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The Teen Code–A Wake Up Call for Parents

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Rhett Godfrey is a young man with a message. As author of *The Teen Code*, he conducted research involving over one thousand teenagers. Rhett displays obvious gifts and intelligence, and his new book offers an interesting angle sure to catch public attention. At the same time, the book’s underlying concept tells us a great deal about the shift of authority from parents to children that marks our contemporary age.

As Rhett tells the book’s story, “Over the course of almost 3 years, I’ve been exchanging ideas with teens of how parents can communicate with us better. In person, over the phone, and mostly over the Internet, I’ve talked to kids about their parents, what they have done right, what they haven’t done at all, and most importantly, what they could do better.”

What did this young author discover? “I found out quickly that it’s not so much what parents say that causes problems, it’s how they say it that causes us to shut down, tune out, and stop listening. And I couldn’t believe how much of what our parents said was just not getting through.” In order to help parents out, Rhett Godfrey now offers his book of suggestions, organized around themes ranging from drugs and alcohol to sex and privacy.

As the book’s title indicates, Rhett points to what he calls a “teen code”—a system of language and communication that parents often do not understand. As he explains, “it defines how we think and act, why we get tattoos and piercings, why we experiment with dangerous stuff, and how and why we are who we are, teens of today.” Rhett invites parents to see him as “going off to spy on the other side to bring you back inside information: the little stuff your kids wish you knew.”

Rhett offers some advice that is undeniably helpful. He stresses that teenagers would have their parents begin conversations on difficult issues earlier rather than later. “The most successful drug conversations are with younger teens, say 11 to 13 years,” he suggests, “and the least successful are with older teens from 16 to 18.” He also suggests that parents use events of daily life, and happenings in the news to raise significant and deep subjects. He calls on parents to use cultural “Jumper Cables” to “jump-start the conversation.” He also suggests that parents not decide to have intrusive and substantial conversations on issues like drugs and sex in the teen’s bedroom, where the young person may feel uncomfortable.

Throughout the book, the young author documents the frustration experienced by many teenagers when their parents make inadequate attempts at discussing an issue of importance. As “Willis,” age sixteen, told Rhett: “I told my dad that you were writing a book about communication between parents and teens and then I told him that you are working on the chapter about drugs. His only response to that was, ‘You’re not doing drugs, are you?’ I said, ‘No, Dad, of course not,’

and that was where the conversation ended.” Similar frustrations were registered by teenagers who complained that their parents actually did not say anything about sex at all, and seemed reluctant to admit that their own children might be struggling with sexual issues.

Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of this book is the particular kind of advice that Rhett offers parents about how to address issues likely to be flashpoints and potential trouble.

For instance, when it comes to alcohol, Rhett suggests that, at least for older teens, drinking is “more of an inevitability than a possibility.” Thus, parents should talk to their teenagers about how to drink alcohol safely, rather than not at all. “The leap of faith is to accept that we will most likely drink in the future or may be drinking now, and since you will probably never know about it, it’s better not to take the risk, so prepare us realistically, not idealistically.” So, Rhett advises, concentrate on convincing your kids of the danger of drunk driving, not of the evil of alcohol itself.

Rhett took a similar approach on the issue of sex. As he told his readers, “Sex is one of those areas with a high Scary Quotient, so brace yourself. Here is what a lot of kids told me about the role of sex in their lives.” Right from the onset, Rhett lays down the law on oral sex. “Of all the teens that I interviewed on this topic, it seemed like maybe one or two in a hundred considered oral sex to be sex.” As he continued, “When I was in seventh grade, to have oral sex was a big deal: We only knew one kid in the whole grade who said he did it (but most of us thought he was lying). By mid-year eighth grade, oral sex was no big deal—everyone said they were doing it (and this time we knew they weren’t lying). By the time high school rolled around, giving and receiving oral sex became so normal that it was basically expected, even in casual hook-ups.” In other words, oral sex is not sex, parents—so deal with it.

Rhett also suggests that parents should teach children “about the proper way to use a condom.” In other words, parents should join the “safe sex” bandwagon, and leave behind any real hope of sexual abstinence and sexual purity.

