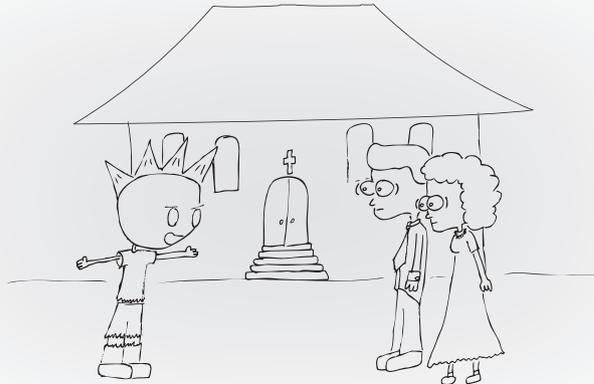


BODY/APPEARANCE ISSUES



But I AM dressed for the wedding!

REMEMBER LOOKING AT your teen when he or she was just born? *Perfect* was likely the word that sang softly in your head. Beautiful skin, soft hair, and a bright face beautifully accentuated with perfect ears and nose. And remember those great outfits you used to dress him up in? You know, those crazy-expensive jumpers that your great-aunt Annalise would bring? He sure looked great. He even smelled great, so sweet after those fun, bonding baths. I hope you took lots of pictures, because you're gonna need 'em. For now before you stands that model of perfection who desperately wants to desecrate many or most of those things that you held so precious. The thought of piercing, tattooing, dyeing, or otherwise mutilating that perfect body is a horror to

you. He doesn't even smell so sweet anymore. And where the hell is Aunt Annalise when you really need her?

Welcome to the appearance battles, those “whose body is this” conflicts where parent and child often wage seemingly senseless wars of attrition until the day that both stagger exhausted into the adult years, wondering what the heck happened and why the appearance fights suddenly stopped at the end of twelfth grade. The fact is that those fights are not senseless at all. They're all about *identity*.

Identity formation is job number one for your child's adolescence, a life-defining process by which she tries to discover who she is by trying on a thousand “hats” (styles, interests, beliefs) to see what fits and what doesn't. Some examples seem obviously important, such as her developing values, morals, life goals, and codes of conduct. But the body battles often get overlooked and underestimated by us parents. For those changes are prized symbols, battle flags marking this critical teenage process. For example, acquiring purple hair can become a safari of critical learning into the jungles of prejudice and irrational fear, those places where someone's interior worth gets judged by her exterior appearance. So when your teen fights for her right to have crazy hair, she's also learning about defending the rights of persecuted minorities to be different.

Your kid will move through this identity process in stages, each with its own critical pieces of learning. These will soon come together to assemble the healthy, happy, and hardworking young adult that your crazy teen is about to become (believe it or not). Each of these stages also has its own set of markers or flags that appear on the surface of your child in the form of clothes, hair colors, piercings, and even (gulp) tattoos. The huge mistake we parents make is blowing these things off as “teen rebellion.” If

your neighbor gets a tattoo, would you call that “neighbor rebellion”? The fact is that your child is very much like your neighbor, a unique human being with his own values, beliefs, and interests that can vary widely from your own. *Yet you still see him as a good and worthwhile person*—as, you know, that guy with the insane political views who is also the first one at your door whenever you need help.

I hate to be the bearer of scary news, but your child is becoming your neighbor, and she very much needs to do that—not to “rebel” against you, but to find herself, her identity, and to define that thing as separate from you. As parents we all harbor this dark secret of wishing our teens to become smaller extensions of ourselves, of our egos. We want them to think like us, believe as we do, enjoy our music, and look something like us. This is a terrible and debilitating wish. For if our kids succumbed and did those things, they’d be living in our basements when they’re forty. *We don’t want that.* But the price we must pay now for their independence then is to scratch our heads, sigh, and find the grace to honor these scary appearance changes in our kids for what they truly are: the first shoots in the blossoming of our children into young adults.

