

# WHY ARE TEENS SO DIFFICULT: FIELD- TESTED STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CHALLENGING TEENS FROM A VETERAN GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

## 現在的青少年很難教吧？ ——以理解尊重支持取代嘮 叨控制，資深校園心理師給 父母、老師的實戰書

*This parenting and education guidebook speaks up on behalf of teens and the adults who care about them. Developed from real situations encountered in the author's work as a guidance counselor, it pinpoints the key issues of teen psychology, and addresses common areas of conflict with concrete advice and proven methods.*

The teen years are an important stage for the development of “self identity” which is facilitated by the attention and accompaniment of adults. However, teens can also be confused and irritable, making them frustrating to be around. This book helps parents and teachers understand the issues behind the confusing behavior of teens, and puts them on the path to better relationships with teens built on understanding, respect, and support.



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The book's 22 chapters are divided into four parts. The first part addresses the key factors in getting along with teens: trust and respect. Only when you respect a teen and demonstrate that you are trustworthy will they open up and communicate with you. This gives you space to discuss the differing obligations and responsibilities of teens and adults, and why some behaviors aren't appropriate for teens.

What about challenging teen behaviors like unstable emotions, obsession with appearance, and the tendency to engage in put downs? The second part of the book addresses these issues one at a time, providing solutions to each. All of these behaviors reflect the hidden need to be seen and understood. Rather than assume that nothing can be done and therefore ignore these behaviors, adults need to engage teens in appropriate ways. The unstable psychology of teens can make them swing between seeking closeness and keeping their distance, making it difficult to maintain relationships. The third part of the book advises on what to pay attention to when building relationships with teens, and what minefields to avoid, emphasizing that a "sense of safety" is critical for developing healthy interactions. The book's fourth part focuses on how to work with teens as they discover their own values (hints: don't force them, don't negate them, and be patient), analyzing a variety of scenarios to point out underlying concerns, and guiding readers to practical solutions.

Beyond just summarizing field-tested strategies for working with teens, author Lin Wei-Hsin shares his knowledge of the sticking points we all encounter when relating to teenagers, providing solutions and model dialogues for a variety of common situations. This practical guidebook is essential reading for any parent or teacher who wants to understand teens and interact with them in ways that provide positive support for their growth and development.

## Lin Wei-Hsin 林維信

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**How should we offer guidance to teens who engage in inflammatory online behavior?**  
**— Understand the six psychological causes behind teen bullying; use dialogue to help teens consider the circumstances of others.**

Hao-Ching likes leaving nasty comments online.

Apart from calling people with differing opinions morons, Hao-Ching also engages in flame wars. He's incited so much anger that people got together to have him banned. In the end it took the Student Affairs Office stepping in and providing protection before it was finally resolved.

A classmate predisposed to depression recently posted on his individual page, stating he was miserable and wanted to die.

Shockingly, Hao-Ching told him to "Do it, kill yourself!" As a result, the student slit his wrists. This had the entire class in an uproar.

When adults asked Hao-Ching about it later, his reply was apathetic, "He's the one that wanted to die, I didn't do anything wrong. These attention seekers are the ones asking for it!"

The victim's father was so enraged by Hao-Ching's attitude that he posted a campus bullying survey and threatened to sue.

To everyone's surprise, Hao-Ching still refused to admit he was in the wrong, "Do it then. Hope you win, you useless scum."

\*

While adults are horrified when teens engage in unprovoked online bullying, the bullies remain indifferent.

Attempts to teach empathy are met with resistance, leaving parents discouraged, sad, and questioning whether there's something wrong with their parenting.

It's true that teens often put up a rebellious front when it comes to these matters. If you want them to be less defensive, then you must understand where they're coming from, which is no easy task.

They don't consider themselves as being in the wrong and instead think that the other party is too sensitive. They think "why shouldn't we tell them to wise up and take care of themselves? And then I have to show sympathy? What's the point?!"

Before we try to change them, we must first understand teen psychology.

### **1. Teens feel a sense of accomplishment when they accurately predict what someone else is thinking, believing they've unmasked the other party**

It's true, sharing one's struggles online may be partially motivated by a desire for others' sympathy.

To a certain extent, this teenage perspective isn't "completely wrong," and is one of the reasons they can't accept being rebuked.

They aren't sure why "most people" can't see it and would even go as far to console the other party.

"It's so stupid, and fake. Just watch, I'll expose them so everyone knows what they're up to."

Because of their contempt for "fakes," teens believe their actions – revealing a person's true colors – shouldn't be labeled as bad.

