

LIFE SKILLS

A Parent's Guide to
REJECTION

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Rejection is like breathing—an unavoidable, important part of life. Our job as parents is to help teens manage it and use it as a springboard to success.

—Harlan Cohen,
founder of the International Risk-Taking Project

A Parent's Guide to **REJECTION**

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What is rejection?

“Good for you, you look happy and healthy
Not me, if you ever cared to ask.
Good for you, you’re doing great out there without me
Baby, like a **** sociopath.”

- good 4 u, Olivia Rodrigo

It happens all the time. A clique closes ranks. A crush asks to stay “just friends.” A college sends a letter beginning with “We regret to inform you...”. If there’s any question how teens feel about it, Olivia Rodrigo’s sarcastic hit good 4 u is a good example. Rejection is a part of life, one that most adults face fairly frequently, even if we don’t notice it. For a teen, though, rejection may be a new experience, one that brings with it feelings of confusion, anger, self-doubt, and sadness. Kate Hurley, LCSW says, “It feels like the opposite of being accepted, valued, and appreciated. In the minds of teens, rejection feels life-altering.” Any experience in which your teen feels unwanted by a person or group is an experience of rejection.

Common types of teenage rejection include:

- Change in a social circle
- A negative response from a crush
- Not getting into the college of their choice
- Bullying or ostracization
- Not getting onto a sports team

The high school years are especially rife with opportunities for rejection. Even something as seemingly small as getting a negative comment from a teacher on a school paper can feel huge if it hasn’t happened before. It is essential that parents understand that rejection is something teens don’t necessarily know how to deal with yet, and that we are the first resource our children have in learning how to process it.

Why does rejection hurt?

The question may seem obvious, but it’s important to understand what your teen is feeling when they experience rejection. Rejection comes with feelings of confusion, loneliness, and shame. Rejection makes teens feel unwanted, and those feelings can easily and quickly turn to self-judgment. Learning, for example, that they didn’t get a part in the school play can lead to a teen developing thought patterns like “I’m not worth getting the part” or “There’s something wrong with me that I didn’t get in.” These thought patterns set the stage for future assumptions that rejection is based on the teen’s adequacy or value as a person rather than the reality that rejection is inevitable and normal.

Rejection can even alter our biochemistry. According to a study done by The University of British Columbia, there is a connection between teenage rejection and inflammation leading to heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

“Researchers at the University of British Columbia and other partner institutions recently explored the effects of teen rejection on inflammation – a physiological process known to contribute to a host of problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. In the study, the researchers followed 147 adolescent women for 2 ½ years by meeting with them every 6 months for an interview and a blood test...Interestingly, the researchers found that in general, when adolescents suffered a targeted rejection, their blood contained more inflammatory biomarkers. The elevated biomarker levels were even more pronounced among adolescents that had perceived themselves as being of high social status. In other words, targeted rejection seemed to hit teens even harder when they viewed themselves as popular.” (Mentalhelp.com)

These physiological and psychological effects on teens can be long-lasting if the rejection is not adequately addressed. This can lead to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem later in life, and create habits of thought that are very hard to break.

What does culture say about rejection?

Though it may not be immediately obvious, culture has a lot to say about rejection. Whether it be an angry breakup song or a movie or TV show in which the main character just isn't cool enough to hang out with the popular kids, the message given is that rejection deserves anger, and the rejected party should try and prove that they're better than those who rejected them in the first place. Take, for example, the early 2000s romantic comedy *13 Going On 30*. In the beginning of the film, the protagonist, thirteen year old Jenna Rink, is tricked and bullied by the popular group of girls at school. Once she is magically turned into a successful thirty year old, however, she gets her revenge on the most popular girl by exposing her for being a liar and cheater. The audience wants to cheer for Jenna, and indeed there is much to cheer for. Jenna “wins” by being a good person; despite that, the movie goes out of its way to show that Jenna's enemies must have their downfall in order for Jenna's success to be legitimated. There must be a hero and a villain.

The message teens get from this kind of structure is subtly dangerous. It teaches teens to vilify those who rejected them, an instinct that may already be tempting to most parents. The easiest way, it seems, to protect our children from the sting of rejection is to cast them as the hero and those who rejected them as the villain. Phrases like “it's their loss” or “they don't know what they're missing”, true as they might feel, encourage teens to see themselves as the tragically wronged main character of their life. This mindset doesn't help teens move through rejection; it teaches them to dwell in it. More importantly, it stifles a teen's ability to learn from the rejection. Maybe they need to practice more before they're good enough to get onto the sports team, or perhaps they came on too strong when they asked that cute girl to prom. If they buy into the cultural message that nothing is their fault and that those who rejected them are the “bad guy”, they can't examine their actions and act differently next time they're in the same situation.