So try not to wage wars over these appearance issues, but rather roll with them, and even welcome them as signs that you are doing your job of helping your kid to grow up to become a unique human being—albeit a slightly strange-looking one for now. The supreme irony here is that the more we patiently honor these passing styles of our kids, the more they come back to permanently embrace things infinitely more important than our appearances. They come to embrace our values.

The choice is ours.

Body Image, Has a Poor

“Am I gonna end up looking like *you*?”

—ROSS, AUTHOR’S SON, AGE SIX

The What

DO

- Model acceptance of your own body with humor. (“Believe it or not, I mostly feel good about myself, even though I look like *this*.”)
- Praise the heck out of your kid’s achievements, especially the small ones. Emphasize fitness versus appearance. (“You ran a mile? That’s terrific!”)
- Empathize with her concerns. Ask if her feelings change from day to day. (“Are there some days where you feel OK about yourself? How are those days different?”)

DON’T

- Model obsession with your own appearance.
- Overly praise or criticize her body’s appearance.
- Emphasize appearance over fitness. (“You look great. Are you losing weight?”)
- Dismiss her concerns. (“That’s silly! You’re not ugly. You look great!”)

The Why

Teens have likely worried about their bodies ever since the invention of reflecting glass. Those endless hours spent frowning in mirrors were always normal to the age and were painful enough on their own. But this generation of adolescents—male and female—is being pummeled culturally like no other about their

appearance, being told incessantly that their worth is all about how they look, not about who they are. Consequently, these kids have set records for worrying about their bodies, clothes, and hair from incredibly early ages. Their obsessing over this stuff only gets worse in adolescence. Having parents add their own critical voices to that crescendo can take kids over the edge into hopelessness, self-loathing, and even life-threatening, appearance-related disorders (anorexia, depression, steroid abuse, and so on).

A wonderful antidote for teens struggling with a painful self-image is watching physically imperfect parents who shrug off these crazy cultural trends (such as perfect bodies) and who look instead to more important aspects in people.

The How

Believe it or not, your teen still watches you (although usually sideways) to see how you handle issues to include body image. If you preen endlessly, constantly worry about your appearance, talk twice as much about how a friend looks as about what she is doing, that's what you are programming into your kid. Conversely, if you focus on who people are—their values, their character, and what they do with their lives—that's what your child will emphasize for herself. The key is to say little about appearances and rave endlessly about values and achievement.

At the same time, don't dismiss your teen's body worries. Her culture makes it nearly impossible to be OK with being less than perfect. This is a very tough time to be a teen. Lend an empathic ear to support her fears without judging them. (See "Communication/Empathy," Part 9.)

Remember that, as parents, we still have the greatest impact in our child's life, for better or for worse. (See "Parenting Teenagers," Part 9.) Use that power very wisely. Help your kid learn that we humans only rent these bodies for a relatively short time,

and then we move on. Help your kids start to think about where they want to invest their time and effort: into a body that is going to wrinkle and sag no matter what or into a heart that will grow and shine brighter with age.

Clothes, Wears Provocative

“Dad, everybody dresses like this—including my teacher!”

—KATIE, AGE FOURTEEN

Also see introductory text under “Body/Appearance Issues.”

The What

DO

- Stay calm.
- Understand why she’s dressing that way.
- Connect first; then discuss. (“Honey, I do know that girls are dressing like that, and I know it’s time for you to choose your own clothes. Are there other clothing options that might work for us both?”)
- Offer incentives. (“I’ll go the extra cost for clothes that cover more of you.”)
- Share how your own parents went nuts over your clothing choices (back in the sixteenth century).

DON'T

- Go nuts. (“Are you insane? You look like a slut!”)
- Issue ultimatums.
- Assume that the clothes imply cheap sex to her.
- Forget how important your clothes were to you (back in the sixteenth century).

- Just let it go. There is a deeper issue here that must be addressed.

