

Is It a Control Battle?

How do you tell whether what's taking place in your family is a healthy power struggle or an unhealthy Control Battle? This brief survey is designed to help you find out.

Choose the answer that **best** describes your situation from the two choices for each question.

SECTION ONE

- _____ 1A. My teen pleads his/her case but notices when I am firm and clear, and accepts my decision and moves on.
- _____ 1B. My teen argues as if entitled and holds on intensely to the view that I, the parent, am completely unreasonable.
- _____ 2A. My teen generally participates positively in family activities.
- _____ 2B. I think twice about requiring my teen to participate in family activities because it is likely to be a battle, and his/her participation will make the event less enjoyable for everyone.
- _____ 3A. When caught doing something wrong, my teen is remorseful, accepts the consequences, and doesn't quickly repeat the behavior.
- _____ 3B. When caught doing something wrong, my teen makes excuses and, even if he/she apologizes, is likely to quickly repeat the behavior.
- _____ 4A. My teen might object to a request to do a chore, but he/she will eventually do it without a battle.
- _____ 4B. Getting my teen to do a chore is predictably a battle.
- _____ 5A. Though having a teenager has presented certain challenges, other members of the family are still getting the time and attention they need.
- _____ 5B. Problems with my teen are getting most of my attention and keeping me from attending to other family members' needs.
- _____ 6A. My co-parenting partner and I support our teen together.

- _____6B. Dealing with my teen creates stress between my co-parenting partner and me.
- _____6C. I do not have a co-parenting partner, so this question does not apply.
- _____7A. My teen knows the rules and usually follows them.
- _____7B. My teen is constantly breaking rules.
- _____8A. Though I may worry about how my teen is doing, things are generally going well.
- _____8B. I feel exhausted and worn out from worrying about and dealing with my teen.
- _____9A. When my teen presents problems, I'm confident in my ability to deal with them.
- _____9B. When my teen presents problems, I'm often confused about the best way to respond.
- _____10A. I'm generally comfortable communicating with my teen.
- _____10B. I often find myself "walking on eggshells" around my teen.

SECTION TWO

- _____11A. My teen is involved in positive activities and has interests that he/she is passionate about.
- _____11B. My teen does not have or has abandoned positive activities and passions, other than hanging out with friends.
- _____12A. My teen does well in most areas (e.g., school, home, recreational activities, friends).
- _____12B. My teen's level of functioning (e.g., school, home, recreational activities, friends) is a significant concern.
- _____13A. Although there may have been some instances of drug or alcohol use by my teen, it is not an ongoing concern.
- _____13B. I am very concerned about my teen's substance use.
- _____14A. My teen is sometimes moody but mostly positive.
- _____14B. My teen is mostly negative in his/her mood or attitude.
- _____15A. My teen is not in counseling, or if he/she is, it is partially on his/her own initiative and for issues other than cooperation with parents (e.g., dealing with divorce, adoption, sexual/gender identity).
- _____15B. I have my teen in counseling due to behavioral issues.

SCORING

Number of B answers in *Section One*: _____

Number of B answers in *Section Two*: _____

If you answered B to no more than 1 question in Section One, you are most likely *not* in a control battle with your teen.

If you answered B to 2 or 3 questions in Section One, you most likely are in a mild to moderate control battle with your teen.

If you answered B to 4 to 6 questions in Section One, you most likely are in at least a moderate control battle with your teen.

If you answered B to 6 or more questions in Section One, you very likely are in a serious control battle with your teenager.

If you answered B to no more than 2 questions in Section One and answered B to any questions in Section Two, you may be in a control battle and not be aware of it. Or, even though there is no control battle, your teen may be struggling and would benefit from professional help.

If you answered B to 3 or more questions in Section One and also answered B to any questions in Section Two, you may be in a control battle that is having a noticeable impact on your teen's development.

The good news is that ending your control battle can resolve these issues. With a clear understanding of the control battle phenomenon, applied skills, and a little perseverance, it can be done.

For Teens Only

Teens, thanks for reading this chapter that I wrote for you. I've written this book on the subject of parent-teen control battles to help your parents have a better relationship with you. But parents can only manage *their* side of the relationship. *You* manage *your* side of the relationship. I want to acknowledge that you have a lot of power and influence over how things go between you and your parent(s). And I wrote this chapter to help you think about how your power actually works with them, and how to use it most effectively.