In reality, most people know that there is probably an underlying desire for sympathy behind these posts, it's just that we don't choose to provoke them. Someone mature might figure that it's not their duty to help them get better, but they wouldn't do anything to harm the person. That's because mature people do unto others as they would have others do unto them.

The paradox for teens is that while they can't stand others' needling when facing setbacks, they think they'll never encounter a low point. *And only once they've been upset and experienced lows many times will they understand the other party and become more tolerant towards both others and themselves.*

### **2. Making a show of being stronger and smarter; teens relieve pressure and dissatisfaction through online attacks**

In actuality it's not just teens, but perhaps even adults who have especially aggressive online personas.

People who can't compete in real life turn to the internet to show off, mercilessly mocking perceived "weaklings". They attack others as a defense mechanism because they are scared of becoming a weakling themselves. Only through this attack can they increase the distance between themselves and the weaklings, proving themselves entirely separate.

*They weren't treated well, so they don't want to treat others well; their own feelings weren't seen as important, so they won't care about the feelings of others.*

However, teens who are quick to reply aren't necessarily in the same category. It's just that some unhappy teens find it easy to make others also feel unhappy online.

### **3. Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)**

Psychology's Fundamental Attribution Error points out that when discussing human behavior, there's a tendency to overemphasize individual factors and underestimate situational ones. In other words, some teens believe that when others run into a problem it's a matter of their personality or them being stupid, when it's really a matter of the other party's unfavorable environment.

Take depression, for example. It's actually a condition related to the quality of neurotransmitters in the brain, but teens think that it's a matter of a weak personality. Similarly, teens may believe students in special education – whose biologically uncontrollable impulses produce distressing behavior – are faking it to garner attention.

It's easier for teens to make FAEs, mainly because their cognitive processes have yet to mature, and they lack social experience, leaving them with no way to understand human behavior from more distant perspectives. With insufficient information and a lack of in-depth familiarity about the situation, it's simplest to conclude that "it's their own fault."

### **4. Wanting to reduce guilt and absolve responsibility without knowing the gravity of the consequences**

There's a humor to netspeak and internet memes, as well as a sense of belonging that comes from being part of a subculture. Take the netizen phrase, "Be confident, drop the XX." But when someone posts "I want to die," commenting "drop the 'want to'" may bring about grave results.

Teens mistakenly believe that the phrase "I'm just joking" reduces the harm they inflicted. They don't understand that provoking and bullying others online can result in serious physical and emotional harm, and possibly even suicide. Teens don't necessarily know the weight of their words.

*This isn't just a moral issue, but a legal one as well.* Public humiliation, slander, blackmail, intimidation, and inciting suicide are civil offenses that harm another's reputation. This all happens in an instant with a single careless comment and may very well carry legal implications.

### **5. Even if they understand the consequences, teens' defense mechanisms render adult advice ineffective**

"It's not that big a deal. Anyways, they're just words."



“If someone looking for attention ends up dead, it serves them right.”

When you openly warn a teen about the gravity of an outcome, you’ll likely receive this kind of flippant response. This is due to their unwillingness to face criticism and their heightened defensiveness; they won’t register what you say, maybe even coming up with more facile defenses for the sake of argument.

*The more you show your anxiety, the more teens will minimize the damage caused by their actions. Otherwise, they would have to face what they’ve done and understand that they are in the wrong.* Adults might hope to see teens repent, but they will do whatever it takes to avoid losing face.

Adults know that taking responsibility is a serious task. It’s not something you can avoid with an “It’s got nothing to do with me,” and start with a clean slate. The toll of avoiding responsibility will follow you the rest of your life, unless you face the truth.

Mature people have a strong sense of boundaries and avoid stirring up trouble for no reason. They won’t insert themselves in matters that are none of their business, or needlessly offend others.

## **6. Empathy deficiency**

Immediately assuming that teens lack empathy just leads to further discouragement. Instead, I recommend rethinking the issue of empathy in light of the previously discussed possibilities. Empathy isn’t something you have or don’t have; it exists on a spectrum.

It’s true, an exceptionally empathetic person would never make the kind of comments mentioned above, but parents need not put too much pressure on themselves or worry that they didn’t raise their child well just because a teen stirs up trouble.

At the very least, children can understand that they should treat others how they want to be treated. Whether or not they can exhibit true generosity is another matter.

If there is a true lack of empathy, caused by excessive egocentricity, a teen will still understand the principle of maximizing benefits. Analyzing the costs and benefits of their behavior can help them understand more quickly the advantages that come with being empathetic.

As for how to nurture true empathy, it’s a long process with many stages.