The Why

The fact is that your daughter is likely dressing this way not for the *boys* but for the *girls*. Teens have an overwhelming need to fit in, to look like their peers, as much as they deny this. If the uniform of the day changes to burkas tonight, tomorrow your kid will be a black tent swooshing down the stairs (remember the “grunge” movement?). Today’s sexualized culture has created this look, not your kid. She’s just caught up in it.

Reacting angrily or sarcastically will just set that style in stone. Your loss of control can transform a passing fashion issue into a battleground for identity and respect. Your rage can push your daughter farther down that path of sexualized clothing and behavior. Your invasive control measures can create the “super-girl syndrome,” where she changes into her uniform in the first phone booth out of your eyesight or, worse, goes crazy when she’s finally away from you in college.

Use this conflict to address the bigger issue here, namely that girls are being defined in this culture as the sexual property of males and that the clothes are part of this conditioning. (See “Sexuality,” Part 9).

The How

Try to stay cool by not seeing the clothes as *you* see them (advertisements for sex) but as she does—the gateway to identity and acceptance. (See “Communication/Empathy,” Part 9.) Dad must be the one to actually tell her she’s a few stitches away from dressing like a prostitute, since she’ll listen more to an ex-boy’s per-

spective than to Mom's. In that talk, first be sure to tell her all the good things about her and support her need and right to make her own choices about things like clothes, just as you did. Then softly talk about the sexualization issue and ask for her opinions on that critical topic.

Look for compromises where you offer to get her other (new and flashier) clothes that can fulfill her needs and calm your fears. Don't pick them out for her, but tell her your preferred coverage ratios and then let her choose.

If push comes to shove, strike the best compromise that you can and don't go to war over this. If you keep your connection to her heart, the clothes won't take her away from you. But be sure that you get her on to something much better than more conservative clothes. Get her into a frame of mind where she starts to think about valuing herself for much more than her sexuality.

Clothes, Wears Weird

“OK, OK! I’LL STOP WEARING THIS WEIRD HAT! By the way, Dad, how did it end up in your old trunk anyhow?”

Also see introductory text under “Body/Appearance Issues.”

The What

DO

- Allow almost all choices. (See “Clothes, Wears Provocative.”)
- Negotiate increased autonomy for increased responsibility (e.g., your son gets clothes you dislike in exchange for doing more chores or being nicer to his sister).
- Remember what your clothes meant to you as a teen.
- Offer him a basic budget, and allow him to contribute more if he wants pricier items.

- Look to see if the new clothes are part of a bigger pattern of troublesome changes (mood, sleep, attitude, grades, respect). Get help if you see that pattern. (See “Getting Help,” Part 9.)

DON'T

- Make fun of your kid’s clothes, especially to others.
- Issue ultimatums.
- Assume that his clothes alone mean a thing about his character—they don’t.
- Go to war over clothes. Save your ammo for fights about his heart.

The Why

Clothes to teens can be like battle flags to rebels—they’re willing to risk a lot for those symbols. Somehow we parents forget that particular adolescent passion (among others) as we age. Jeans and shirts (or the lack thereof) can become powerful symbols of critical adolescent issues such as identity exploration. The trick with teens is to give them as much power and control wherever we can, and a nonlethal issue like clothing is a great place to do that.

Clothes may make the man, but they definitely do *not* make the teen. I’ve worked with wonderful kids who looked like frightening, chain-bedecked gangsters and with teen heroin dealers wearing button-down shirts. Don’t place too much value on the cover of any book.

The How

Your kid is growing up and needs to be making his own decisions as often as possible, even (or especially) the ones that differentiate him from you. But be sure to get your end of this bargain, namely teaching him that increased freedom must be purchased

with increased responsibility. Let him pick the clothes when he demonstrates that he is mature enough to act responsibly in the ways that really count (values, character, and so on).

In all issues like this, before you talk to your teen, talk with yourself—with that old fourteen-year-old part of you hiding out in the attic next to your dusty electric guitar (with the Jimi Hendrix decal). Remember how you prized adults who accepted you for who you were (clothes and all) even though who you were changed every two months. Also remember how you hated those adults who made fun of who you were. Ask yourself which of those adults had more influence over you on important issues like values and character. Then become that person to your kid.

