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**Ways to Avoid  
TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**



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# 6 Signs Your Teen is in a Toxic Relationship

Moving into the phase where children become aware of their sexual feelings is difficult enough. After they actually start dating, parenting reaches a whole new level of complicated. This was particularly the case for a friend of mine whose son became involved in a toxic relationship while in high school. On the surface, the relationship seemed fine, but deep down he felt like something was off. At first, he attributed it to his own discomfort to this new phase of life. Eventually, he realized that wasn't the case. The relationship was unhealthy and he wasn't the only one who was seeing it. By the time he and the rest of his family started to talk to his son about the relationship it was like he was caught in a deep pit. Nothing they said could break him out of it, not even when his friends began voicing the same concerns. Finally, his girlfriend broke up with him and after time apart his son was able to see the truth, but not before a lot of damage had been done.

Although the signs were there it took a long time for them to act. By the time they did their son was so ingrained in the relationship he could no longer hear their concerns. Fortunately, it eventually ended. If your teen is in a relationship make sure it doesn't become toxic. If you see any of the following 6 signs intervene immediately.

## 1 THEY SEPARATE THEMSELVES FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

It's common for teens to separate from their families, particularly parents, during adolescence. However, when they do it after entering a relationship it is a red flag. When they spend considerably less time with their friends, especially if they lose them altogether, the alarm bells should go off. There could be a number of reasons involved in their isolation. They have become obsessed with the person they are dating or the other person is controlling and possessive. If you see a sudden change in their friend or family relationships sit down and talk to them about your concerns. This would be a good time to set boundaries or schedule consistent family time.

## 2 THEIR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE CHANGES.

If there are sudden changes in the clothes they wear or hairstyle it could mean they are changing themselves to appeal to the other person. Relationships should bring personal growth and sometimes that means learning to look more presentable. There's also nothing wrong with trying new looks, but when teens feel pressure to look or dress a certain way to earn affection it has turned toxic. It's a signal that your teen has low self-esteem or has become dependent on the sense of belonging the other person's approval gives them. Ask them questions about how they feel about themselves. Get a discussion going. One revealing question could be, "What is one thing you would change about yourself?" You'll probably be surprised by the answer.

## 3 THEIR PERSONALITY CHANGES.

Being in a relationship with a toxic person, no matter what type, is not a safe place. It usually has an effect on the victim's emotional state of being. If you see them go from being a lively, upbeat person to more quiet, depressed, withdrawn, suspicious, or melancholy talk to them about it as soon as possible. Any personality change is a sign they are being belittled, controlled, or are so tangled they are following the emotional roller coaster of their boyfriend or girlfriend. They are carrying a heaviness that comes from the instability, and possibly the abuse, of the relationship.

## 4 THEY REPEATEDLY MAKE EXCUSES FOR THE OTHER PERSON'S BAD BEHAVIOR.

When you hear them apologize on behalf of the person they are dating it's a signal their sense of self may be wrapped up in that person. They actually start taking partial or full responsibility for the other's wrongdoing.

## 5 THEY MINIMIZE VIOLATIONS.

Many times a toxic relationship is like being in prison with a fear of parole. They recognize the dysfunction but minimize the severity of it for fear of life without that person. They end up afraid to confront things that are wrong because it could lead to the end of the relationship. As a result, they attempt to convince others and themselves that things aren't that bad. Another situation is they become so enamored with the person they actually can't see the wrongdoing. In their mind the person is perfect. They almost begin to worship that person. This opens the door for a lot of power and manipulation.

## 6 THERE ALWAYS SEEMS TO BE DRAMA.

Someone's feelings are always hurt or there's constant fighting. The worst combination of this is combining someone who is deeply insecure and someone who is attracted to drama. If your teen has what even hints of a volatile relationship you need to intervene. Teenagers, whether they admit it or not, need their parents help in learning how to have healthy relationships.

# 4 Behaviors That Will Make Your Family Relationships Toxic

A half an hour drive northwest of Boston is a small town called Woburn. In the 1960s, water began to grow scarce so city officials decided to drill two new wells in the east side of town, which was predominantly industrial. They did so despite warnings that the water would be poor quality. Almost immediately, the residents of East Woburn complained that the water not only tasted bad but smelled bad as well. Tragically, the water was toxic resulting in a number of residents, mostly children, being diagnosed with leukemia. The issue led to multi-million dollar lawsuits by the families against the companies: W.R. Grace, Beatrice Foods, and Unifirst Corp. The suits gained national attention. Eventually, a bestselling book called *A Civil Action* was written and a movie was made with the same title.

