

Alternatives to Grounding

Being a parent is a huge responsibility. Supporting our children to grow into responsible adults while protecting them from the very real dangers of childhood is a monstrously difficult and important task. When we do it well we see our children thrive and grow more and more responsible for their own wellbeing. When we do it poorly, our children suffer.

This article offers to parents, especially those of teenagers, some tools for doing it well. These tools are among those in a set of tools known as Creative Conflict Resolution as spelled out in the book *Just Conflict: Transformation through Resolution* and on the web site at JustConflict.com. If you don't have a copy of the book you can search an online copy from the web site or you can order a print copy.

Helping our children mature into healthy adults is a difficult task made immeasurably more difficult by the fact that we as parents are only one factor influencing their development. Among the other factors are genetic and developmental disabilities, cultural and social influences, and injuries and illnesses, all of which we have little if any control over. Just as we can't take all of the credit for how our children turn out, neither do we deserve all of the blame.

Still, it is also true that as parents we have a huge influence over our children and just because we can't do everything is not a reason to not do all we can. We are motivated to give our kids the best life we can. We are thus very hurt when our best efforts are met by their resistance and oppositional behavior. They often seem to be trying to mess up their own lives.

Son is a few months shy of his seventeenth birthday and still a new driver with some restrictions on where he is permitted to take the car and when. In particular he only gets the car to go to school and to soccer practice. He shares the second car with Mom. She works out of their home as so doesn't need it every day. Step-Dad has pretty much exclusive use of the primary car.

Son has been pressing for fewer restrictions on his driving. He thinks he should be able to take Girl-friend out to the movies and have the car with him when he spends the night at a buddy's house. Mom and Step-Dad are concerned that he is not yet mature enough to have those privileges.

One afternoon Mom pulls the mail from the mailbox and finds an official looking letter from the City Red Light Enforcement office. Inside she finds a summons for a red light violation and photographs of the second car entering and leaving an intersection in another part of town. The close-up of the license plate makes it clear this is their car.

Mom goes to the calendar to clarify when this happened. From the date and time on the summons she determines this was just minutes before Son was to be at soccer practice but is miles away from the practice field. It is, however, very close to where Son's girlfriend has a job after school. Son has been told that he is not to use the car to give rides to his friends. Mom has no doubt that Son used the car to give his girlfriend a ride and was then about to be late for practice and so was in too big a hurry to heed the light.

Option A

Mom decides to talk to Son about this when he gets home.

When Son comes in the door she holds the envelope up and asks, "What's this?"

"I don't know."

"Well, take a look at it and tell if you can explain it?"

Son opens the envelope and glances at it and says, "It looks like a letter from the City."

"It is a ticket for running a red light. It happened while you were using the car. Can you tell me what you were doing?"

"I don't know."

Mom starts to get more agitated and raises her voice. "You don't know what you were doing running a red light between where your girlfriend works and where you have soccer practice? You don't remember what you are doing when you are driving the car recklessly?"

"Mom, I wasn't being reckless. I was just in a hurry because I wanted to be on time to practice. Coach gets really mad when we are late."

"So you do remember what you were doing. You do remember that you were giving your girlfriend a ride when we have told you that you are not to give anyone a ride."

"Yes, I gave her a ride. Her mom was going to do that but her car was in the shop and she didn't have any other way to get there. I don't do it all the time. But she was really in a bind and I thought I had time to take her."

As he says this the back door closes as Step-Dad gets home from work. He walks into the room finding Mom flushed and furious as Son tries to explain himself.

"What's the problem," he asks.

"I gave my girlfriend a ride to work," answers Son.

“We got a \$100 ticket because he ran a red light,” answers Mom.

“What?” shouts Step-Dad grabbing the letter. They stand in awkward silence as Step-Dad reads it. He starts to shake his head back and forth quickly as they wait. He is clearly weighing his options.

Finally he says, “You are so grounded!”

“Step-Dad, I was just giving my girlfriend a ride.”

“Honey,” says Mom, “he does need get to his games and to practice.”

“He can ride his bike, but he is not driving that car. He breaks the rules by driving his girlfriend and then he breaks the law by running a red light. He clearly is not mature enough to drive. Nope, sonny, you are handing in your keys.”

In the next few weeks Mom enforces the grounding by not allowing Son to drive but she knows he can't get to practice and games without a ride so goes back to driving him as she did before he got his license. Son becomes more sullen. Step-Dad feels good about having set clear limits with his step-son.

Option B

Mom decides to call Step-Dad and talk to him about the letter. They agree to talk when he gets home. When Son gets home she shows him the letter and tells him that Step-Dad and she will talk and then they will want to hear from him about what this means and what he thinks should happen.