From the above we can conclude that if we want teens to take our advice, we must utilize the following principle: *while working to reduce their defensiveness, help them consider the consequences of their actions, and find better options to satisfy their underlying needs.*

**One: first, see what they see**

Seeing your teen's point of view is not supporting or affirming their poor behavior. There's no need to praise behaviors we don't approve of.

All we are doing is *refraining from making a split-second judgment, using reflection and a curious attitude to show that we can see the logic behind their thinking.*

Just seeing what they see, that's all. This allows at least some portion of their underlying needs to be met. How do we go about this? First, start by earnestly asking your teen why they're so certain the other party is seeking attention.

Teen: "You can tell just by looking that she wants attention!"

Adult: "I see her expressing her sadness, that she wants to die, but I don't see her saying 'pay attention to me!' How do you know she wants others to comfort her?"

Teen: "If she really wanted to die then she wouldn't post it there out in the open (in a public space) for everyone to see."

Adult: "That's true, everyone can see it. But there have been cases where people have made public posts before killing themselves. How do you know for sure that she won't do the same?"

Teen: "Those people are usually just whining; I never saw her actually try to kill herself."

Adult: "So you're saying that since you didn't see her attempt suicide, the chances of her dying are low?"

Teen: "Exactly!"

Adult: "So you have your way of seeing things." (We aren't confirming his assessment, we are only conveying that we understand what has been said. There is a purpose to this.)

"Do you know her? If not, how do you know she's never tried?"

Teen: "I don't, but these kinds of people are all like this."

Adult: "Okay, have you ever known someone who actually tried to kill themselves?"

Teen: "No."

Adult: "So, you don't know whether she's attempted suicide, but you don't think she's the sort of person who would do it. But you aren't sure, either. Do I have it right?"

Teen: "Yeah."

Adult: "What if she's part of the small group that makes a post and then actually kills themselves, then what?"

Teen: "Then she kills herself. What's that got to do with me? She said she wants to die so that's all on her."

## **Two: Use dialogue to help them understand what the other person may be going through**

Adult: "Not necessarily. Didn't you say that she's probably just looking for attention? Maybe she didn't really want to die at first, but then after reading your comment she became so sad that she actually killed herself."

Teen: "If she dies because of a comment, then she's weak. So what if someone that weak kills themselves?"

Adult: "Are you saying that if you're going to live, then you need to toughen up?" (Don't let your teen's harsh words get to you. Rather, attempt to see the good intentions that may be hidden beneath.)

Teen: "Yeah."

Adult: "So if she can toughen up a little, then she can live a better life where she won't want to die, am I right?"

Teen: "Yes."

Adult: "Then can you help her toughen up?"

Teen: "Why should I? That's not my problem!"

Adult: "Mm, it isn't, so it'd be fine if you just ignored her, wouldn't it? So why push and make someone who is already vulnerable feel even worse?"

Teen: "I just can't stand her looking for attention and not being honest about it. She's being all dramatic about wanting to die, it's so annoying."

Adult: "So you'd prefer if she could be upfront and show her weakness, show that she needs something, to openly say that she wants someone to comfort her, yes?"

Teen: "Yes."

Adult: "If she honestly said 'I'm so sad, will someone comfort me?' and posted it, would you mock her?"

Teen: "Yeah, I'd destroy her."

Adult: "Hm, that's pretty harsh. Didn't you just say that if someone wants attention then they should be open about it? But then if they are, they have to worry about people like you making fun of them."

Teen: "Only people looking for attention, they deserve it."

Adult: "We all need others to care for us. Have you never had moments when you felt sad and needed someone to show they cared?"

Teen: "I wouldn't go online when I need help."

Adult: "What would you do?"

Teen: "Hang out with friends, play sports, PUBG (mobile game)."

Adult: "So when you feel down you can find ways to feel cared for, more ways than she can."

Teen: "Yeah."

Adult: "Ah, she might not have as many options as you, or maybe she's already tried them but they didn't work for her."

Teen: "That's her problem."

**Three: Lastly, remind them of the consequences and their severity**

Adult: “Yup. She probably has her own problems and hardships and it’s not your job to help. You each have your own lives to live and whatever happens to her has nothing to do with you.

“But if you encourage her to commit suicide and she dies – I know you want to say it’s got nothing to do with you – but... you can’t avoid the consequences.

“Her family could sue you for inciting suicide, and that’s a crime with a one to seven year sentence.”

This dialogue isn’t one size fits all. *The point is to demonstrate how to reduce a teen’s defensiveness and facilitate neither aggressive nor passive discussion using some of the outlined tips.*