If you're like most teens, what you want is more independence and control over your life. You'd like to be able to hang out with your friends and go do stuff without having to get permission, or without getting into a struggle with your parents about every single detail. "Who's going? Where will you be? What time will you be home? What will you be doing there? Is your homework done? Is your room clean? When are you going to mow the lawn?"

I'm sure you would like a lot of yes answers when you ask permission to do the things you want to do. What you don't want is a lot of no's or to be told what you have to do every minute of the day.

To many of you it seems like your parents enjoy criticizing everything you do, and finding things for you to do that you don't want to do! Often they take away privileges and it makes no sense to you. "Hey, like grounding me is going to make me do my homework!" you say. "It's just going to make me miserable and less motivated to do my homework." Or, "Taking away the TV isn't going to help me do my homework; TV helps keep me calm so I can *do* my homework."

I know that it seems rather hopeless, as if your parents never back off and approve of your friends, your activities, or your choices. Adding to your frustration, it may seem like other kids get plenty of freedom. They're able to do pretty much what they want without all the parental hassles *you* have to put up with.

Why Do My Parents Act This Way?

So amid all this confusion and injustice, please allow me to shine some light on your parents' behavior and offer you a way out of this jungle of frustration and futility. For starters, you are now grown up enough to realize and accept the reality that your parents aren't perfect. They make plenty of mistakes in their own lives, and they make plenty of mistakes in parenting you. There are times when they are unfair and unreasonable. There are other times when they are too trusting and too generous. And of course there are those times when they are there for you, like only a parent would be. So let's agree that they are imperfect by being wrong in both directions, and sometimes, once in awhile—admit it now—they can even be right. You might believe that they are too generous and trusting way less often than they are unfair and unreasonable, and you might have a point. But even so, I think if you read on, we can begin to fix that.

In spite of your parents' imperfections, they *are* well intentioned and have a lot to offer. After all, they didn't buy this book to find new ways to torture you. They bought it to help them better understand things and to create a healthier relationship with you. Your parents love you and want only for you to be happy and successful in your life. When they give you something to do, it is because they believe that it is in your best interest to manage that responsibility or to learn to manage responsibility in general.

You may be wondering why, with all your parents' so-called good intentions, they are so often angry and negative toward you, why they seem to pick on you, and why they are so restrictive. As I have explained to your parents in the earlier chapters of this book, parents and kids often find themselves engaged in what I call a *Control Battle*.

You know what I mean; parents are always trying to get their kids to do things that the kids don't want to do, such as homework, chores, and things like that—and kids are always trying to avoid or delay doing those things! And parents are always trying to get their kids *not* to do things that their kids want to do, such as party, play video games for a long time, or just hang out; and of course, the kids keep trying to do those very things. After a while it becomes so entirely predictable that it could be played out on a sitcom.

Say your parents are trying to get you to do some chores, and you say, "Okay, later." They say "No, right *now*." You ask, "What's the difference if it gets done now or later?" They tell you to stop arguing. You reply: "Hey, I'm just asking!" They walk away pissed, and you figure it's okay to do the chores later, but then you forget. They get even *more* pissed at you, and you ask, "Why are you so pissed? I *meant* to do it—I just forgot."

Are We Stuck in a Control Battle?

The same kind of discussion takes place regarding homework, going out and doing stuff, having the car, or just about anything. That is a Control Battle. When parents and kids are in a control battle, they get mostly negatives from each other. They both anticipate negatives and defend themselves with negatives, and that's the problem. The whole relationship has become negative and nobody knows how to get out of it. Parents may try to be positive and trusting, but as soon as their kid does something wrong, they become frustrated and go back to being negative. Kids, too, might try to be more positive and cooperative, but as soon as they feel their parents coming down on them, they go back to being uncooperative and negative as well.

Being stuck in this control battle can lead to a sense of hopelessness that anything will ever change, and some kids become resigned to having a negative relationship with their parents and a certain level of personal unhappiness. They can also become negative toward life in general and give up on the idea of creating a happy, successful life for themselves. That's truly a tragedy, but unfortunately it happens every day. For you, it must be avoided at all costs. Instead, I hope you will come to feel optimistic and fully empowered to create the life of your dreams. I also hope that this will lead to you more fully enjoying being the teenager you are now.

