

LOSING CONTROL & LIKING IT



*how to set your teen
(and yourself) free*

TIM SANFORD, M.A.



Losing Control & Liking It

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“Control issues often control and confuse us as parents. Here’s clear help and hope!”

—CAROL KUYKENDALL
Author and speaker

“George H.W. Bush was asked at the end of his presidency what he thought his greatest achievement was. As I recall, he noted that he had five kids who all wanted to come home to visit. This book will help you raise kids who want to come home to visit when they’re grown. It will also help you understand what you can and cannot accomplish as a parent—and go a long way toward keeping you sane.”

—MAX ANDERS
Author, *New Christian’s Handbook* and
30 Days to Understanding the Bible

“So many parents—with the best intentions—try to strong-arm their kids into being safe, successful, and spiritual. But that hurts the relationship, and rules without relationship lead to rebellion. Whether you’re burned out by arguing or weary of ‘rescuing’ your teen from his own mistakes, Tim Sanford has a far better way. It’s time to ‘lose control’—and start enjoying your son or daughter again.”

—JOSH D. MCDOWELL
Author and speaker

“This book is for everyone—because not only will you learn a lot about your teen, you’ll learn about yourself as well. Tim Sanford has reset the bar on books to develop your relationship with your teen.”

—JOE WHITE
Director, Kanakuk Camps
Author, *Sticking with Your Teen*

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INTRODUCTION

Raising two-year-olds is hard work.

Raising teenagers is hard work.

When I'm talking to a group of teenagers, I tell them raising parents is hard work, too.

As for two-year-olds, they require constant supervision and complete physical care—from changing diapers to making sure they don't feed your old VCR their morning oatmeal. Toddlers can't always use words effectively to tell you what they want or need. It takes a lot of time, energy, and your best powers of observation to identify their feelings and anticipate their next move—and stop them before they try to give the cat a bath.

With teenagers, it's different. They don't need or want your help getting dressed. They don't need you to feed or bathe them—though you may think they do at times! They're fairly self-sufficient, at least when they want to be. They can use language to express themselves, though they don't always choose to exercise that ability.

Yet in many ways teenagers tax your time, energy, and mental and emotional stability more than they did as infants or toddlers.

Why?

It has to do with control.

Think about all the things you can control with a young child. You can schedule and regulate bedtime and bath time. You can decide the type of food offered—though each toddler ultimately decides what stays in his or her mouth instead of being smeared on the face or spit out in a Technicolor rainbow. You can choose when and how your child is exposed to fresh air, playmates, learning opportunities, entertainment.

You can even push those “laugh buttons” with the right toy or tickle spot.

Now think of the areas of your teenager’s life where you have little or no control—or where your efforts to exert control are met with resistance or outright rebellion.

Maybe you can relate to Margaret’s story.

Her two boys are video game addicts. She’s tried to set time limits, but now that they’re older, they often stay up late playing online games.

As a single mom with a heavy workload, Margaret gets up at 5:00 every morning. She can’t stay up all night and monitor the boys’ activities. They promise to go to bed at a reasonable time, but sometimes she wakes up at midnight or 1:00 A.M. to find they’re still awake and playing games.

They’re not bad kids. They’re not making a mess or lots of noise. When she yells at them in the wee hours to go to bed, they do.

But it doesn’t change their behavior the next time. Margaret feels frustrated and helpless.

The possibilities for control-driven conflicts in parent-teen relationships seem endless. But the options for resolving them don’t. Who has the final say on most of these life choices?

Ultimately, it’s the teenager—as he or she reaches complete independence as an adult.

I’m not sure I like that answer, either. But it’s the truth.

We parents may nod our heads at this fact. But often we fight it when it confronts us daily. We’re desperate for our kids to turn out “right”—and convinced the key is controlling them.

It’s not.

True, teenagers need just as much of our attention as they did when they were younger—whether or not they realize it. They require our time and input—but in different, more indirect ways.

That’s easier said than done. It would be nice if you could get time off to study the subject for a year or two. Unfortunately, parents don’t get sabbaticals just because their kids are growing up.

That's where this book comes in. Congratulations on choosing to dedicate some of your time—which I know you have so much of these days—to reading it and applying the principles it presents.

You might be wondering what I know about parenting, control, and teenagers. I'm the father of two grown children. I'm also a licensed professional counselor with 20 years of experience as a therapist working with teens and their parents. Before that I was in youth work, so I've been around teenagers for over 30 years. I don't claim to know everything, but I've learned a lot about what works—and what doesn't—when it comes to raising adolescents.