Fat, Is Concerned About Being

“Tell me the truth. Do I look fat in this?”

—DIBBIE, AGE TWELVE

Also see “Anorexia/Bulimia, Has,” Part 6, and “Eats Too Much” and “Eats Very Little,” Part 3.

The What

DO

- Ask her how she looks to *her*.
- Support her views as true *for her*. (“It must be tough to hate the way you *think* you look.”)
- Describe the “variability” factor in yourself. (“One day I look OK to me, and the next I think I look awful. Does that happen to you? Why do you think that happens?”)
- Ask what might help her feel better.

- Reassure her only after she's talked as much as she's willing and only about her *worth*, not her weight. ("I'm so proud of who you are. I'm sorry that this hurts you so much.")
- Answer only after doing all of the above. ("Well, I think you look fine, but my guess is that my answer doesn't help you very much.")
- Get help if you see her obsessing over weight or having unexplained weight loss.

DON'T

- Give blanket assurances. ("Oh, you look great!")
- Critique. ("Well, you sure have gained a few pounds.")
- Discount her distress. ("That's silly. You shouldn't worry so much about appearance.")
- Switch to another topic. ("Well, you know you're the best soccer player on your team.")
- Push her feelings away. ("I'm really sick of hearing you whine about this.")

The Why

Perhaps the greatest pressure on today's teens (particularly girls) is about their weight. Girls are literally dying to become "thin enough." What used to be considered a "normal" body is no longer acceptable in the teen world. Giving blanket assurances to kids who don't feel good about themselves is like painting over rotted wood. Your kid will dismiss your words as forced ("Dad *has* to say that") or ill informed ("What does Mom know about how girls are supposed to look?").

Far better to get them to talk out their feelings, much like vomiting up bad food. That helps them get some perspective on this complex and powerful issue.

The How

Your ear, not your mouth, holds your magic. (See “Communication/Empathy,” Part 9.) The overwhelming parental urge is to simply reassure a daughter to “make the monsters go away,” but she’s too old for that now (sorry). Becoming a quiet, nonjudgmental listener, however, can do wonders.

Only after your teen is finished sharing her feelings should you problem-solve and then only if she wants that. Like us adults, kids usually know *what* to do—it’s the *doing* that’s the rub. Brainstorm with her to look at how you can get better food into the house and what exercise options exist. Perhaps suggest that the two (or three) of you work together to get everyone a little *healthier*, not thinner. Joint shopping trips (for better foods) and daily walks can be great shared-time opportunities.

Most of all, look for other arenas where she can experience success (sports, music, community service). It’s amazing how our minds shrink down our monstrous flaws in the face of achievement.

Hair, Wears Weird

“The bald side will grow back, Dad. Just not sure when the purple side will fade out.”

—MARK, AGE SIXTEEN

Also see introductory text under “Body/Appearance Issues.”

The What

DO

- Stifle your first response, as in “Are you nuts!?!”
- Remember what your hair meant to you as a teen.

- Negotiate for nonpermanent compromises, such as temporary dyes.
- Offer to trade autonomy (the teen alone picks his hairstyle) for responsibility (doing better at school, helping out at home).
- Honor the teen’s drive for individuality. (“Boy, that’s certainly different. I wasn’t brave enough to be that different when I was your age. I really admire your spunk.”)
- Stand up for your son if others make fun of his new look.
- Get help if this is just one of many worrisome changes (scary friends, dropping grades, prolonged bad moods, and so on).

DON’T

- Yell, belittle, or become sarcastic.
- Mock your kid to others.
- Assume that crazy hair makes crazy teens—it doesn’t.
- Start a war over a hairstyle.