How Do I End the Control Battle?

So, my friends, there is a way to end this ongoing battle with your parents and to get more of what you want as well. It's not necessarily an easy task, but it's not as hard as you might think. The hard part is sustaining

the effort, even when it seems that it's not working. But I've seen dramatic turnarounds in relatively short periods of time. In a matter of days, in many cases, and within a few weeks in most cases, major improvements can be made.

Here is a secret you need to know about your parents: Everything you say and do is noticed and evaluated by them, and it influences what they allow and don't allow you to do. Every time you miss a responsibility or display a negative attitude, their opinion of your maturity level goes down. Every time you manage a responsibility and display a positive and respectful attitude, their evaluation of your maturity level goes up. The higher their opinion of your maturity level is, the more privileges and independence they will support. The lower their opinion of your maturity level is, the fewer privileges and the less independence they will support.

The Mature-O-Meter

Picture a round dial right in the middle of your parents' foreheads. As their view of your maturity goes up, the dial moves clockwise to the right. As their view of your maturity goes down, the dial moves counterclockwise to the left. This may sound corny, but it's pretty close to what is really going on, so picturing it can help you see what's truly happening. As you turn the dial to the left, they see you as immature, unable to manage privileges and independence. Their trust in you goes down. When you fight and argue to get a privilege, the dial moves left, and ironically, you are less likely to get that privilege. When you accept a limit, or work with them on their rules, the dial goes the other way, and you are more likely to get the privileges you want.

So here's the deal. You can't control your parents any more than they can control you. But you can strongly influence the way they see you. You can move the dial to the right, and that will have a strong positive impact on them and their actions. How they see you will have a strong positive impact on the privileges you get and the level of independence they support.

Here are some equations for you to think about:

Attitude + Responsibilities = Trust (the right side of the mature-o-meter)

Trust + Age = Privileges

To live in this world, there are things we must have and things we must do. And then there are things we want to have and want to do. Privileges are those things in the "want to have" and "want to do" categories. For example, we *must* work, and we *want* to play. As adults, we generally have figured out that we work first, play second. Another example: First we spend our money on what we *have to* spend it on: rent, food, socks, and so on. Then we can spend what's left on what we would *enjoy*—movies, music, treats. It's the same with time. First we spend our time on what has to get done, and then we spend the time we have left on what we would like to do.

This may seem obvious, and I don't mean to insult your intelligence by saying it. But it's a huge deal. In many ways it's the whole deal. If your parents know that you understand, accept, and work within that basic understanding, they don't have to manage you, because *you* manage you. And if they don't have to force you to take care of your responsibilities because they know that you are all over it, then they are going to be a lot less restrictive on your *want-to-do* list. Get it? And they are going to be less restrictive on your *want-to-have* list, too. Why? Because they trust that having a new cool thing such as a video game or smart phone won't be

a distraction, or put them in a position of struggling with you to put it away when it's time for you to manage your have-to-do list. Also, they will want to be more generous because they will see you as having earned the opportunity to get that new thing you've been wanting.

The Benefits of a Good Attitude

You may be asking, "So if I'm taking care of my responsibilities, what's the big deal with having a good attitude? Do I have to go around with a smile on my face all the time, kissing my parents' butts?" I can understand this point of view, and I would never want to encourage you to act phony. And yet, there are two important reasons for having a good attitude.

First, having a good attitude reflects a person's respect for and accountability to authority. Showing respect for authority and being respectful of others in general is a very important life skill. As you move into adulthood, who you are accountable to will change, but the fact that you will continue to have authority figures in your life will not change. Right now, teachers and parents are the primary authority figures to whom you are accountable. It is their job to have rules and standards that they enforce. You might not like their rules, or you may feel that their enforcement of those rules and standards is unfair or prejudiced, but their role is their job. Your role and job are to deal with them respectfully and abide by their rules and standards. At some point later in life you may have the same or similar positions of authority, and you will expect others to treat you with respect as well. You may have some roles of authority right now, such as being captain of a team, providing childcare for younger children, or being an employee in a job where you need to set limits with customers or other employees, and you need others to respect you in that role.

