, and assured her that while things **seemed** hopeless, there was in fact a way to regain her effectiveness as a parent. The counselor began by helping Maria look objectively at what parenting methods she had been employing so far and with what results. Maria began to see that every time her daughter expressed a different opinion or tried to act independently, Maria clamped down and simply **told** Susanna what to do. Second, the counselor helped Maria express her feelings about what was happening in her family right now. Maria's greatest fear about losing control over her daughter was that her family would come apart. Maria remembered the pain she had caused her grandmother by leaving home; now she feared her daughter would be lured away by her boyfriend. And, while Maria was happy that she and her husband had reunited, she resented that he offered so little help and support with her children.

Finally, the counselor recommended that in addition to the counseling sessions Maria attend a six week parent effectiveness class. In the class, Maria and other parents learned new and more effective techniques for creating mutual respect and cooperation with their teenagers. Maria was able to see that the problems she faced were typical of other parents.

In the weeks that followed, Maria and Susanna were able to disengage from the power struggle and negotiate an agreement about dating, curfew and school performance. Dating Mark was acceptable so long as curfew was honored and activities were safe. School performance was left totally up to Susanna, with the understanding that poor grades would affect Susanna's future options, not her mother. Initially Susanna complied with the new rules. Then one day she returned from the mall after curfew and smelling of beer. Maria calmly but firmly reminded Susanna that a curfew violation and drinking meant no extracurricular activities for the next week. Realizing that she had violated their agreement, Susanna complied without dissent.



"Probably one of the most important goals for the parent of a teenager is to develop the courage to be imperfect."

Don Dinkmeyer and
Gary McKay
Parenting Teenagers

Parenting experts refer to adolescence as the "terrible twos" with hormones and wheels. While adolescence need not be a time of rebellion, it is of necessity a time to break away from one's family enough to create a separate identity. Peer groups are important because they allow teenagers to try out the new identity; ideas and values different from those of the family may find acceptance within the peer group.

Based on Dinkmeyer and McKay's book Family Counseling Services created the parenting classes which Maria attended. Here are some of the highlights from Parenting Teenagers :

Listen, listen, listen... practice reflective listening to get your teenager to open up. Restate in your own words what you think your teen means. This is especially helpful when listening to some strong feelings your son or daughter has expressed. Try to understand before you talk. If you're too tired or preoccupied to listen, make arrangements with your son or daughter to get together a little later--then be sure to do it.

Be clear about whose problem it is... One of the goals of adolescence is increased responsibility for self-management. Unless your teen's behavior is unsafe or interferes with your rights, the choices he makes and any resulting problems are his. For example, if your teenager is late for school or gets failing grades because he stays up late and doesn't study, that's his problem. You may feel badly or be disappointed, but the consequences belong to your teenager. If you offer to help with problem-solving, resist the temptation to jump in and rescue by taking him to school, or doing her homework. You won't be there in college to take the exams, so now is the time to let your teen learn from natural consequences.

When it's your problem... that is, when your son is infringing on your rights by blasting the stereo when you try to read or returning the car with the gas tank on empty, try giving feedback using "I" messages. For example: "When you play the stereo so loudly [antecedent condition] **I feel** annoyed and a little angry [how you feel] because I'm unable to relax at the end of my day and read the paper [consequence for you]. It takes practice to routinely use "I" messages, but the

practice is well worth the results. They work equally well with spouses and colleagues. One time to avoid using "I" messages is during a heated argument.

Avoid arguments by agreeing to disagree... Your teen is developing his own values and opinions. Objective discussion of the value of higher education or whether fourteen is too young to go steady may actually help your teenager clarify her thinking. But stop short of trying to convince or impose **your** values and opinions on your teen. Making up her own mind is part of what she needs to become her own person.

Give encouragement whenever possible... even if your teenager acts like your input doesn't count. It does. Show confidence that he can take on new responsibilities and use good judgment. Emphasize your son or daughter's strengths and abilities, not his limitations. Some teens have good intellectual or athletic ability, others good social skills. Help your son or daughter feel a sense of accomplishment through such comments as "You must feel great about completing such a challenging chemistry experiment" or "I see from your practice that you've really improved your running time." Focus your remarks more on efforts to improve than on grades or winning games.

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how we can help with
personal or work/family
problems. Free and
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Our final words of encouragement to parents come not from Dinkmeyer's book, but from our own experience.

When you've had a bad day... Remember the "time outs" you used during the terrible twos? Use them again for yourself. When your nerves are frayed and your patience is exhausted, tell your teenager you're tired and need a break. Excuse yourself to a hot bath, a movie theater, a trip to the library, a long walk alone or with your mate. Our most challenging moments as parents seem more manageable when our energies are restored.

Take the long view... Although adolescence is a difficult time for you **and** your teenager, it is only a phase. Someday you and your grown son or daughter will be playing with your grandchildren. When the two year old throws a toy at the glass door or pulls a clump of hair from the cat's tail, your frantic son or daughter will surprise you by turning to you for advice on parenting!