

Adolescence and the Development of Habits

Adolescents become bound by the habits they create

It's a responsibility most adolescents don't consider while in the process of growing up - how they are in charge of creating habits of living that will determine much of how they will probably behave when they step off into independence.

Focused so much on the moment, many teenagers fail to understand the law of formative effect: how we become accustomed to acting in the present is how we are likely to act in the future. Practice can make permanent because by repeating ways of acting, a young person forms habits (patterns of recurrent behavior) for good and for ill.

Good habits are self-maintaining and even self-enhancing, like when the teenager makes a habit of being industrious, of exercising, or of planning ahead. Bad habits are self-defeating and even self-destructive, like when the teenager makes a habit of quitting, of cheating, or of [lying](#).

At best, habits provide efficient routines, systems for organization, and self-disciplines that allow the young person to lead a life that works well for them. At worst they contribute to compulsions, obsessions, and addictions that cause the young person to follow a course of increasing unhappiness.

Whether following good habits or bad, people are by repetition ruled because human beings are not simply creatures of habit; they are captives of habit. Much of how we behave today is how we are going to behave tomorrow.

We may like to think we have free choice in what we elect to do, but in reality conscious thought determines only some of our [decision-making](#). Blind obedience to habit, going on automatic functioning, acting without thinking, doing what is second nature, repeating what we have done innumerable times before, sticking to the familiar, is at the root of much of our conduct - whether it be how we eat, drink, do our personal hygiene, manage our feelings, like to start and finish our days, approach work, manage our communication, and on and on.

While still in high school and at home, a teenager's bad habit of sleeping through his morning alarm can be moderated by parents willing to repeatedly wake him up. Away from family at college, however, and without this parental support, the young person is at the mercy of his own bad habit, continually sleeping in and missing morning classes to his academic cost. As for starting good habits, it can be easier to install regular study habits when still under the shelter of family than when one has moved out and there are more demands and distractions of independence to contend with.

When, during the last phase of [adolescence](#), trial independence (ages 18-23), young people move away from home they must confront the personal baggage they take with them, habits weighing heavily among them - like [procrastination](#), impulsive spending, and escaping into endless video and computer entertainment.

What last stage adolescents discover is that good habits are hard to start (that takes "will" power), and bad habits are hard to stop (that takes "won't" power.) In each case they find that habit change is resisted because people are so deeply invested in their own status quo - in how they are used to operating, which is familiar, predictable, and comfortable.

Eating habits are a prime example. Practiced daily for so many years, they are very hard to change in any permanent way through [dieting](#) because one's psychological and physical systems are so historically opposed to giving them up. People grow very accustomed to what and how much and how often they like to eat.

Even if the diet was successful in the short term (like prepared diets often are), in the long term once a person loosens dietary strictness, former eating behaviors usually reassert themselves, which is why taking weight off and keeping it off are two very different matters.

Resist a habit, it seems, and the habit will defend itself. Habitual behavior will fight for survival. This battle to change a bad habit reminds me of cartoonist Walt Kelly's conclusion: "We have met the enemy and they are us." In this contest, the old "us" often wins.

Like launching a rocket, to start a good habit creates the problem of lift-off. It takes a disproportionate amount of focused energy to get the new habit off the ground and up and flying. The three R's of creating a good habit are: Reminders to regularly activate the habit, Repetition to establish consistency of practice, and Reward to recognize accomplishment.

Like suffering [bereavement](#), to stop a bad habit creates the problem of loss. It takes a lot of giving up and doing without to let investment in an old habit go. The three A's of retiring a bad habit are: Acknowledgement of the habit's negative consequences, Assertion of commitment to change, and having an Alternative way to react when the old temptation arises.

Given the influential power of habits, it behooves parents to keep a weather eye out for what patterns of behavior their teenager gets into. Part of their responsibility is to help instill healthy habits of living in their adolescent where they can, and to give the teenager a strategy for changing unhealthy habits that he or she may unwittingly acquire along the way, if that is what the young person wants to do.

So, what are a few things you might tell your adolescent about habits?

Habits are learned patterns of behavior that, from practice, become embedded in how we repeatedly function to conduct ourselves, take care of ourselves, and to get things done.

Habits operate largely unmindfully; like programs that are performed with a minimum of conscious thought they create their own momentum from becoming desirable to do again.

Habits are indispensable because they allow us to create predictability, to act automatically, and to accomplish efficiently.

Habits are goal-directed and functional - they have an objective and they serve a purpose.

Habits can serve us well when they help maintain and enhance how well we perform, and they can serve us badly when they undermine and harm how adequately we function.

Good habits are harder to start than to put off; bad habits are easier to start than to shut down.

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Habits are so robust because they are routine, usually recurring under the radar of conscious regulatory thought.

To understand how a particular habit works, identify the circumstance that cues it, the [motivation](#) that drives it, and the objective it seeks to accomplish.

If you want to end a habit, don't try to stop it; start planning and practicing an alternative behavior to resort to when the temptation to repeat the old pattern arises.

By consistently practicing a viable alternative, the bad habit can fall into disuse. For example, I have seen this system of bad habit change illustrated many times in [counseling](#) over the years when a client (often a last stage adolescent) with a very bad habit, [alcohol](#) or other [drug abuse](#), comes in for help. In addition to exploring assessment and treatment options, I usually try to steer the young person to Alcoholics Anonymous for the intensive habit change assistance that is required.

Over the years in counseling, I have seen Alcoholics Anonymous turn around many lives. The supportive fellowship it offers (so the addicted person doesn't have to go it alone), the guidance it provides (the twelve steps for recovery), and the hope that it holds out (of a saner way to live), all help addicted people find an alternative practice for managing their habitual desire to compulsively drink and drug. AA is not about stopping people from the habit of problem drinking; it is about giving them a program, place, and the understanding company of people where another habit can be practiced when the urge to drink arises.

Now the person has alternative choices - for example, to read the Big Book, to call a sponsor, to go to a meeting, or to simply reflect on strategies for sober self-[management](#) they have learned from the fellowship.

Parents can tell their adolescent that the struggle with habits, how to install good ones and how to uninstall the bad ones, is a lifelong part of the human condition because everyone has a mix of good habits and bad. Managing this mix is what a lot of effort in life is about because we must rely upon our habits every day.

Finally, Mark Twain once remarked that a few bad habits were always worthwhile keeping around in case of an emergency. That way, he believed, when your health was in dire need of recovery you'd have some unwholesome practices available for giving up. In this sense, he considered the man with no bad habits to be a danger to himself, too well regulated for his own good.

Maybe Twain had a point.