Second, a positive attitude demonstrates emotional maturity. It shows that you have the ability to manage your feelings in a positive way, and that you are not controlled and turned into a negative person by your negative feelings. We all have feelings of frustration, disappointment, hurt, and anger. Mature individuals are able to deal with their feelings in the best way possible. Less mature people are more easily overwhelmed by their negative feelings and are much more likely to act negatively and show their feelings in negative ways. None of us deal with our negative feelings in a mature way all the time. We all get overwhelmed and can become enraged, sarcastic, or withdrawn, but this kind of response should be the exception and not the rule. And of course we never want to physically hurt or emotionally frighten anyone with our anger. Not only is that wrong, but it can get us into big trouble. We'll end up not only with the problem that made us so mad in the first place, but also with new problems because we let out our anger inappropriately! We need to be able to talk about our feelings, concerns, and issues and maintain a healthy, respectful tone while we do.

So in many ways having a positive attitude is at least as important as being able to manage your responsibilities. None of us manages our responsibilities perfectly, and trying to be perfect will only make us crazy. But if you consistently demonstrate a positive attitude, your parents will begin to trust that you will try to make any adjustments that they request. They will know that your intentions are positive and that any responsibility issues that come up will be solved without a hassle. They will know that you respect and hold yourself accountable to their authority, and that you demonstrate maturity in the way you manage your feelings.

How we manage responsibilities and the privileges we earn are different at different stages in your teen years. Ages twelve, thirteen, and fourteen are the early teen years, when kids take the first steps in moving away from parent and family activities and parents' control over their time, to more personal choices and

control over their own time. During these years, kids become more interested in their relationships with their friends and less interested in their family relationships, and they also want greater privacy. These changes in behavior are the effect of enormous changes taking place physically, hormonally, and even neurologically as the brain goes through dramatic changes. In fact, one of the changes in the teen brain is the development of the ability for abstract thinking. That's why I'm sharing these ideas with you. A child's brain isn't ready to understand them, but an adolescent's brain is.

Ages sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen are what I call the early young adult years, and the focus of this stage is on the future. Teens in this age group are more motivated by the desire to prepare for what is coming next in life. Whereas in early adolescence kids are working hard at establishing their individuality from their families, older adolescents have accomplished much of that already and are now facing the inevitability of life after high school.

You may have noticed I've left out the fifteen-year-olds. That's because they generally are not really "young adolescents" anymore, but they're not exactly "young adults" yet either—they're right in the middle. So let's just say that fifteen-year-olds are a little bit of each: half early adolescent and half older adolescent. This can be a frustrating age for both kids and their parents because of that. These kids often want more older-adolescent privileges than they are truly ready for. They see the privileges their sixteen- and seventeen-year-old friends have and want those too. So if you're fifteen, be patient. Your time will come.

Let's look at the bigger picture here. Adolescence is all about the transition from childhood to adulthood, from being totally dependent on one's family for physical, emotional, social, and financial support to becoming independent in all these areas. We hope to continue sharing love and support with our families throughout our lives, and as we move through adolescence, we are developing the skills that we will need to be happy and successful adults.

The skills we learn in early adolescence prepare us for early young adulthood. And the skills we learn in early young adulthood prepare us for young adulthood, and so on. So your parents' emphasis on fulfilling your responsibilities is not just a way to torture you, it is actually their way of helping you get ready for adulthood. The more smoothly and successfully you and your parents navigate through your early adolescence, the more prepared you will be for the next stages of middle adolescence and then older adolescence.

As a young adolescent, the more you embrace your responsibilities and cultivate a positive attitude, the more independence you will achieve and the more prepared for older adolescence you will be. And as an older adolescent, the more you embrace your responsibilities and maintain a positive attitude, the more prepared you will be for young adulthood.

Managing Responsibilities

Let's take a closer look at the responsibilities that will lead to the independence and privileges you want, dividing responsibilities into school, home, and social life.

School Responsibilities

- getting up in the morning, getting your things together, being ready to go, and getting to school on time;

- getting to all of your classes on time;
- paying attention and participating in class; and
- reading, studying, doing your homework, completing projects to the very best of your ability, and turning them in on time.

These are basic responsibilities, and yet they're not always easy to manage. Some kids have an easier time of it than others. There are big differences in natural ability, and that's another reason that a positive attitude is as important as the management of the responsibilities themselves. If you have trouble with these responsibilities but you're keeping a positive attitude, trying your best, and asking for and accepting help, it's all good. If, on the other hand, you have difficulties with these responsibilities and you resist help or simply give up on them, you will be inviting a battle, and we've already talked about where *that* will get you.

