

**THE PARENT DE-BUGGING PROGRAM:**  
**A POSITIVE CHILD MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

by Frank D. Young Ph.D., R. Psych.1[1]

Over several years I have seen families where yelling and coercion have been overused as methods to try to get people to do what other family members believe they should do. This pattern applies between parents and their pre-teen and teenage children, but also can have as its precursor in the way both parents try to manage each other's behavior.

Onset of referral to a family therapist most likely happens in the teenage years, with one or more children rebelling to the exasperated overcontrol of one parent, often the father, with the unwitting covert support of the other parent, in a classic too tough – too lenient parental split. By the time of referral, there may have been family control struggles in which police were called to quell the domestic disturbance, but no charges were laid. A less extreme and more common example is a nag-withdraw cycle in which one or both parents nag the child into doing household chores, and the child passively avoids carrying out the assignment or misses deadlines repeatedly, sabotaging family structure and order.

Many interventions have been aimed at resolving this configuration. The program suggested here is merely a variant, proposed because it often is strongly supported by the teenagers, with some curious pattern reactions by the parents.

A. THE PARENTS MAKE A WRITTEN DOCUMENT WHICH THEY BOTH WILL PRESENT TO THE TEENAGER.

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- B. THIS DOCUMENT WILL STATE IN CLEAR BEHAVIORAL TERMS WHAT THEIR WEEKLY REQUIREMENTS ARE ABOUT THE TEENAGER'S DUTIES IN THE HOUSEHOLD. This would include minimum standards for the task.
  
- C. FOR EACH DUTY SPECIFY A WEEKLY DEADLINE.
  
- D. FOR EACH DUTY STATE A REWARD.
  
- E. IF THE DEADLINE IS MISSED, THE CHILD IS IMMEDIATELY GROUNDED AND SUSPENDED UNTIL THAT TASK IS COMPLETED. This means that apart from school attendance and attendance at organized activities such as lessons or team practices and games, the child is denied TV, radio, telephone, cellphone, and computer games, until the task is done to minimum standards. Furthermore, the child receives NO PAYMENT for doing the task.
  
- F. IF THE DEADLINE IS MET, THE CHILD RECEIVES PAYMENT CREDIT FOR THAT TASK AND FULL HOUSEHOLD PRIVILEGES.
  
- G. IF EITHER PARENT NAGS, PROMPTS, OR "REMINDS" THE CHILD THAT THE TASK NEEDS TO BE DONE (for example, a day before deadline) THE TEENAGER IS ALLOWED TO CHALLENGE THE PARENT "Why are you bugging me?" The parent must then provide a plausible RATIONALE (e.g., The deadline is tomorrow, but you have hockey practice so you won't get home in time to clean your room." If the rationale is reasonable, it is allowed. IF THE RATIONALE IS DEEMED BY PARENTS AND TEENAGER TO BE UNNECESSARY, THE PARENT MUST DO THE TASK AND FULLY PAY THE TEENAGER THE CREDIT FOR THAT TASK.

Typically what happens is the parent forgets and habitually bugs the teenager. The teenager challenges successfully, the parent has to do the task without pay while the teenager gloats, the parent fumes, and resolves to not get caught again in the nagging trap. Within 2-3 weeks the new

system runs smoothly. The family therapist monitors and fine-tunes the program with the family, and is brought in as an external arbiter, if necessary, on whether a parent rationale for bugging was warranted and legitimate.

In my experience, this has worked well in all families. Sometimes, in cases of ADD or ADHD, the teenager has requested one “free prompt” by the parent, and that has worked out well to everyone’s satisfaction.

So that’s the program! I hope you enjoy it. Your teenager will.

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