

Tim's Top Ten Tips for Teaching Teen Testosterone

"I used to enjoy homeschooling my son, but when he turned 13 I suddenly felt like we were in a tug-of-war," a mother recently confided to me. I've heard similar comments from other parents when their boys hit the teen years.

Sometimes the change happens a little earlier or a little later, but it will come for all boys. God has designed the male such that when the testosterone begins to course through his veins, his rooster feathers pop up and he seems to communicate in subtle ways, "I am a man. I don't have to do what a woman tells me." While it is true that he will one day need to be able to stand on his own feet and take the leadership with his family, he must also learn how to respond to authority and treat the opposite sex with love, respect, and chivalry. The hormonal changes in their sisters are better anticipated and understood by homeschooling moms, but there are some predictable behaviors in junior high boys that make homeschooling more challenging. I have been a teacher and principal in Christian schools for the past 25 years and have been conducting homeschool evaluations for almost 20 years. I trust some of these observations and suggestions may be of help to you.

When boys enter about 7th grade they lose their brain. They may have been good students, diligent, interested in learning – until they turn 13. Then the "brain fairy" comes and steals away their brain one night, slowly returning parts of it over the next few years. That's just my theory, but it explains a lot!

Methods that worked great for the first six years of homeschooling suddenly seem to hit a brick wall. The desire for independence, interaction with other teens, and physical outlet rises to the forefront. It is important to recognize these as normal and not get frustrated. Explore new strategies to deal with the new "man" in the house. Here are some of my "top ten tips for teaching teen testosterone."

1. Get dad involved. Dad, can I talk to you for a minute? You may have had it easy up until now. Your wife has been able to do all the homeschooling and your role has been mainly paying for it and listening to her describe her plans for the upcoming week. But you must take the reins with your son. He needs to learn from you that he must submit to mom as teacher – and you as principal. Your wife needs the security of knowing that you'll back her in dealing with discipline, motivation, and accountability – as soon as it's needed, not when she's maxed out her frustration level. Work out a discipline plan with your wife – and son – and then keep the communication channels open in both directions. You understand your wife better than your son does, and

you understand your son at this point better than your wife does (he is probably a LOT like you were at this age) – so you are needed as a go-between and interpreter.

Mom, I'm serious that you must get your husband's involvement if you are to have success with your junior high son. Your son WILL respond to Dad. If he knows something is important to Dad, it will become very important to him. Trust me on this one!

2. Get him involved in outside activities. He needs to burn off that testosterone daily with active sports, hard work, or manual labor chores. I've seen remarkable turn-arounds in teen boys who were previously unmotivated, apathetic, and under-achieving as soon as they got onto a community soccer team, or took on a part-time physical job, or began helping dad with a major home or yard renovation project. He needs an outdoor break every hour or so to unleash his energy. A ten-minute bike ride or basketball shoot-out can really help!

3. Set objective standards and hold him accountable. One of my favorite maxims for teachers and parents is, "Kids don't do what we expect – only what we INSPECT." This is especially true for boys. If they think mom won't really check their work, it will get progressively worse or not even get done. This is another arena where getting Dad involved on a regular basis for accountability can be very helpful. Set a regular time for a parent conference with Dad – at least quarterly.

4. One of the best techniques for helping teen boys take their school work seriously is to **have them be accountable to someone outside the family.** Enroll him in a co-op class for writing skills. Hire a math tutor. Take a class at the local community college. Watch him rise to the challenge of meeting the expectations of an objective third party teacher. This frees up mom to be "mom" again – encouraging, helping with homework assignments, and not being the heavyweight. This has been the biggest help to quite a number of 15 year old boys – getting them enrolled in co-op classes. In some cases, it might even be worth considering enrolling Junior in a school full time. (Don't take offense at that – I'm not recommending that for every teen boy. But for some families that may be a solution worth pursuing. You have not failed, mom, if you delegate the teaching

to someone else. You want to do what is ultimately best for your son.)