In that time I've discovered a key to understanding parent-teen relationships: coming to grips with the issue of control. That may sound obvious, but it's surprisingly hard to work out in daily interaction with our teens.

Control issues can be very tough on parents, resulting in the kinds of struggles that will be realistically addressed in the following pages. My goal is to help you understand and accept what you *can* control as well as what you *can't*.

I also want to make your job as a parent easier—not to give you a to-do list that will only make your life harder. I don't want to make you feel guilty over the things you're *not* doing. I want to help lighten your load as a dad or a mom, not make it heavier—to make parenting your teen a bit less confusing and less stressful.

Working toward that goal, I'll help you discover clear boundaries where control is concerned and explain the critical difference between control and influence. You'll be able to use the principles in almost any situation you encounter with your teenager, regardless of your personality types.

I've divided the book into three parts to keep it organized in your mind—and mine.

Part I looks at the reasons why control is such a flash point between parents and teens—the misconceptions, attitudes, and even biology that

spark those notorious power struggles. We'll consider what a parent's real job description is—and isn't.

Part II is the heart of the book. You'll see how to balance control, influence, and responsibility. You'll find out what to do and when—including when to step back and do nothing.

Part III applies the principles of control and influence to situations in which you may find yourself. That would include making and enforcing rules, picking battles, getting outside help, and dealing with an "adult" teenager.

Just to clarify, though, this is not a *Five Ways to Get Your Teenager to Clean Up Her Room* book.

Sorry.

One girl, almost 18, told me confidently, "The floor's the largest shelf in my entire room—and I'm just trying to use it as efficiently as I can!"

That girl was one of mine.

So if your kid's room is messy, just pull the door closed.

Okay. Now that *that* problem is settled, let's move forward.

You're on your way to losing control of your teenager. If that occurs in the right way, you'll eventually find that your son or daughter has grown into an independent young adult.

And what parent wouldn't like that?

PART I

Getting Too Much of a Grip





Control: It's Not Your Department

As a therapist working with teenagers and their families, I've heard many a story from parents. Some of them go like these.

- Denise's daughter is overweight, and the two constantly battle over junk food. While Denise serves low-calorie dinners and packs healthy lunches, she frequently finds her daughter sneaking between-meal cookies and chips. The 14-year-old spends her babysitting money at the nearby convenience store, loading up on snack cakes and soft drinks. Angry, Denise strikes back by withholding allowance and repeatedly warning of the consequences of unhealthy eating habits. Nothing seems to work.
- Mac's blood pressure skyrockets when he thinks of his 15-year-old son getting his driver's license in a few short months. The boy has completed an expensive, private driver-training course and seems cautious and responsible. But Mac can't stop remembering his son's kamikaze approach to theme-park bumper cars five years ago. This hapless father's knuckles turn white when his teenager is at the wheel; his right foot presses an invisible brake pedal

while his heart races like crazy. He wonders if he should make his son wait to get his license until he's 17 . . . or 18 . . . or 20.

- Joe wonders where his little boy and girl have gone. His sweet, bright-eyed grade-schoolers suddenly have been replaced by a shaggy, lanky 15-year-old boy who appears unaware of his own overwhelming body odor—and a 13-year-old girl who favors tight tank tops and too much eye makeup. Joe's wife has had some loud conversations with their daughter about her tastes in clothes and cosmetics, but neither parent has confronted their son about his pungent smell. Joe knows it's probably up to him, but he hates to destroy the boy's self-esteem. He wonders whether he's just being a control freak. He looks on his bookshelf for help, but finds nothing. *They never deal with anything practical in those parenting books*, he thinks.

Like Denise, Mac, and Joe, you probably face plenty of situations in which a book called *The Complete Guide to Controlling Your Teenager* would seem helpful. It wouldn't be, though. The idea of being your son's or daughter's puppeteer might sound appealing, but the results would be disastrous for both of you.

This book takes a different approach. And when it comes to control, many of us parents need to as well.

Are You Out of Control?

Parenting is a daunting task when you consider the consequences of major decisions like these:

- how your teen spends his free time
- which friends she spends time with
- how he makes and spends money
- how she approaches her schoolwork
- when he starts driving
- what she eats, where she eats, and how much

- whether he goes to church or youth group
- what she looks like
- what level of personal hygiene he attains
- whether or not she uses foul language
- what parties and other social events he attends
- whether she smokes, drinks, or uses illegal drugs

It's no wonder so many parents would like to control those decisions until the last possible second. But is that wise, not to mention doable? Here are some questions you may be asking about control as you try to set boundaries with your teenager:

- Which parts of a situation belong to me and which belong to my teen?
- What's mine to decide and what's not?
- How much "rope" can I give my daughter before she "hangs" herself?
- What does my son get to choose, and what do I choose for him?
- Should I make my teenager go to church with the family?
- What about rules?
- What about freedom?
- What about being responsible?
- What about respect?
- What about his hair?
- How do I get her to do her homework?
- What if my daughter is already 18 years old?