The sad reality is that these families thought they were getting nourishment and instead were ingesting something toxic. When it comes to our families, particularly children, we are in a position of strong influence. Our loved ones look to us to provide a nurturing, healthy, and life-giving environment. We have the opportunity to be like fresh water or something harmful. Knowing the unhealthy behaviors and attitudes that make relationships toxic is the first step to cleaning things up. Here are 4 behaviors that lead to a toxic family.

## 1 STICK WITH THE STATUS QUO EVEN IF IT'S BAD.

One of my favorite movies is *Pay It Forward*. In it the main character, a middle school boy named Trevor says these words. "I think people are too scared or something to think things can be different. I guess it's hard for people that get so used to things the way they are, even if they're bad, to change – and they kind of give up. And when they do – everyone – they kind of lose."

If things are consistently bad then something is wrong with the cycle and it has to be changed. Too many families fall back into the same dysfunction because it has become comfortable. You can't change other people, but you can change how you respond to them. Be prepared though. When you respond in a way that is outside of the norm, they will try hard to get you to fall back in line. If they get under your skin and you respond unfazed, they will get more extreme. Stay focused and continue to break the cycle.

## 2 BLAME AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.

The people that have the healthiest relationships, deepest maturity, and are the most self-assured tend to be quick in accepting responsibility. Even when they are one percent wrong and the other person is ninety nine percent, they will take responsibility for their one percent first. Then they address the wrongness of the other person. At the same time, people that blame often experience stagnated growth and a graveyard of former relationships. Take the lead by modeling what it looks like to be a person that accepts responsibility for wrongdoing – no matter what percentage is yours to own.

## 3 HOLD GRUDGES AND DON'T FORGIVE OR, AT LEAST, BE SLOW TO IT.

It may feel good, even right, sometimes; but, in the end, it's relational poison. Holding onto grudges and anger is like inviting a couple wild animals to live in your house. They are just there waiting to cause you to overreact to something minimal creating lasting strife and damage. The reward is a lower quality of life and a lot of energy spent. Forgive and let it go.

## 4 STAY AWAY FROM DIRECT COMMUNICATION AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.

This includes triangulating, being passive-aggressive, and being silent on a problem that needs confronting. Triangulating is when person A has a problem with person B. However, instead of talking to person B directly about it, person A just goes to person C and bad mouths person B. It's a good way to promote dissension and bitterness. Being passive-aggressive is a tactic of undermining while posturing a position of understanding. All it produces is frustration, distrust, and isolation. Finally, when there are relational problems that go uncontested, it causes the rift to become wider. Bad feelings get deeper. Good communication solves a world of problems.



# Top 10 Habits to Break as a Family

If you have had multiple kids in diapers at the same time, you know that it's survival mode time. A friend of mine was telling me that when his kids were that age, he and his wife would be so tired they would want to lay down to watch their favorite TV shows at the end of the day. The problem was that they liked different shows. So they agreed to watch in separate rooms. It wasn't bad once in a while, but it formed a habit, even after their kids were older. Eventually, their marriage reached a difficult place. Breaking habits like that was the beginning of restoration.

There are lots of not-so-great choices families make once in a while with no major consequences. But when those choices become habits, you've got a problem. Such is the case with most of these 10 negative habits to kick. If you see them making regular appearances in your family's life, act fast to correct them. Here are 10 family habits to break.

## 1 FAST FOOD

The nutrition you get for the calories, sodium, and fat grams you consume is a bad deal. If you find yourself feeding your family from a paper bag with grease stains every few days (or more), it's time to cut back.

## 2 BICKERING

Some families, especially those with teenagers, find themselves in tense, argumentative conversations over and over all day long. But it doesn't have to be that way nor should it be. Make a conscious effort to curb the sarcastic or argumentative comments you make as a parent, and demand that your children speak to one another with love and respect, too.

## 3 DISORGANIZATION

For a busy family, organization is a must. It starts with keeping a great calendar of everyone's activities and should trickle down to kids keeping their own work and assignments in order.

## 4 WASTEFUL SPENDING

Making everyone aware of how little expenses add up can turn the family budget around substantially. Help your kids break habits like buying bottled water or soda when they're out and about and bring a reusable water bottle instead. Eat at home more and dine out less (see #1). Teach your kids to take care of expensive sports equipment and school shoes so they don't have to be replaced as often. It all adds up quickly. If you need financial advice, our friends at brightpeak financial can offer help.

## 5 OVERSCHEDULING

An overscheduled family is a stressed-out family where survival, not intentional living, becomes the rule of the day. Choose carefully and wisely in terms of which commitments you make or allow your kids to make. You may find that your family gets greater joy out of doing fewer things with less pressure.