On the other hand, groups and their rejection of anyone “different” or “weird” is the focus of much comedic media. Sitcoms like *The Office*, *Parks and Rec*, *Friends*, and *New Girl* all revolve around an “in group” whose hijinks often involve trying to protect the circle of friends from outsiders who pose a threat to their status. The audience is encouraged to cheer for the group's ability to keep out the other. In the popular sitcom *Community*, there is a recurring character named Señor Chang, a Spanish teacher played by Ken Jong. “The study group,” the central circle of characters on the show, repeatedly humiliate and reject Señor Chang, to the point

that an entire season revolves around his attempts to join the group and his “hilarious” rebuffs. Señor Chang is awkward, quirky, and perhaps most significantly, the only Asian character on the show. He embodies the other as far as the structure of the show goes, and his constant rejection teaches that it’s okay to reject someone if they are different enough. Though teens may not realize this is the message they’re receiving, it nonetheless comes through loud and clear: weird is bad, and having a cool group is better than showing kindness to others.

Though these two narratives are very different, they show what culture thinks about rejection. On the one hand, if you’re the one rejected, revenge is the best medicine. On the other hand, if you’re part of the group doing the rejecting, you’re justified and the other person’s feelings don’t matter. Both are dangerous ideas that do nothing to mitigate the issues of cliques or help teens feeling rejected to learn and move on.

What does Scripture say about rejection?

One thing we know about Jesus; he was no stranger to rejection. Before his birth, Isaiah 53:3 prophesied that he would be “despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Over and over again during his life Jesus was turned away not only by strangers, but by his closest friends.

In light of this, it’s easy to focus on those who rejected Jesus. However, more can be learned from Jesus’ behavior when he experienced rejection. Being human, we know Jesus felt the sting of rejection, and we can assume that it influenced how he behaved. Being God, Jesus perfectly responded to those situations, and his behavior sets a pattern we can follow.

- He chose his friends carefully

Scripture makes it clear that while Jesus loved everyone, he only invited twelve people into his inner circle, and among those he was closer to some than others. Jesus chose these people to go with him and be a part of his ministry, which means he had some level of trust for them. Even though they were far from perfect, these men believed Jesus and supported his mission. And, even though they too rejected him before his death, they returned and apologized, and later became apostles of the gospel. What we can learn from this is the importance of who we surround ourselves with. While popularity, wealth, or status may be appealing factors in who teens want as friends, they aren’t the kind of characteristics that make for lasting friendships. Instead, teens should ask themselves questions about what traits make for good friends.

- Will these people support me?
- How do these people’s values line up with mine?
- If I feel hurt by these people, will they be willing to make it right?
- Can I trust these people?
- Why do I want to be friends with these people? Is it because I like them, or because I want them to like me?

- He made choices differently after rejection.

Jesus wasn't reactionary, but he did move on when something wasn't working.

"Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where, then, did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home." And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:54-58).

The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus, and as a result he did not do many miracles and left more quickly than he might have otherwise. What we can learn from this passage is that there's nothing wrong with altering our behavior after rejection. If something isn't working, it's okay to move on to a different group of friends, a new extracurricular activity, or a second-choice college.

- He knew his value.

More importantly than anything else, Scripture shows us that Jesus kept his sense of identity through rejection after rejection. He maintained his relationship with God, and was aware of his goals and what he needed to do regardless of what people thought of him. Even on the cross, the greatest rejection of all, Jesus continues his ministry to the criminal beside him. He cries out to God on the basis of being His son, and fulfills the Scriptures which foretold his actions. He is aware of who he is, and he acts in accordance with that character despite being rejected by those around him. This is essential for teens experiencing rejection. Psychom.org says, "Rejection involves two very important components: what you feel, and what you think." Despite what your teen may feel, it is essential that they don't let those feelings turn into what they think about themselves. "I feel alone" is a very different state of mind from thinking, "I am alone." Your teen's sense of identity is crucial in recovering from rejection. Encourage them to ask questions like:

- Who am I important to and what is their opinion of me?
- What does my life mean to the people around me?
- What do I think of myself?
- What does God think of me?

All of these are good starting points for building self-worth and identity, which will not only help teens recover from rejection, but prepare for it in the future.

- He reached out to the other.