When Step-Dad gets home, he and Mom sit at the kitchen table and discuss what this means and what they are going to do. Son is not in the room but he knows they are talking and he is thinking about what he is going to say when they ask him to come talk with them.

“I say he loses the car,” states Step-Dad. “He knew he wasn't supposed to drive his girlfriend or anyone else and I can't see any other reason for him to be in that part of town.”

“I agree that it looks like he broke the rules. I want to wait until we have heard from him before we decide what to do. But as for losing all access to the car, one of the reasons he is driving is so I don't have to. Driving is about him becoming more responsible for himself. If he can't do it safely then he loses the car. But I want us to address this in a way he will learn from.”

“Well, sure,” says Step-Dad, “I want him to become more responsible too, but what about this \$100 fine? Are we just going to pay this for him?”

“No, it is his fine. He might try to deny that he was driving but the only other person it could have been was me and I know I wasn’t there. He had the car that day. If someone else was driving then he is really in big trouble.”

“Okay, so we agree that he is responsible for the fine but we aren’t yet sure what impact this will have on when and whether he uses the car.”

They sit in silence for a moment.

Mom says, “So are we ready to talk to him?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Step-Dad gets up and goes to find Son and discovers him waiting in the next room.

“Let’s talk.”

Step-Dad and Son return to the kitchen and take seats at the table with Mom.

“Look,” starts Son, “I know I’m not supposed to give anyone a ride but Girl-friend’s mom called her to say that the car was in the shop and she wouldn’t be able to give her a ride to work. It was really important to her to get there and the bus would have taken so long that she would have gotten there at the end of her shift. I had time before practice so I gave her a ride. I saw the light turn amber but I thought I could beat it. Coach really doesn’t like it when we are late to practice.”

Mom and Step-Dad look at each other to check in and Mom says, “Son, we are glad that you are acknowledging what you did. It is nice that you are so interested in helping out others and we can see that Girl-friend was in a bind. But you didn’t have permission to use the car to give a ride to anyone and then you were in such a hurry to get to practice that you ran a light and now there is this \$100 fine.”

“Yeah, and I have some money left from the Christmas gift from Grandma I can pay that with.”

Mom and Step-Dad look at each other again. This time Step-Dad speaks. “We are glad that you accept responsibility for the fine and are willing to pay it. I’m not sure that using your Grandmother’s gift is quite what she had in mind.”

Mom jumps in, “Yes, I think there are some other ways we can find for you to earn the money. We can make a list of jobs that need doing around here and you can work off the cost of the fine.” Mom and Step-Dad look to each other again and see they are in agreement.

Step-Dad adds, “But there is also the matter of your having taken it on yourself to give Girl-friend a ride. It is not your car and it is not up to you to decide how it will be used. “

“Step-Dad, I just gave her a ride to work. This is not a big deal.”

“I see that it is not a big deal to you. Would you like to know why it is a big deal for us?”

Son is caught up a bit short. He knows he can't say he doesn't want to know but he is a bit afraid of what he is going to hear. “Yeah,” he says.

Mom and Step-Dad look at each other again. Mom starts, “Well, we know that you are still learning to drive and your judgment isn't as good as it will be when you are more mature.”

“Mom,” Son cuts her off, “I am almost seventeen!”

“Yes, that's right, you are far more mature than you used to be and you are not as mature as we hope you will become. We hope you will live long enough to know that sometimes you don't get to make the rules. We don't let you carry passengers because we are afraid you will have errors in judgment and do dangerous things like run stop lights.”

There is a bit of silence before Son says, “No one got hurt.”

“That's right,” Step-Dad responds, “No one was harmed and we are grateful for that. But someone easily could have been and that is just what we want to try to avoid.” He pauses for a moment and then asks, “Did you know that you ran the light?”

“I was afraid I hadn't made it through in time. I saw the strobe flash but I didn't see a cop. I guess I thought I had made it.”

“So let's just list out what our concerns are here,” continues Step-Dad. “You decided to use the car to carry a passenger when you know that is against the rules. You were then in such a hurry that you ran a light. And, aware that you had done so, you didn't tell us that we were likely to get a ticket. Do I have that right?”

“Yes, that's right,” says Son, now very sheepish. And after a pause adds, “But what was I supposed to tell Girl-friend? I have a car and time and she needs a ride. Do you want me to say, sure, I'd love to give you a ride but my parents don't want me to have any passengers.”

“Actually, that would be a fine thing to say,” adds Mom. “It has the advantage of being the truth. Still, I am glad that you want to help her out. So how would it be if when you are in a situation like that where you want to help someone but you don't have permission to use the car for that purpose, you call us and talk to us about what you should do? Would you be able to do that?”

“Yeah, I guess I could do that.”

Step-Dad picks up the conversation again. “So the second problem is that you used the fear that you were going to be late to practice to give yourself permission to drive recklessly. Can you see that you did that?”