The Why

Hair choices, like clothes and music, are small but critical paths in your child’s journey of figuring out who he is. The tactical fact is that the more you fight his wish for iridescent purple hair, the more incredibly appealing it becomes. Better to use this strategic “loss” to gain more important ground such as his level of achievement and responsibility. Isn’t it amazing how purple hair doesn’t look nearly so bad on an honors student? It works the same with D students who score Bs in the bargain.

The How

Before you open your old mouth to yell, open your young brain to recall what hair, clothes, and music meant to you as an adolescent. Your teen’s request (or demand) is one of many messages

from your kid saying that he's growing up, and you'd better deal with it skillfully.

Look to get what you can in exchange for your eyestrain (from the purple hair). It's perfectly fair to request that his request be seen as a sign of his growing up and thus that he needs to display increased responsibilities to earn the increased autonomy.

Finally, you should know that in most cases the more you fight your teen about a new style, the longer it lasts. So if you don't like it, keep quiet.

Hygiene, Has Poor

“Hey Mom, why won't the dog come near me anymore?”

The What

DO

- Understand that in his head, your son is six years old and doesn't need to shower daily.
- Understand that in his head, he's also twenty-six years old and must make up his own mind about everything (including bathing and toothbrushing).
- Surround him with the needed supplies (soap, deodorant, and so on).
- Provide gentle, once-a-day reminders. (“Son, you might want to grab a shower after exercising like that. You're a tad ripe.”)
- Patiently await natural consequences from his peers. They teach very well. (“GEEEEZZZZ, dude! You smell like old onions! PHEW!”)
- Offer incentives to build hygiene habits.
- Monitor for extreme cases that continue beyond a few weeks or occur along with other symptoms. (See “Depression, May Have,” Part 3.) Get help ASAP for this.

DON'T

- Belittle, badger, or demean him.
- Get hooked into a “you can’t make me” battle, since you really can’t make him anyway. (“OK, son. I guess you’re old enough to decide about hygiene.”)
- Let the oily hair become all you see. Your wonderful child is still under that greasy mop.
- Ignore this if it continues beyond a few months, even without other symptoms. See a helper. (See “Getting Help,” Part 9.)

The Why

Toothbrushing, bathing, and hair washing are often casualties of your kid’s struggle for independence. When he was smaller he pretty much did what you told him because, well, *you told him*. Now that he’s larger he often does not do what you told him because, well, *you told him*. He’s at an age where he must take the lessons you offer and test them out for himself to see if they’re true. This process is a normal and critical (although sometimes odiferous) part of his growth. (See “Adolescent Brain Development” and “Adolescent Psychological Development,” Part 9.) The fact that you’re reading this section means that he might also be a tad oppositional, the kind of teen who says “black” when you say “white.” Getting tough with kids like that can turn short, silly phases into long, nasty battles over power and control. The diplomatic approach can have you running out of hot water from hour-long showers a lot faster.

The How

Calm yourself by trying to reframe that greasy hair and doggy breath as temporary signs that he’s growing up and

will soon decide that most of your values really do make sense—if you *keep your cool*. If you're feeling like you want to get heavy-handed, know that shortly the world will speak to him most unkindly about his poor hygiene. When that happens, better that he remember you as having offered wise counsel instead of added humiliation. He'll come back for more counsel.

Some parent tricks include bribing and contracting. Bribing involves offering some temporary incentive for bathing so that he gets used to that clean morning or evening feeling (builds a habit) and consequently starts to hate feeling unwashed. (This is an adult value that will build in him on its own.) Contracts include negotiating with him to take on the consequences of his hygiene choices. For example, you might say that it's unfair that others should have to do his overly smelly laundry or that he needs to bear half of his dental/medical costs connected to hygiene-related issues, such as cavities. If you do this, do it dispassionately and not as “stick it to you” retaliation: “Son, since you're old enough to decide about bathing and toothbrushing, I think that you're also old enough to take on the consequences of those decisions. Fair?” When the autonomy hits the wallet, even teenagers are willing to conform a bit more.