Over and over I've heard parents ask questions like these. Control is one of the biggest issues they encounter, and one of the most misunderstood.

Illusions of Control

I try to base all my counseling on what Jesus said in John 8:32: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Jesus was

talking about a particular truth—who He is as the Son of God. But I believe His observation applies to all reality. Knowing and understanding the truth—what reality actually is, like it or not—can set you free from the problems that come with lies and mistaken perceptions.

Error, wrong thinking, skewed beliefs, and misconceptions lie at the root of many, if not most, conflicts. That's certainly true of control. The more accurately you think about something, the healthier your life will be. The converse is also true. The more inaccurate your thinking, the more dysfunctional your relationship with your teen will be—even if you assume your thinking is fine, which we all usually do.

So here's a good place to start: thinking more accurately about control, in order to undo common confusion about its role in relationships.

Many tensions between parents and teens boil down to the issue of control. Sometimes it's not visible on the surface, but lurks below. For instance, you may think you're pressuring your son or daughter to work harder in school to have a better chance at college scholarships. But the deeper issue may be how you feel about the way your teen spends time—texting from that iPhone or hanging with friends instead of doing homework. The two of you are battling for the right to decide.

There are as many myths about control as there are days of the year. Our culture doesn't make it any easier; an alien visiting our society might think we're all a bunch of control freaks. Consider the phrases we use that have the word *control* in them. Here's a starter list:

- remote control
- quality control
- cruise control
- climate control
- traffic control
- crowd control
- master control
- weight control
- arms control

We talk about controlling our destinies, our lives; we study ways to control the aging process; we attend expensive seminars in an effort to control our eating habits, anger, financial future, thinking, moods . . . and children.

Self-help books and workshops—in the Christian arena as well as the general market—promise control. Much of the psychology practiced in the U.S.—cognitive behavioral therapy—focuses on control, too.

Don't get me wrong. The idea of having control is not bad in itself. Therapy that focuses on what you can *legitimately* control, as well as what you *can't*, is a healing and helpful tool.

But a person's fixation on needing control, which I often observe as a therapist, and the illusion that you need or have more control than you actually do, turn healthy ownership into a control-freak thing.

Most of us want control, plain and simple—and the more the better, thank you very much! That's because when we have control, we can make things turn out the way we want. We can be happy and avoid pain or displeasure.

If only it were that easy.

High-control people believe the best way to avoid pain is to keep a tight rein on the things around them—including key people, especially their children. After all, there can be a whole lot of hurt when children go astray.

I met such an over-controlling parent many years ago when I worked at a psychiatric hospital. I was the primary therapist for a teenage girl from a military family. She was rebelling, skipping school, experimenting with alcohol. Her family diagnosed her as a "behavior problem."

In our second weekly family therapy session, the girl's father—a high-ranking officer—stated emphatically that the only reason something goes wrong is because somebody didn't do his or her job correctly. Therefore, that somebody is at fault. He was referring to his teenage daughter, of course; everything else was under his control.

This father had an exaggerated sense of control, and a huge

misconception about it. He'd carried his "systems checklist" mentality home from the office, refusing to see that there were some things he couldn't control. He also refused to see that his campaign to over-control his daughter was partially—though not completely—to blame for her rebellion. Her behavior was an attempt to escape his overcontrol.

When you think of control, you might have visions of someone like this father—or a power-mad villain from an old James Bond movie. While I've met a few who could have been cast for such a part, the vast majority of us parents are much more "normal" in our desire for control. But because our culture encourages us to seek control—and because some Christians overemphasize its role in parenting—it's important to look at the way you think about the topic.

Everyone Has "Control Issues"

Most parents don't behave as extremely as the aforementioned dad. But that doesn't mean they have no problems with control. It's not an "all or nothing" proposition.

Take, for example, the issue of trying to "guarantee" what will happen to our children.

My early years were spent as a missionary's kid in Ecuador. In that culture there was a life philosophy that could be summarized as "*Que sera, sera*"—"What will be, will be." There was no "I am the captain of my fate and the master of my soul" quoted at graduation ceremonies.