Throughout the volume, Rhett’s mom, Neal S. Godfrey, offers a response at the end of each chapter. When it comes to sex, Rhett’s mom talks right out of the safe-sex handbook. “Should parents buy condoms for their kids? There’s certainly an argument for it. At least that way you can be sure that your kids have them, even though it doesn’t guarantee they’ll use them. But for a lot of us it just doesn’t feel right. We may not believe that abstinence is the answer to sex education. But we still don’t want to be in the position of appearing to encourage our kids to have sex.” So, what does she propose? “Maybe the mom who put the condoms in the cookie jar on the kitchen counter has the right idea. It’s halfway between.”

Halfway between what? What teenager whose parents put a cookie jar of condoms on the kitchen counter is going to realistically believe that they expect him to refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage?

What about homosexuality? As Rhett explains, “I know that certain religions—and millions of people around the world—think that it is a horrible thing. But if your teenager is gay and thinks you feel this way, it’s going to make for a very difficult life for both you and your child. The question you need to ask yourself is: Do you hate homosexuality more than you love your child?” Rhett is thoroughly convinced that sexual orientation is simply “part of who your child is,” and thus parents should just deal with it.

An even more fascinating section gets further into the heart of the matter. In discussing teenagers and the issue of privacy, Rhett counsels parents to prove their trust by granting their teenage children a wide swath of privacy, even when they suspect wrongful or dangerous behavior. Privacy, he offers, “is a sacred thing to teenagers.”

Rhett tells the story of “Jessica,” a sixteen-year-old girl in Akron, Ohio. As Jessica relates, “My mom came to me one day with pictures of me and my friends drinking and smoking (and not just cigarettes). I got in sooo much trouble. But I also was so [outraged] that she went through my purse. She told me that she was looking for makeup and she just saw them. I know that is [nonsense]; why would she want any of my makeup? We have totally different tastes. I felt really betrayed, and we didn’t talk for awhile.”

Here we have a sixteen-year-old girl whose experiments in drinking and smoking marijuana have gotten her in trouble, though the consequences of that trouble, if any, are not provided. The main function of Jessica’s story, however, is to warn parents against snooping.

Rhett asked Jessica if her mother was able to regain Jessica’s trust. She responded: “My mom and I are actually better

than we were before now. She made large efforts to show me that she respects my space. Like before she used to clean my room (probably just for the reason of finding something she could use against me), and now she does not even set foot in my room. Seeing the pictures was a shock to her because before that she thought I was this innocent little girl, but now she knows what I do when she is not around. When we talk now about that kind of stuff, it's not like parent-child, it's more real."

Rhett offered an extended commentary on the whole episode. "Jessica's mom gave a bogus story that Jessica did not believe and lost her daughter's trust. But she was able to gain it back by showing her daughter that she respects her and her privacy. This actually helped their relationship in many ways."

This little episode is a profound illustration of the complete inversion of values and subversion of authority that marks our modern times. Jessica's mom had every reason to be outraged, concerned, and indignant about her daughter's use of alcohol and marijuana, but the whole point of this story in Rhett's book is to show that it was the mom whose behavior needed correction, not the daughter.

When Jessica explains that her mother, having been thoroughly disciplined for snooping in her room, now respects her space and "does not even set foot in my room," we see the absolute victory of adolescent rebellion over parental oversight, authority, and discipline. When Jessica says that, after she successfully clarified the power structure in their relationship, "it's not like parent-child, it's more real," she is telling us more than she could possibly intend to relate.

The Teen Code offers many interesting insights, but the most fascinating aspects of this book are those the author certainly did not intend to communicate. Even as he offers patronizing advice to parents about how we should speak to our teenage children, he demonstrates with almost poetic perfection the absolute victory of the child over the parent, and the almost complete subversion of parental authority.

The underlying message of the book is that parents can indeed parent their teenagers, so long as we parent them as they will allow themselves to be parented. Now, armed with advice from an adolescent expert, parents are told that we must just accept the fact that vast areas of our children's lives are off limits, and that we should treat our teenagers as autonomous individuals who happen to live in our homes and are doing their best to negotiate around our discipline and moralizing. America's parents owe a debt of gratitude to young Rhett Godfrey for his new book. The Teen Code serves as a prophetic warning and an all-too-accurate description of the teenage mind at work.

This very gifted young man has given America's parents a gift—and an unintended wake-up call. In all too many homes, the inmates are running the asylum.

