

You Want to Do What?

“You learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance.”—
Franklin P. Jones, American businessman

You can't believe it. Your child wants to do something...unspeakable. (Or your child has already done the unthinkable.) Throughout childhood, your child will get into things that make you gasp, and the way you react will set the stage for what your child will do next. Before you pull out your hair (or consider more drastic measures), consider these ideas.

Try it...

For all parents

- Growing up involves taking risks, and your child will sometimes take risks that make you bristle or get your child into trouble. Risk taking is partly about your child trying to figure out what's acceptable and what's not, and partly about your child figuring out who he is.
- Analyze how often you're going into shock. If it's more than a few times a year, either your child is getting into trouble too often or you're overreacting. That's why it's important to have other adults in your life who can give you support and perspective.
- Keep talking with the parents of your child's friends. Sometimes your child may be doing something that a lot of other kids are getting into. As a group, you can work together to reign in the behavior or give each other the support to be patient.
- Know the difference between what's truly dangerous and what's just pushing your buttons. For example, it's upsetting when your child colors the walls with permanent markers, but young children often don't know that this is wrong (until they do it and get scolded). If possible, direct the behavior in a different direction and explain why a different choice would be better next time.
- If your child is insistent about doing something you're not entirely happy about, break the request into pieces. For example, if your 12-year-old wants to go to a concert with friends, work through which parent or adult will drive and which adult will also go to the concert. If your 17-year-old wants to go camping with friends, talk about adult supervision, your teen's knowledge of camping and cooking out, and how she will get there.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Young children learn by exploring, which means they can find all kinds of wonderful things—and things that make your skin crawl. Encourage your child's exploration of his environment, but also do whatever you can to keep him safe during his explorations so that he's not sticking keys into electrical outlets or grabbing a handle

of a cooking pot on the stove.

- Recognize that kids will get into things, no matter how well you childproof your home. Kids may still find the flour (and dump it on the floor) or find a box of bandages (and cover themselves with all of them). Some kids have even colored their arms and legs with markers. Be clear about what's acceptable behavior and why, but don't be overly shocked if your child does something upsetting once in a while.
- Always love and reassure your child after she has gotten into some type of trouble. Separate the bad behavior from your child. Say things like, "It's not acceptable to lie." Avoid statements like "Sometimes you're such a bad child."

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- As children start school, they can find themselves getting caught up with other kids. A group of kids may pick on another kid, or a group may have a water fight in the school bathroom. When these types of situations happen, be clear about what would be a better choice next time and also how easy it is to get caught up in the antics of a group.
- Children at this age may express their individuality in small ways, such as having a hair cut that includes a tail down the back of their heads or wanting to wear only orange. Some of these preferences may drive you crazy, but as long as they're not hurting anyone, allow your kids to experiment and at least *try* to understand what's motivating them to express themselves in this way.
- Be clear about what's appropriate and what's not. Some kids seem to have a knack for finding trouble. What's most troubling is when they repeat bad behavior over and over rather than getting into trouble once and then learning from it.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Hair color. Hairstyles. Clothes. Accessories. These are ways kids can freak out their parents at this age. Maybe one kid wants his head shaved and another kid wants green hair. Work to negotiate with your child about these issues. Don't squelch your child's interests, but honestly talk through the issues. For example, some kids have sensitive skin and can have an allergic reaction to hair dyes. Also, hair dyes typically only last about six weeks before the hair starts growing out. Help your kids make informed decisions.
- Expect bumps along the way, particularly if your child tends to be a risk taker. Some kids are more likely to learn by trial and error, so proceed cautiously through their errors. If your teenager gets into serious jams, be there. Consider reading [*Helping Teens Handle Tough Experiences*](#).
- Focus on your relationship. Even if your kids are doing things that make you squeamish, continue to keep communication lines open.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Listen to the wishes and dreams of your older teenager, even if those dreams scare you. For example, maybe your teenager wants to be a foreign exchange student, and you think it's frightening for your teenager to travel overseas. Be open about your concerns, but don't extinguish their passions, or "sparks." To learn more about sparks, visit www.ignitesparks.com.
- Be clear about consequences so that when your teenager gets into trouble, he is the

one who feels the consequences—not you. For example, if he gets a parking ticket, he should pay the fine.

- Continue to be there for your teenager. Make your home a comfortable, safe place to be, a place where she can always turn. Be supportive of her and be clear that you're always there for her.