“Yeah, I did that.”

“And then, when you realized you may have run the light, you didn’t tell us about what happened hoping that we wouldn’t find out. Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“So how are you going to handle those situations in the future?”

There is a long pause as Son looks for the right answers. “I guess if I am going to be late I will just have to hear Coach yell at me. And I guess if I get into trouble I will have to tell you about it before you get a letter in the mail.”

Mom and Step-Dad look at each other and smile. Step-Dad says, “And when you can show us you can do that we can look at you driving with Girlfriend in the car.” Mom says “I’ll get to work on a list of jobs to be done.”

Step-Dad adds, “We love you, Son.” Mom and Step-Dad take turns giving Son a hug.

My experience as a psychotherapist working with families together with the stories I hear from my wife who teaches at a public high school lead me to believe that there are more families like Option A than Option B. While there are a theoretically infinite number of ways parents could respond to the situation, some ways do a better job of supporting greater maturity in our children than do others. There are some principles we can follow which help us find those better ways. By following these principles you will become more like the family in Option B.

Five Fundamentals of Justice and Fairness

At the core justice is about setting up clear expectations for what we will each do that will result in an equitable distribution of resources. These are not only tangible resources but also things like respect, trust, and appreciation. When we are able have rules and follow them, and when the result is that these resources are fairly distributed, we create justice.

[This is an article in progress. From here on is simply an outline of what is to come.]

1. **Changing Punishment into Consequences:** It is essential that we give guidance to our children so that they do not learn only from natural consequences. We are not offering good parenting if we let our children learn the hard way why they shouldn't stick a fork into an electrical socket. We correct them before they get hurt. Thus having permission to do things to them they will feel hurt by we can then lose sight of the reasons we are offering correction. We can punish them in ways that make us feel better but don't actually help them mature. We have to be very clear about how what we are doing will be of benefit to them.

In that regard we must design responses to their transgressions which are swift (happen as soon as possible after the misdeed), certain (always happen in the manner the child can expect), proportional (be of a scale that fits the harm or the danger), and logical (deriving naturally from the transgression).

- a. Fundamentals of justice and fairness: when you do a bad thing you get hurt
 - b. Creating consequences for our children: not waiting for them to learn the hard way
 - c. Guiding or abusing?
2. **Balancing Rights and Responsibilities:** Because of the risk that we use our parental power abusively, or that we can begin to feel abused by our own children, it is essential that we maintain a balance between the rights and the responsibilities that are expressed in the relationships we create with them.

For relationships to be just there must be a balance of rights and responsibilities. If one person has more responsibilities than rights, that person will feel oppressed. If a person has more rights than responsibilities, he or she will feel entitled...and someone else, the one who is picking up the slack, will be oppressed.

The structure of our relationships is designed to create a balance of rights and responsibilities. In a reciprocal relationship we each have responsibility to honor the rights of the other. If I have a job I have a responsibility to honor the right of my boss to my best efforts. My boss has a responsibility to honor my right to get paid for my labor.

In some relationships one party has special rights to act on behalf of another because that party has a responsibility for the welfare of the other. We call this a fiduciary relationship.

In some relationships all of the parties have the same rights and responsibilities. We call this a mutual relationship.

As parents we have a fiduciary responsibility for the welfare of our children. We have the right to make choices about their behavior and circumstances because we are responsible for their wellbeing. If we are not looking out for their welfare we can lose parental rights. Exercising our rights without fulfilling our responsibilities is a form of abuse.

As our children grow they have more and more rights as they show themselves to be more and more responsible. If we give them rights for which they have not shown themselves responsible, we are spoiling them. If we deny them rights when they have earned them by their responsibility, we are making them bitter and joyless.

- a. Fundamentals of justice and fairness: an imbalance of rights and responsibilities results in oppression
 - b. Balancing rights and responsibilities as we raise our children
 - c. Fiduciary and mutual relationships
3. **An Imbalance of Power:** Everyone and everything has power. But not everyone has the same amount of power. Teens are very keen on becoming more powerful but they don't recognize easily the power they already have. They are thus usually pretty willing to be overpowering in relationships that feel safe to them. They are observant about what will get us to abandon our position relative to them.

As a result they are often perceived by parents as more powerful than they actually are. Parents have far more power than do teens. We have the power of our disapproval (our children really do want to please us). We have the power of our wisdom (despite what they may say, we really do have more experience in insight than they do about most things). But most of all we have the power of our material and financial resources. It really is up to us what goods and services they receive from us.

Our power is constrained by our concern for their wellbeing—we won't easily kick them out of the house—but there are myriad things we can do short of that which have a huge impact on them. We can restrict their ability to move about and communicate with their peers. We can ground them.