While it's essential to notice how Jesus dealt with being rejected, the Gospel revolves around how he worked against rejection himself. The character of Jesus is defined by his acceptance of those who were rejected by the world. Women, the disabled, the disenfranchised, the other; all of them found themselves acknowledged and seen by Jesus. Though he didn't invite every one of them into his intimate circle of friends, he still practiced infinite kindness and friendship with everyone who wanted to be near him. How did he do this? Through empathy; he knew what rejection felt like. John 15:18 says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."

How can parents help teens face rejection?

Though the instinct for parents may be to shield their children from any and all rejection, the likelihood is that they will face their first rejection in middle or high school regardless of their parents' efforts. Instead of trying to stop your teen from being rejected, a better question is how can parents help their teens cope with rejection and prepare them for next time? There are several important answers to this question.

- Speak truth to your teen
 - Don't villainize those who rejected them
 - Encourage your teen to embrace their identity
 - Encourage them to learn from the rejection
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- Speak truth to your teen.

Teens' first instinct is likely to blame themselves for their rejection. "That college didn't want me because I'm not smart enough" or "Sarah didn't want to go to prom with me because I'm ugly" are thoughts that likely arise out of a desire to explain why they were rejected. It's important to emphasize that rejection doesn't have anything to do with our teens' identity; sometimes it just happens. Even if the reasons are made clear, for example a clique saying the new girl is just "too weird", those reasons don't always hold truth. Teens need to know that they are valued and loved despite—or even because of—their differences.

- Don't villainize those who rejected your teen.

Tempting as it might be to turn the popular girl who called your daughter names into Public Enemy Number One, this doesn't help your teen. Parents.com says,

"Resist the urge to put down the object of your teen's affection...and avoid repeating phrases like "It's his loss," even if you truly believe it is. Rather, focus on the qualities (like her sharp sense of humor) that make your teen a catch as a way to help your teen overcome rejection. Try introducing what [Harlan] Cohen calls the "universal rejection truth," the basic idea that some people will like us and some people won't and that's okay—we just need to focus our energies on the people who appreciate us."

By pouring energy into making the person, group, or institution who rejected our teens the bad guy, we lose the opportunity to walk alongside them in healing. We encourage them to treat the situation with anger and bitterness, and to see others as inherently bad. To return to our Olivia Rodrigo lyrics, teens who are taught to villainize others may end up with the idea that anyone who rejects them is "a **** sociopath."

- Encourage your teen to embrace their identity.

It's easy to feel set adrift in the face of rejection, especially if you've set any part of your identity on the thing or person who rejected you. A young woman who puts a lot of stock in being smart may find herself reeling more than her peers when she doesn't get into her top college choice. A young man who feels he would make a good boyfriend may feel hopeless after being turned down by the girl he likes. What matters more than anything for our teens when they are

rejected is helping them remember who they are.

- Remind them who they are to God (loved, chosen, unique)
- Remind them who they are to you (liked, interesting, important)
- Remind them who they are to themselves (special, full of potential, known)

Our teens' sense of identity comes from these three places. Scriptures like Isaiah 43:1 apply not only to ancient Israel, but to all God's children: "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Reminding your teen that they are loved and chosen by the Creator is the best way to help them put perspective on the reality of rejection. If they can understand that their value is determined by God, not by the people around them, then they won't be as devastated by the loss of things they hoped for.

It's also essential that teens understand how much you care about them. As much as they may brush off your affection following a bad breakup or a college rejection letter, it matters to them that you know their value and are able to communicate it to them. Remind them how much they are loved and appreciated; and be specific. Tell them how they are needed in their role in the family, and how much their individual traits make you like them, not just love them. If our teens believe they are needed more than they are rejected, then they will bounce back more quickly and be prepared for next time.

Finally, teens' sense of identity is perhaps more than anything a conglomerate of what they think of themselves. This is formed by lots of things; media, family, friends, Scripture, and anything else that regularly surrounds them and attempts to tell them who they are. When teens are rejected, that can deeply inform the image they have of themselves if they don't know how to process their emotions regarding the situation. Middleearthnj.com says, "Encourage your teen to talk to you and name their feelings. For example: "I feel really disappointed that I didn't get chosen for the cheerleading squad. I practiced so hard, and I wanted to be on the team so badly. I feel left out because my friends made it and I didn't." When teens are able to put their feelings into words instead of taking them as facts about themselves and internalizing what the rejection means to them, they are more easily able to grow from the experience. It helps them to remember that the rejection doesn't say anything about their identity, and that they are more than what others say about them. Remind them to think about what they have been told by people they trust and who love them, and to think about what they believe is true about themselves and why.

