



## Do As I Say, Not As We Did

I have a secret to tell you: Your parents aren't being completely forthright with you. Though perhaps that wasn't such a secret to you after all. They probably know a little more about the reckless abandon of youth than they pretend to know. They've likely engaged in a whole lot more careless shenanigans in their past than they let on about. When they were teens and young adults, they may have done many of the very things they tell you not to do now. And then they have the nerve to give you the third degree about your behavior and experiences. Who do they think they're fooling?

This is more than a sly observation. It's a scientific fact. Go ahead, tell them so. Studies in psychology show that when middle-aged people are asked to remember what they used to think about things such as premarital sex, political issues, or how much alcohol they drank when they were young and reckless in college, their memories are influenced by how they think, feel, and party now. <sup>1</sup> As psychologist Daniel Gilbert points out, "people misremember their own pasts by recalling that they once thought, did, and said what they now think, do, and say." <sup>2</sup> So if it seems as though they might be acting a tad bit hypocritical, you're right. If it seems as though they hold a double standard about how you should behave in comparison to how they may have behaved, they almost certainly do.

It's not hypocrisy that's intentional. It's a basic psychological nuance in the way our brains work. Everything about our world as we see it is based on perspective – our attitudes and interpretations are filtered through the world views we have at the time. Two people can look at the exact same situation and come to two completely opposite conclusions based on their differing perspective.

When your parents tell you not to do something, it's probably because they've done it. When they tell you drugs and alcohol are dangerous and you better not partake, it's almost certain they did a little partaking in their own youth. When they preach to you about the dangers of skinny dipping in the nude in piranha and leech infested waters...well, we won't touch that one. (Just thought you might enjoy the mental picture.) Yes, your parents were young and reckless once too. But their perspectives have changed since then.

So if it seems at times as though they have forgotten what it's like to be a teenager, in a certain way they have. But before you dismiss what they have to tell you outright as just more old people gibberish, consider this: they just want what is best for you based on all the knowledge and experiences they've gathered since they were teens. Those 8 1/2 centuries have proved very insightful and taught them a lot. Believe it or not, there may be some wisdom in what they believe now. It's worth at least a second thought. If it keeps you from repeating even one of their mistakes, it will be well worth it – if for nothing else than to avoid the inevitable "I told you so's." Heck, surprise them: show them up by being wiser and more mature than they were.

Your parent's attitudes are guided by their past experiences (and mistakes), their current knowledge, and most of all, their love for you. They've had time to reflect on the stupid things they've done. They are able to see now JUST HOW TRIVIAL AND MEANINGLESS some of those things are in the grand scheme of things. They know that just because they managed to roll the dice in dangerous situations and survive doesn't mean you will too. They may know of friends who had their lives ruined or taken away by careless behavior. Which is why they now have a different perspective on these things than they may have had in their own youth.

You are your own person with your own hopes and dreams for the future. You are free to make your own mistakes and live your own life. Yet it would be wise to make good use of some of the wisdom your elders can impart to you. Yes, it may seem a little hypocritical at times, but this "been there, done that" perspective is not without its merits. They've likely done all the things they're telling you not to do now, and knowing what they now know, THERE'S A REASON they're warning you against them. Every youth is bound to experiment with some things and is destined to make mistakes along the way. Just be sure to heed some of these warnings that come from real-life experience, and keep them in the back of your mind as you go about navigating your own life. We all want to see you live long enough and successfully enough to become a troll yourself, so that you can garner enjoyment from tormenting YOUR future children. After all, driving your kids crazy is half the fun of being a parent. ;-)

### Article references:

1. L.J. Levine and M.A. Safer, "Sources of bias in memory for emotions." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11:169-73, 2002; L.N. Collins et al., "Agreement between retrospective accounts of substance use and earlier reported substance use." *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 9:301-9

2. Daniel Gilbert, 'Stumbling Upon Happiness.' New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, p. 113