## 6 FAILING TO EAT TOGETHER

Busy families often find that the family dinner table is the big loser when we get caught up in the rat race. But it's worth it to schedule 3-4 (or more) true family dinners each week where every member of the family is required to be around the table to spend time together and eat well. Statistics show that families who do this have happier, healthier kids and parents.

## 7 SCREEN TIME OVERLOAD

If you or your kids are spending more than an hour or so a day in front of a screen (TV, computer, video game, etc.), you're probably spending too much. Families who have major electronic addictions have higher rates of obesity and other health problems. Plus they're missing out on countless other worthwhile things like reading, outdoor play, games together, and great communication about things that truly matter.

## 8 SKIPPING CHURCH

Make worship and family church activities a priority. This will pay greater dividends in the life of your family than anything else you can do. It will establish a good habit that will be important to their own spiritual growth and health long after they leave your care.

## 9 HIRING HELP FOR ALL THE TOUGH CHORES

For busy suburban families, there's a great temptation to simplify things by hiring help for all major tasks: housecleaning, yard work, etc. But if your kids never have to pitch in to get these everyday jobs done, how will they ever know how to do them well or appreciate what goes into them? Do your kids a favor by reserving some key jobs for them that help them develop a work ethic and sense of responsibility. This can also be a great relief to your budget.

## 10 COMPARING

Doing so can create a host of other problems. For starters, you don't know if the family you're comparing yourselves to share your values and priorities, practical limitations, or budget. For those reasons, it makes more sense to set your own pace for life by intentionally choosing what's best for you and your family and not worrying too much about everyone else.

# 5 Bad Kid Behavior Issues That You Need to Break Early

I hate going to the dentist. I know it's necessary, but I always put it off. It is the last thing I want to spend money on. After several years of avoiding it, I was forced to make an appointment because of intense tooth pain. The result was exactly what I expected. Small cavities had grown into larger decay which eventually led to infection. Ultimately, smaller and cheaper cavity fixes turned into an expensive double root canal with two crowns. Routine checkups and maintenance would have prevented all of it.

In the same way, kids can develop bad habits early. Engaging those habits with consistent correction and guidance can be tiring. It can take thought and energy that can wear parents out. However, if left unchecked, they can grow into major problems down the line. It is important to engage the problem now in order to save them and us from more intense pain in the future. Here are some bad kid behavioral issues that you need to break early.

1

## LYING

This leads to a life of secrecy. Growth and maturity come when we deal honestly with our mistakes and shortcomings. We learn responsibility by owning it. Others see us as dependable, faithful, and authentic. Trust is built leading to healthy relationships. Lying has the opposite effect. Distrust and immaturity take root. On a personal level, in our house, my kids know that this offense receives the steepest consequence because it, more than anything, causes relational separation in the family.

2

## DISRESPECTFUL TO AUTHORITY

We are all people under authority in some way or another. Parents, teachers, government officials, elders, bosses, and police officers are some of the authorities in our lives. An attitude of disrespecting authority creates a dangerous habit in a child. It will lead to an attitude of entitlement and a lack of proper humility. They will end up suffering for it as their options are limited. Children need to learn a respectful disposition to those in authority over them. This doesn't mean they can't disagree with that authority or challenge it, particularly when the authority abuses its power. However, it is important to teach children to always submit to or challenge authority with grace and respect.

3

## UNKIND WORDS

Words are important. Clearly the words we choose affect those they are directed towards. Unkind words cause deep wounds in people; however, they can also lead our general attitude or our feelings about someone. I once made a decision to go an entire year saying only positive things about someone I had a hard time getting along with. After the year, I felt completely different about that person. There may be time to disagree, argue, or even fight, but there is never a reason to be unkind. The earlier our kids develop a vocabulary of kind words the better.

4

## AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Intervene as soon as possible to prevent other children or animals from being hurt. There are many reasons for a child exhibiting aggressive behavior. It is important to find out the reason by observing and listening. Many times, it is a coping mechanism in dealing with stress or feelings of insecurity. If the behavior is allowed or reinforced, it will continue. It is best to stop it immediately when it happens, remain calm, listen to the child, and enforce consistent nonphysical consequences.

5

## LAZINESS

Children need to be taught to take responsibility for themselves early. Otherwise they can come to expect that their parents will do everything for them. Instilling a good work ethic starts by giving them chores to do around the house at a young age. Start by teaching them to make their bed and clean up their toys daily. When they develop a habit of taking care of their things, add a chore pertaining to a common area. Encourage and reward their work only when it deserves it. This will teach them to value and strive for good work. Starting as early as possible will make all the difference.