The problem we have using the considerable power which is available to us is that we are afraid of being abusive. It is easy to abuse the power we have over others. But there are two other forms of power: power with and empowerment. Power

with is the ability to act in concert with others to meet a common goal. Empowerment is when we act on our own behalf to create whatever we need. When we dressed our children we exercised power over them. When we taught them how to dress themselves we had power with them. Now they are empowered to dress themselves.

- a. Fundamentals of justice and fairness: the appropriate use of power
- b. Why we see our teens as so powerful
- c. The sources of our own power and why we are afraid to use it
- d. Three forms of power

4. **Getting the Other to Change:** Nevertheless, despite the huge amount of power we exercise in the relationship, we can't make them change. We never could.

This reality is obscured by the fact that the power we have over infants and young children is so great that we may be lulled into the belief that we can make them do what we want. They do what we want—to the extent they actually do—because we have the physical strength to pick them up and move them or because they are so urgent to get our approval that they will bend their wills to our own. This is not to say they are not willful, only that they may not be as strong-willed as we are.

As own children grow into adolescence they become more confident about their own power and their own choices. They become less willing to submit to our demands. When we try ever harder to make them do what we want we create a test of wills that they are increasingly motivated to win, even at their own peril. If we are dedicated to their wellbeing more than we are dedicated to “being right,” we won't engage them in this kind of fight.

When we recognize that our children are just like everyone else—they make their own choices—we can let go of trying to make them be who we want them to be and invite them to discover who they want to be and to support them when the ways they want to be match the ways we think are beneficial to them, to our relationship with them, and to ourselves.

- a. Fundamentals of justice and fairness: changing the relationship without changing the other
- b. Inviting your teen into a more mature relationship

5. **Making Durable Agreements:** All relationships are constructed by agreements. Most agreements, and certainly those we create with infants, are not formally constructed. With infants we have all the rights and all of the

responsibilities. But as our children grow they want more rights and we parse those rights out as they show they are responsible. They don't have permission to cross the street by themselves until they demonstrate they are responsible for looking both ways.

Agreements are understandings we construct out of promises and requests. My child wants to cross the street by herself to visit her girlfriend who lives across the street. That is her request—to have permission. I want to be sure that she is safe so I request that she follow certain rules for safety. She promises to do so and demonstrates that she has the presence of mind to follow through. I then fulfill my promise to give her permission. Our requests are honored as long as we keep our promises.

Sometimes we find our requests are not honored. Sometimes we tell our children to go to bed and they don't. The requests become demands and the promises become compliance. Understandings that are composed of demands and compliance are not as durable as agreements which are made of requests and promises. Further, demands can generate resentment and even defiance even when we think we are seeing compliance. Remembering that we can't make others do what we want we can back off of being more demanding and instead work at creating durable agreements.

- a. Fundamentals of justice and fairness: Mutually constructed agreements are more just and more durable than are demands
- b. Clarifying the parameters of the relationship and the issue
 - i. Who are we to each other
 - ii. What is it that may happen, must not happen, or has already happened?
- c. Seeing the validity of each other's point of view
 - i. Knowing our own experience
 - ii. Knowing how to name our point of view
 - iii. Feeling safe to self-disclose
 - iv. Soothing our own anxiety
 - v. Mirroring the others perspective
- d. Identifying the qualities we all need
- e. Committing to a strategy we are both invested in including what we will do to fix the agreement when it seems broken

Identifying the patterns of conflict and having a strategy for addressing each pattern

You will no doubt have noticed that this is a lot of work. It is not something we are going to have the luxury of addressing for every little conflict that emerges. When we observe these conflicts as they arise we discover that they are not a new thing each time but the same things over and over. While this is in some ways troubling, it is also good news in that we don't have to master a huge number of situations. We only have to master a few that arise over and over in different combinations.

Once we have clearly identified each of the patterns and have in mind a clear and creative response to each issue we only have to do what we have already determined is the best thing to do. We continually revise and refine how we respond to each pattern so that we are changing ourselves in a way that evokes the qualities in the relationship that support what we need.

Violations of implied or clear agreements

While each relationship is different, and thus the conflicts which arise in it are different, there are some patterns that are so common as to be present to some degree in nearly every relationship between a parent and a teenager.

- Out of bounds behavior: choice to act in a manner that one knows or has reason to know are against the rules [Son gives Girlfriend a ride to work.]
- Secrecy: choice to hide or distort information that another has a right to know [Fails to tell parents about the red light violation or about taking Girlfriend to work.]

How to repair a damaged relationship: Apology and Forgiveness

1. Choices: what were the choices that created this problem and who made them?
2. Consequences: what did those choices cause to happen both to individuals and to relationships?
3. Clean-up: What can be done now to repair the harm which was done?
4. Patterns: What was going on with those who made the harmful choices and what will they do to address those circumstances so that such choices won't recur?

In Practice: What this looks like