As a result, I've come to see the truth in the following observation:

- You can drive the safest car built in the world (control).
- You can place your infant in the safest car seat manufactured (control).
- You can be the safest driver in your state, with all the necessary skills for every possible situation (control).
- Yet a drunk driver can still cross the double yellow line, hit you head-on, and take the life of your baby.

“Que sera, sera.”

Where is your control now?

You were very wise and responsible. You did everything correctly. You controlled the things that were yours to control. But after all was said and done, there was no *guarantee* that you could keep your child safe. There were a lot of elements—including people—you couldn't control, yet which could have a huge impact on you.

“But I want a guarantee!” you may plead.

You're not alone. As parents, we want certainty that we can keep our children safe and raise them so they'll turn out well, following scriptural guidance.

But there is no guarantee.

“That kind of thinking is negative and scary! I don't like that.”

Yes, it is scary.

“But what about the verse that says, ‘Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it?’”

Proverbs 22:6 communicates a very wise *principle*. But it's not a *guarantee* that magically or spiritually overrides your teenager's free will—which, by the way, was given to him or her by God Himself. This biblical principle does not obligate God to you or force Him to make your teenager turn out the way you think he or she should.

“But—”

I hear you.

We parents want control so badly because we think that if we do the right things, our kids will turn out the way we want them to. It doesn't matter whether we're Christians, or whether we're “high-control” people or think we have no control at all. We still want it.

We want to be able to lay our heads on our pillows at night, with our teenagers snugly tucked into their clean beds, and know we did it “right.”

Since there aren't any guarantees, many parents settle for illusions of control. An illusion often is more comforting than the truth. That may

sound harsh, but I've found in my years as a therapist that most people have a hard time with the truth.

Reality can be a hard pill to swallow. But last time I checked, whenever you fight reality you lose.

That's just the way life is. Reality wins.

The only absolute assurance, for those who have a relationship with God through Christ, is that eventually they'll enjoy life forever with the One who made and redeemed them. *That's* guaranteed.

The rest of life isn't.

Ask parents who've lost a son or daughter to an automobile accident on the way home from a church meeting, or in a rock climbing fall, or to the sudden onset of cancer, or in a school shooting incident, about guarantees. See what they have to say about control.

I know parents like these. I've looked into their tear-filled eyes and attempted to field the "Why?" questions. Maybe you are one. If so, I'm truly sorry.

No Control?

Does this mean our lives are careening, like cars with the brake lines cut, toward the edge of a cliff? Should we just take our hands off the wheel and brace for the crash? Why try to guide our teenagers at all?

Keep in mind that there are degrees of control. While you can't guarantee the outcome, you *can* make a baby safer with a good car seat.

There are also different kinds of control: the kind that is *actually yours* to exercise and the kind that *isn't*. The key in parenting is knowing which is which—and knowing what to do with each.

You need to *keep and use* the control you're entitled to—or take hold of it if you've lost it.

And you want to *lose* the control you really don't have in the first place—and give up illusions you may have about it.

It's not easy to figure out! But that's why you have this book. It

explains what's truly yours to control—and helps you quit trying to grasp control that doesn't belong to you.

Believe it or not, when it comes to raising teenagers, losing control can be a wonderful and freeing thing!

Your Brain and Control

To understand your assumptions about control, it helps to understand what you've been telling yourself about it. Your need to control grows out of your experiences, and how they affect your thinking and decision-making.

The neurology of your brain is complex, but for the moment let's compare it to a jukebox.

I mean a real jukebox, not a digital one—the old kind with vinyl 45s inside and a panel of buttons, each corresponding to a hit single. You watch as the record drops onto the turntable, the arm swings over, and the needle slips into the grooves to play your selection. If you have teenagers, maybe you can remember when these weren't called antiques!

That's what your brain is like. Each “record” has etched on it a simple, short phrase known as a belief. A belief is a statement of what you think is fact. Most of your beliefs were recorded, catalogued, and filed in your jukebox during the first seven to ten years of your life.

When you hear the word *belief*, you may think first of religious beliefs. But you have beliefs about every subject under the sun. You use them every day as you try to make sense of life. They're your worldview—all on a bunch of 45s!

So your thought process plays out (no pun intended) in the following sequence:

1. A new experience happens, or a series of similar experiences. Perhaps a bully trips you in the school cafeteria, and you land in the middle of your own mashed potatoes. Or you feel guilty while reading a “how to raise a teenager” book.

2. You attempt to understand this situation as best you can.
3. You draw a conclusion from the experience. It may be based on incomplete information available at that moment, but you assume your conclusion is true.
4. A recording of your conclusion is made into a belief statement and filed in your jukebox. The new record is polished, catalogued, and ready for future reference.
5. Every time a similar situation arises, that record plays. You respond according to the belief it contains.

