On Your Mind

By

Dr. Jon Robinson

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 I’m at my wit’s end. My 13 year old son is very bright and gets good grades in school. However, it’s not because he does his homework well. Getting him to settle down and get busy is like pulling teeth. We have a set time for homework, but frequently he says he doesn’t have any. He gets mostly A’s and B’s. Oftentimes, he just doesn’t bring any books home at all. Study for tests? Book reports? Term papers? All last minute for him. I’m tired of the homework wars. Help? Signed, Battle Weary

Dear Battle Weary,

 What a dilemma. If your son were failing at school, or a frequent trouble-maker, you could just come down on him like gang busters. What I see as critical here is that he is a good student. So, what’s going on? At 13, junior is entering adolescence. Developmentally, that means he is trying to figure himself out, find an individual identity.

For children younger than age 10, parents are the best thing since sliced bread. We can do no wrong and our kids are obedient because they want our blessing. From age 10 to 12, the jury’s out. This is called latency age, which means not a child and not a teen. The new developmental term is “tweener.” At this age, children have their own ideas, but mostly conform to ours. Sometimes they want to be just like mom and dad, and sometimes just opposite of mom and dad.

With adolescence, most teens want to be opposite of mom and dad. This is the *sturm und drang*, or “storm and stress” of forming an individual identity. It’s where, as the parent, you want your son to begin making his own decisions, but with accountability and supervision. If his grades are in fact all A’s and B’s, that’s great! That means all of you are doing something right, and you want to convey your pride in him and his abilities.

However, in **Teachable Moments: Building Blocks of Christian Parenting**, I caution that children always test the limits and that they never mean what they say. Therefore, believe what they do, moreso than what they say. In politics, the foreign policy wonks talk about “trust but verify.” So, get on his teachers’ computer portals and check his grades online, or in conversation with his teachers.

Also, as a new teenager, consider revising your rules to allow your son more latitude in completing his homework. You can prompt, but don’t hover. Another concept I share with folks is the Principle of Responsible Freedom. That is, give your son as much freedom (to complete his tasks in his time and manner) as he demonstrates responsibility for (keeping his grades up). If he demonstrates irresponsibility, then you have a right to pull back on the freedom. At his age, though, problem-solving is a joint endeavor. To impose your will may lead to sullen noncompliance and emotional distance.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My kindergartener is being bullied on the playground at school. She’s a dainty, sensitive, little girl, and her tormenter is a tomboy. The tomboy knows that what she’s doing to Avis is not right. I know this because she does it on the sly and the teacher never catches her bullying my little girl. My husband wants Avis to “man up” and fight this girl. He even has gotten boxing gloves and shown her some punches. Avis just melts into tears, throws the boxing gloves down and runs to her room. Because the tormenter is athletic and respectful to adults, her teacher thinks she’s all that and not a bully. She seems to have singled Avis out, because other mothers in the class report their child is not her victim. Any suggestions?

Signed, Out of Options

Dear Out,

 My heart goes out to you and your precious little girl. As you may know, most schools have strict policies to stop bullying. Even if Avis’ teacher is in disbelief of her being a bully victim, you can request that the school counselor come to the class and give a presentation to the whole class about bullying and how to confront/avoid it. That’s your right as Avis’ parent.

Also, while I appreciate hubby’s perspective, Avis has made it very clear that she’s not going to defend herself. Additionally, many schools have a zero tolerance policy on fights, indicating that both parties get punished. So, defending herself might make her point, but with consequence to her. Nonetheless, what’s going on does require action on Avis’s part.

First, use your Active Listening tools to help Avis talk about her feelings. Your empathy will help her focus on how the bullying makes her feel. When you see her emotional tension going down, switch to, “So, what do you think we should do about this?” Even at age 5, she needs to be included in the problem-solving.

Second, use role-play with Avis to help her re-enact the bullying behavior (you play the bully). This give you opportunity to help Avis use her words to confront the bully behavior. “I’m telling,” is not sufficient or effective confrontation. Something as simple as saying, “Stop!!!,” with accompanying hand gesture, will surprise the bully and may work.

Because the teacher doesn’t see the bullying, it’s important for Avis to hang closely with her good friends in the class. Like a predatory jungle cat, bullys tend to single out the weakest in the herd. If the tormenting is witnessed by one or more other children, the teacher is more likely to confront the bully.

Finally, while not excusing the behavior, bullys tend to have “stuff,” and feel powerless, insecure, and inadequate elsewhere in their lives. Here, you can help Avis have empathy for her tormenter, and consider ways she might make the tormenter her friend. Also, you and/or the teacher or counselor might follow-up with the bully’s parent(s) to help put the behavior in context and offer options. Again, active listening would ease the parent’s embarrassment and defensiveness that their parenting is being called into question. Good luck!