So if you're managing all these responsibilities pretty well, with varying amounts of support, you'll be staying out of the control battle and moving forward in a healthy way. Your parents will offer you more choices about your life, your schedule, and your priorities, because they will see that you have personal ownership of your responsibilities.

Home Responsibilities

Home responsibilities include

- self-care, such as brushing your teeth, showering, and keeping clean;
- remembering and taking the time to eat a healthy breakfast;
- making healthy food choices in general;
- picking up after yourself; not leaving your jacket, books, plates, food, and empty drink glasses all over the house;
- Following the house rules for using things, and putting them back when you're finished;
- taking care of your belongings, such as your bike, car, surfboard, and skateboard;
- keeping your room organized and picked up;
- being home on time; and
- doing your chores as assigned, such as setting the table, emptying the dishwasher, sorting the laundry, sweeping, vacuuming, mowing the lawn, weeding, and caring for and cleaning up after the pets.

Once again, managing these responsibilities is easier for some than for others. Some people are just born with better organizational skills, but if you keep a positive attitude and accept that these are in fact your responsibilities, you will avoid the dreaded control battle and your parents will view you in a positive way. And when you are viewed in a positive way, trust and privileges will naturally follow.

Every time you don't put something away, for instance, your parents think you are saying, "I'm not ready to take responsibility for myself. You have to follow me around and pick up after me." When it comes to allowing privileges, they see you as someone who can't take care of him- or herself.

Think about it. You really do have to take care of your responsibilities—and you probably intended to take care of them anyway. The question is: are you going to do what you're supposed to do only after you avoid it for a while, and get into a struggle with your parents—or will you simply take care of it? If you do your chores with the fight-and-delay approach, yes, you will have done them, but you will be dialing your parent's maturity-o-meter to the left. If, on the other hand, you take care of them on your own, or even when first asked or are reminded to do them, you are moving the dial to the right, and that is an investment in your own privileges and independence.

Just to be clear, negative attitude statements include things like this:

"Why me? I always do it!"

"I'll do it later."

"Why now? I'm busy."

"I'm in the middle of my show."

Positive attitude statements sound like this:

"Sure, Mom. No problem."

"Thanks for reminding me. Be right there."

But what if you're in the middle of a show or a video game when your mom or dad asks you to do something? Well, you can actually communicate some of those things listed above in the negative attitude examples, *if* you word your communications positively and use a positive tone of voice. And you *can* negotiate with your parents: "I'll take care of that now," you might say, "but I'm tired of doing that chore. Is there any way I could trade it for something else?" Or: "Sure, I'll get that done, but could I do it in a half hour? If it's okay with you, I'd like to finish what I'm doing right now, before I do my chores and homework." The power of a positive attitude is much more amazing than you might imagine.

Here's what's going on. Believe it or not, one of the things that your parents like to do *least* is to tell you what to do. Very often they anticipate getting a negative response, so they may feel it as a knot in their stomach, or as just plain stress. There are already a lot of stressful things in their lives, such as work, home responsibilities, paying bills, having enough money to get by, or concerns about extended family members or friends. So if they anticipate a stressful interaction with you, or actually experience one, it can make them feel even worse. On the other hand, if they experience you as cooperative, bringing positive energy to the family, it can be a powerful plus for them—like a wonderful gift you've given them. And that is a great thing. It is important for you to know that you matter a ton to your parents, and when you bring your positive self to them, it's a huge boost to their feelings, just as when you use a negative tone, it's a huge stress to them.

I know you're a good person and in general would like to make others feel good, and that is a reward in itself. But from a self-interested point of view (and looking after your own interests is a good thing!), when you bring that positive energy to your parents, and you move the dial on the mature-o-meter to the right, you are maximizing the privileges and the independence you will receive.

Social Responsibilities

Okay, so let's say you're doing pretty well; you have friends, and you have been granted the privilege to spend time with them. How you handle yourself socially is another big deal that affects how much your parents trust your judgment and the privileges they will support or not. I'll call this third category your *social responsibilities*. This is a very important area, because what you probably want most is the opportunity to do things with your friends, and in order for your parents to feel comfortable supporting that, they need to know that you have a good handle on your social responsibilities.