We all have one record that sounds pretty much the same. It says, “All my records, all my beliefs, are true. I can even validate them with life experiences if I have to!”

We’re quite defensive about our record collections. If you disagree with me, my defenses shout, “What do you think I am? Stupid? I wouldn’t believe a lie! I’m intelligent! I know what’s right and true, and I can back it up!”

If you’re willing to drop those defenses, you may find some of your records are a bit warped. Some conclusions you’ve drawn about walking in the school cafeteria may have been based on incomplete information. What you read in that parenting book may be partly true, but may not be the best advice for you and your situation.

Remember, most of your records were forged in your first seven to ten years—long before you ever thought of raising a teenager. Your beliefs about things like love and discipline—and control—may not be totally accurate.

There are plenty of books for Christians that tell you what you should have on your records. But I want to encourage you to think deeply about the “control songs” your jukebox is *already* playing and whether they’re true.

It matters because those records remain in the slots of your jukebox, some of them warped and misleading, waiting to be activated when life “pushes your buttons.” When one of them plays, it may sound funny

to everyone but you. To you, it sounds true. Most of us, after all, never stop to question our beliefs; we just believe them.

Some of your records may need to be remixed, updated, even tossed. This book will help you do that with records that revolve (so to speak) around the subject of control.

Many of us have whole albums on that subject. One of yours probably features the hit single about how every parent's job is to make sure his or her children turn out "right." Even though most of us don't quite know what that standard means, we feel obliged to meet it.

Oh, how wrong that record is.

If it were true, it would mean God messed up.

Control: A Reality Check

In Genesis we read about a place called the Garden of Eden. It was a perfect environment, a perfect "home."

In this perfect place there were two perfect people—God's children, Adam and Eve. Wouldn't that be nice to have perfect children?

And there was a perfect God—the perfect parent.

There was also a rule: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

You've probably heard the rest of the story.

Adam and Eve chose foolishly, defying what God had told them. Our human decay and ultimate death are stark reminders of that wrong choice—made by perfect people in a perfect environment with a perfect parent.

So what did *God* do wrong? If He "trained them in the way they should go," why did Adam and Eve choose the other option? If Proverbs 22:6 is a *guarantee* of success for parents, why wasn't it a *guarantee* for the Author of the Book?

Enter free will.

I'm talking about a God-given freedom to choose—part of being created in His image. Adam and Eve exercised it, and your teenagers exercise it today.

“But I *want* them to turn out right,” you say.

Yes. I agree with you. But that's not your job.

“But I want the best for them, for *their* sakes.”

I won't argue with that. But it's still not your job to make sure they do.

“But—”

I know. I'm a parent, too.

You do have a job, which I'll get to in the next chapter; it's just not *that* one. You could do everything exactly “right” all 18 years of your child's life under your roof—assuming you could know what “exactly right” was—and he or she could still choose “wrong.”

God has given our children the option to be foolish, even to sin.

He doesn't *want* them to be foolish or to sin. But they're free moral agents to pick right or wrong, wisdom or folly, truth or lies, righteousness or evil.

To a parent, that's scary news. There really is a whole lot more that you *can't* control than you *can* control.

But before you get too discouraged, rest assured that we'll get to the topic of *influence*—of which you have a great amount with your children. You are *not* powerless as the parent of a teenager.

For now, though, I want you to go back and read the fine print on the bottom of that contract—the one you signed when you became a parent, the one that includes the possibility of having your heart broken.

“I never signed up for that,” you might say.

But that's exactly what you did. You opened your heart to the possibility that it would be broken by the very child you love and want the best for.

You signed up to raise a little person—one for whom you're responsible but are not able to control.

So before we go on, take time right now (yes, I mean right now, or

you probably won't do it at all) to contemplate the powerful words of "The Serenity Prayer."

It may be familiar. You even may have it memorized. But as you reflect on it this time, don't do it as an abstraction or for somebody else's benefit. Do it practically, for yourself as the parent of a teenager. Make it a personal prayer from your heart to God.

THE SERENITY PRAYER

God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.¹

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. The author of this expanded version of the “Serenity Prayer” is unknown; the original, shorter version is generally attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, who apparently wrote it as early as 1934. Found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer, March 15, 2008.

Chapter 3

1. Grossman, Lev, “They Just Won’t Grow Up,” *Time*, January 24, 2005, pp. 42-53.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Chapter 12

1. “Youths’ Stuff of Happiness May Surprise Parents,” Associated Press, found at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20322621/>, August 20, 2007.