Finally, try to remember the time when you went through this kind of phase, when you decided that everything your parents told you was suspect or worse. Picture how you insisted on doing the opposite of what they recommended because, well, *because*. Now recall that humbling moment when you shook your head in amazement and said, “Damn if the old man wasn't right about this. I guess he's smarter than he looks.”

Being regarded as smarter than we look might be the zenith of our parental power with our teenagers. That status is well worth tolerating the temporary smell of some old onions.

Piercing, Wants A

“Your ears are pierced, so why can’t I pierce my nipples?”

—LORIE, AGE FOURTEEN

Also see introductory text under “Body/Appearance Issues.”

The What

DO

- Set a minimum age requirement *before* she “has” to have them (if it’s not too late).
- Stay calm (now that it’s too late).
- Ask if she has researched the health risks.
- Require a consultation with the physician.
- Have the doc list the piercing areas by relative risk.
- Insist on the least risky area.
- Trade off piercing for increased responsibilities (grades, chores).
- Negotiate the minimum interval before any other piercing can be considered (if any).

DON'T

- Flip out and yell “NO!”
- Say OK right away.
- Accuse her of “following a fad.” (Of course she is—so what?)
- Assume that all piercings have equal risks.
- Allow an additional piercing within a short time (six months).
- Assume that a pierced nose indicates pierced character.

The Why

As with clothes and hair, piercings are another of those identity “hats” that mean so little and yet can mean so much. The more

angrily these things are resisted by parents, the more attractive (and long-lasting) they become to adolescents. But piercings cross over a health risk line that hair and clothes do not and as such must be handled differently. Beyond the infection, tissue tearing, and tooth risks (from metallic tongues), piercings seem to become strangely addicting to some kids, perhaps giving them a biochemical/emotional payoff similar to cutting. (See “Self-Injures,” Part 3.) Multiple piercings is where “harmless” identity exploration (one piercing) starts to get a little risky (several piercings within a short period). The drill here is to maneuver for a little time for you and a lot of thought by her. The time is intended to allow her to move on to a less scary “hat” while awaiting the appointment. The thought part is supposed to help her develop those lifesaving decision-making skills. (See “Decision Making,” Part 9.)

The How

Play for time by pointing out from the get-go that piercing one’s body is far different from dyeing one’s hair and as such requires some thought and planning.

Consulting with the physician can be a sobering experience (ever heard an infected nose piercing described?) and will help her to make a better decision both now and with the ten thousand other decisions coming her way. The doc’s war stories may help her safely scale down her plans and take better care of a piercing she eventually gets.

Handled well (calmly) by a parent, a piercing or two will usually do no harm and typically becomes a forgotten passion within a year. But the part that she will never forget is the patient parent who wisely winced, shook his head, and then said, “Well, piercing is a tough one for me, but I’m willing to talk it out. After all, you certainly are a wonderful daughter—even if you are a little crazy.”

Tattoo, Wants A

“But I’ll *always* want ‘THE FLAMING PUKES’ etched on my back!
And it’ll look *great* in a wedding dress!”

The What

DO

- Set this limit early on (*before* your kid can’t live without one) and let your kid know.
- Decide quickly (if you didn’t set a limit early on) if you’d ever allow this before age eighteen. (Your answer is no, right?)
- Calmly and sorrowfully say no: “I’m sorry, honey, but this one I can’t go for. This is a forever decision being made at age fifteen.”
- Offer the temporary (henna dye) topical tattoos (they wash off after a few weeks).

DON'T

- Hesitate for one nanosecond—a teen will read that as “maybe” and torture you for three years.
- Blow up and yell.
- Belittle the request as crazy. (Right now it makes all the sense in the world to your daughter; see “Communication/Empathy,” Part 9.)
- Think that listening is the same as agreeing and get talked into this. Her anger is valid. Her logic is not. Empathy does *not* require agreement.

The Why

Here’s one adolescent identity banner you can’t roll with, because a tattoo is a forever flag on a constantly changing creature. You