Social responsibilities include the following:

- Having positive activities that you like to do with your friends. Everyone likes to just hang out without any particular agenda sometimes, but if that's all you do, there will be a lot of missed opportunities for doing positive things and a lot of opportunity for doing negative things. So it helps to get involved in playing sports and other physical activities, music, art, building something, helping each other or each other's family with something, cooking, school projects, or games.
- Joining some formal school activity. This can include anything from sports, performing arts, leadership, a club, or the student newspaper. This is important because it can take you out of your comfort zone and put you in a position where you have to stretch yourself to connect and make friends with people you might not otherwise take the time to connect with. Such activities help develop skills we need in adulthood for forming positive connections in work and other social environments, and they look great on a work or college resume, too.
- Avoiding ongoing dramatic problems with friends. This means you aren't constantly fighting with someone, and that the friends you are choosing are healthy for you.
- Not bullying others, and if you are being bullied, taking steps to speak up, stay away, or get help.
- Being able to make healthy choices even when others around you are not, and not getting into trouble together.
- Not doing stupid stuff.

Stupid stuff—you know what I mean. And this may seem pretty obvious, so why am I bringing it up? Well, if I can help even one kid avoid the painful consequences of doing something stupid, I'll feel good about it. What I want you to know is that stupid stuff can turn into *really* stupid stuff with profoundly negative consequences for you and for others very easily and quickly. As a therapist who works with families and adolescents, I sometimes get referrals from the attorneys representing kids who are in legal trouble. If you have never been

arrested or expelled from school, good! Keep it that way. It is an extremely unpleasant experience. Often the kids who are referred to me by an attorney have been having behavioral difficulties for some time, and things have finally caught up with them. My goal is to help them change direction before their situation gets any worse. But very often, the kids referred to me by an attorney have been going along quite nicely in life. They manage their responsibilities pretty well and generally have positive attitudes. But one time they let their impulsivity get the best of them and they do something really dumb that has profound consequences. Often these really dumb things involve alcohol and groups of kids. Here are some examples:

Example 1:

“Sean has some pot, let’s go to his house.”

“He’s away with his parents.”

“I know where he keeps it in his room and where they keep the spare key. He wouldn’t mind if we take a little.”

“Cool, let’s do it.”

When they get inside, one of the kids takes an expensive camera and a rifle when the others are getting the pot.

“Why’d you take that?”

“I know where we can get a lot of money for it.”

Result: All involved are caught and charged with felony burglary with penalty enhancement because of the firearm.

Example 2:

Someone texts you a picture of a naked classmate. Campus security comes to you, confiscates your phone, and you are charged with felony possession of child pornography.

Example 3:

A classmate takes a picture of your friend doing something he’s not supposed to do. You drive your friend over to the kid’s house to get the picture off his phone, and they get into a fight; the kid gets injured and you and your friend are charged with felony assault causing great bodily harm and conspiracy to commit felony assault.

Example 4:

A friend at school says he’s going to have his backpack searched and asks you to hold his marijuana pipe, a scale, and a small amount of pot until after school. You don’t smoke pot, but you want to help your friend out, so you go along with it. The assistant principal takes your backpack, and you are suddenly facing expulsion and felony criminal intent to sell marijuana in a school.

So the moral of the story is, when you do stupid stuff, it can easily turn into *really* stupid stuff with life-changing consequences. Each of the above examples will take months or years to resolve and thousands of dollars in fines, attorney fees, victim restitution, and more. The kids involved will all live very restricted lives for long periods of time while these situations are resolved. And the resolution can include expulsion from school, a felony record, and extended probation that can last past the age of eighteen.

Really stupid stuff aside, your parents do need to feel confident in your social skills, and that doesn't mean popularity or having a lot of friends. It means being a well-balanced person with interests, goals, and the ability to handle yourself well in unsupervised situations.