5. Praise your son where he deserves it. Particularly look for growth in character, maturity, humility, serving others (siblings?), and initiative. Express it to him without going overboard and being too gushy. Brag on him to Dad at supper and to others when he is within earshot. Find a way to use the magic phrase, “You really earned my respect when you . . . “ Then watch the look in his eye!

6. Use contracts to get through the most challenging motivation issues. Maybe it’s getting that 10-page research paper written. Or reading that thick classic that you’ve picked out for him. Get Dad to act as the negotiator and work out the deadlines and minimum acceptable standard. Spell out all the expectations as clearly as possible. Get your son’s input as you want him to take ownership of this agreement. Then come up with rewards and consequences that are meaningful to your son. Don’t leave the table until it’s typed up, signed by everyone (I’m serious), and posted near his work area. No need to nag or harass now, just an off-handed reminder about the contract once in a while is sufficient. Again, here’s where Dad checking in periodically and holding him accountable is extremely valuable. Don’t let the deadlines pass unnoticed or the rewards or consequences go unfulfilled. Stick to your end of the contract, too!

7. Incorporate competition if possible. If you know of another teen doing the same curriculum or course, find a way to build in some healthy competition and rivalry! Boys need to “conquer” and feel a sense of accomplishment for meeting a goal. This is why I believe tests and objective ways of determining grades can be a helpful motivator for boys. Though I understand and accept a parent’s argument that grades are not “necessary” for homeschoolers, I would argue that for teen boys they help him gauge his achievement. And who says getting a driver’s permit or license or part-time job is a “right” or a “rite of passage”? It is a responsibility and privilege earned by boys who have demonstrated character, responsibility, and hard work. Trust me that you have a valuable motivational tool in your hands for helping your teen son meet your expectations for his school work! Don’t squander it. Turn it into a contract if you need to, but don’t make the standard something vague like “do better in your math” – spell it out. “Bring your math test average up from 80% to 90% on the next 6 tests and complete all your math assignments the night they are assigned and you may apply for your driver’s permit” is more achievable and measurable.

8. Consider using a self-paced curriculum for a few courses if not all of them. It can be frustrating to teen boys to have their school work put on the back burner while mom works with the younger siblings and then when he’s really ready to be outside doing something – anything – he has to focus on school work. Some moms have so much fun teaching their favorite subject that there seems to be no end in sight for Johnny finishing his work. Mom always has more she wants him to do. Ask any man which he would rather have – an achievable “punch-list” from his wife for Saturday morning or a growing and unending “Honey-Do” list that slowly eats up the entire weekend? A self-paced curriculum may not cover everything you would include if you were teaching it, but it will cover the basics well, will be achievable, and will allow your son to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It might even motivate him to work hard and finish early! Accelerated Christian Education PACES, Alpha Omega LIFE PACS, and Switched on Schoolhouse are a few options to look at, as well as video courses from Bob Jones Press and A Beka.

9. Teach them to set their own goals and objectives. The more they feel like they are in charge and determining their work load, the more motivated they become. A Saxon math book or Exploring Creation science textbook can be easily broken up for the year, then each chapter divided into daily assignments. Why should Mom have to spoon-feed those assignments to Johnny day by day or week by week? If he helps in that process, he’ll take more ownership of it and be motivated to accomplish it.

10. Look for individual strengths and interests in each son and customize a curriculum that will meet his needs. That is one of the great benefits of homeschooling, especially today when there are so many choices and options. Don’t feel you have to use the same science book or math curriculum with your second son that another son or daughter used. Just because you have all the tests and scoring materials, don’t make that the only determining factor in choosing what curriculum to use. Explore options, network with other homeschool parents, and ask your evaluator for input. Find some electives and extracurricular experiences that are along your son’s line of interest and possible future vocation and it will help keep him motivated and learning.

I trust that these tips will be of help to you in turning your son’s testosterone into a tool for learning, not a deterrent to your teaching!

Timothy Anger, M.S. has been a Christian high school teacher and principal for over 25 years and does evaluations for homeschoolers in the Lehigh Valley, PA. He can be reached at www.lveval.org