- Learn from the rejection.

More importantly than anything else, teens need to take rejection as an opportunity to learn and grow. Rejection has the potential to be one of the most formative experiences in a young person's early life, and if they process it well, that formation can be extremely positive. If not, it can negatively affect them for years to come. So the question is, how do we learn from rejection? According to childmind.org, "Failure is an excellent learning experience, albeit an uncomfortable one. It can help us reassess our goals and come up with a new game plan to try again." When our teens experience rejection, it tells them that something about their approach didn't work the first time. Instead of barreling back into the situation without changing anything, encourage your teen to look for any shred of truth in what they've been through. If they didn't make it onto the school football team, maybe they need to train more before they try out again. If they have their heart set on a certain college but didn't get in, maybe taking a gap year and enrolling in general education classes would improve their application. Instead of turning around "try, trying again", ask your teen what they think might help their attempt go

better next time. Sometimes that even means trying something else entirely, like a different college or a new group of friends. Sometimes it means working harder or studying more before reapproaching the problem. No matter what they decide, encourage them to make that decision with hope, and with the knowledge that this rejection has given them resilience and grit. Future rejection doesn't have to be as scary.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a free weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- A Parent's Guide to Failure
- A Parent's Guide to Depression and Anxiety
- A Parent's Guide to (Cyber)Bullying
- Conversation Kit to Bullying
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- [Join Axis](#) to receive all our digital resources and start a new conversation today!

Additional Resources

- "How to Help Teens Cope with Rejection, Including the Dreaded College Rejection Letter" [Psycom.net](#)
- "Rejection and How to Handle It" [Kidshealth.org](#)
- "Teaching Teens How to Handle Rejection" [Middleearthnj.com](#)
- "Teen Rejection Hurts More than the Heart" [Mentalhelp.org](#)
- "How to Help Teens Deal with Rejection" [Parents.com](#)
- "Teach Your Teen These 5 Ways To Overcome Rejection" [Helpyourteennow.com](#)
- "12 Tips for Teaching Your Teenager to Deal with Rejection" [Rescueyouth.com](#)
- "How to Help Your Teen Handle Rejection" [Paradigm-treatment.com](#)
- "Proven Strategies to Help Your Tween Manage Social Rejection" [Verywellfamily.com](#)

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A Parent's Guide to **REJECTION**

Recap

- Rejection is the loss of an opportunity, friendship, or group, and often happens all at once
- Rejection is painful because it can lead to us thinking we're defective
- If we aren't careful, rejection can set us in negative thought patterns
- Culture teaches us that rejection deserves revenge
- Culture also teaches us that rejection isn't wrong if someone is "weird" or "different"
- Jesus understood rejection intimately
- He chose his friends carefully, based on who understood and would pursue his mission
- He changed where he went and what he did after being rejected
- He maintained his relationship with God and his identity as the Son of God
- He reached out to the outcasts of society and brought them into his fold
- Parents can help their children grow from rejection instead of shielding them from it
- Parents should speak truth to their children about who they are and why they matter
- Parents shouldn't villainize those who rejected their children
- Parents should encourage their children to embrace their identity apart from rejection
- Parents should help their children think about what they can learn from rejection

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

A Parent's Guide to **REJECTION**

Reflection Questions

- What is your first instinct when your child tells you that they've experienced rejection?
- What are the differences between rejection you've experienced as a teen vs as an adult?
- How would you like to see your child grow from rejection?

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A Parent's Guide to **REJECTION**

Discussion Questions

- How would you describe rejection? What does it feel like? Why does it hurt?
- Describe a time when you experienced rejection. What did it mean to you? What did you learn from that experience?
- What are some thought patterns you're tempted to fall into when you feel rejected?
- Fill in the blanks: "When I am rejected, I feel _____. I think _____ about myself." Why do you think this is how you completed the sentence?
- What do you think culture says about rejection? Think of a song or TV show that talks about rejection. What does it say? Do you think that's true?
- How do you feel about people when they reject you? What does Scripture say about how you should feel?
- What do you think of Jesus' example for handling rejection? How do you think rejection made him feel?
- Have you ever rejected someone? Why? How did it make you feel?
- Parents and teens, each share about the first time you felt rejected. How are the situations similar? How are they different?
- What does resilience mean to you? What do you think of the phrase, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger"?
- What lessons have you learned from the rejection in your life? Do you think you could have learned those lessons without rejection?
- What does identity mean to you? What do you believe makes up your identity?

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