Starving the Beast

So I hope at this point you have a good understanding of the control battle and how you can avoid it. Before you leave me, I'd like to share one more idea about the parent-teen control battle that I shared with your parents. When parent-teen control battles become entrenched in a family, they can be extremely difficult to get rid of. They seem to take on a life of their own, separate from the intentions of the parents or of the kids. So when I see a chronic control battle taking place between parents and kids in my office, I actually visualize the control battle as a living, breathing entity. I see it as a creature, something ugly and menacing like Jabba the Hutt from Star Wars. This creature lives off of our negativity, our hurt, our fears, our frustration, and our anger. When we operate within the control battle, we are feeding the Beast. The more we feed it, the bigger it bloats up, and the fiend just gets more and more powerful. However, when we operate *outside* of the control battle, the Beast starves; it then loses its power, weakens, and dies a natural death.

Our job is to starve the Beast, to starve the Control Battle.

When you're fighting with your parents, it's easy to think of them as the enemy. But they're not—the Control Battle Beast is the true enemy. You and your parents share the same goals, which are for you to grow up to be a happy, successful adult, and for all of you to enjoy life as you grow through your teen years. The Beast, on the other hand, just wants to create havoc and mess with you and your parents. And since we can't fight what we can't see, by visualizing this creature we can see what we're up against, and we gain the opportunity to wage an effective fight against it, render it powerless, and get it out of our lives.

Thanks for taking the time to read this chapter. I hope it was informative and helpful.

Should I Consider Counseling?

Counseling can be a vital component in the journey to end your Control Battle and to help your teen and family get back on a healthy path. If your best efforts to end the Control Battle prove to be insufficient or your teen continues to show symptoms or behaviors that concern you, then you should absolutely seek counseling.

How Do I Find the Right Therapist?

Counseling can and must be an empowering process and a positive experience for your family. You and your teen should feel respected and supported—as well as challenged—as you are guided to a healthy new destination. Counseling is *not* a be-all, end-all solution. It is support to help you and your teenager identify and understand the behaviors that maintain the Control Battle and offer the tools and coaching you'll need to end it.

When looking for a therapist, it's best not to ask, "Who is good with teens?" There are lots of therapists who relate well with teens, but they may not be effective at helping families end their control battles. Instead ask, "Who is effective in helping families with teens?"

What Should I Expect from Counseling?

Counseling should include at least the parents and the teen, and perhaps other members of the family as well. Remember, problems always exist within the family context, so if the family as a whole is not being treated in addition to the teen as an individual, the therapist is missing a critical leverage point and may be disempowering or undermining the role of the parents. The therapist will be ignoring the presence of the Beast, and we know that as long as the Beast lives, nothing changes.

Some therapists will be comfortable meeting with an adolescent individually as well as with the parents and the whole family. Some, however, prefer to have one counselor for the parents and the family as a whole and a different counselor for the teen. Your family situation might be better suited to one approach or the other.

An initial assessment should begin with a joint parent and teen session followed shortly thereafter by an individual assessment session with the teen, after which a treatment plan can be developed. In some cases the parents will need to share information with the therapist that is not appropriate for the teenager to hear, yet most of the time parents should share their thoughts and concerns openly with the therapist and their teenager. Depending on the therapist's assessment, the treatment plan can include a combination of sessions with the family, the parents only, and the teen only.

Which Type of Therapy Professional Should I Seek Out?

There are several kinds of mental health professionals to consider. Psychiatrists are physicians (MDs or DOs—doctors of osteopathy) with a specialization in mental health and psychiatric disorders. Psychiatrists are the only mental health professionals who prescribe medication. Some psychiatrists prefer to only prescribe and monitor medication, whereas others provide psychotherapy as well.

Clinical psychologists are doctoral level psychotherapists who are trained in psychological testing as well as treatment. Clinical psychologists with PhD degrees have an educational background with an emphasis on research, whereas those with PsyD degrees were trained in programs having less of an emphasis on research and more of an emphasis on clinical practice.

Clinical social workers are psychotherapists with an MSW (masters of social work) degree. Their educational background emphasizes understanding the social, economic, and cultural issues that affect human behavior, as well as psychotherapy theory and practice. Clinical social workers who are licensed usually have the letters LCSW after their name, but the designation differs in some states.

LMFTs, or licensed marriage and family therapists, have masters degrees from an accredited counseling psychology or related program and have gone on to meet licensing requirements.

All these options can be rather confusing, but let's make it simple. First look for a licensed therapist with any of these degrees who has an excellent reputation in your community for helping families with teenagers. Then, if medication or psychological testing is indicated, the therapist can provide referrals and coordinate those services.