

## Opening Story, Unit 1: The Bathroom

My wife and I raised two boys, Greg and Robert. Greg was always a strong-willed, complicated, and challenging child. Robert, except for a short time when he turned 18 and announced that he was an adult and would now do whatever he chose, was a compliant, easy-going kid.

In our home, the boys shared their bathroom. The arrangement was great for my wife and me, but the bathroom paid a heavy price. Getting the boys to clean it was always a chore. Robert's the slob, why should I have to clean it? Greg uses it more than I do. Why should I have to clean up after him? Looking back, I think the bathroom cleaning battle continued until the day the boys left home. I usually left the bathroom inspections to my wife. But, one particular day, as I walked by the boys' bathroom, I made the mistake of looking inside. It was a scary sight. Green stuff was growing on the walls, and it had an odor that I can only describe as *you've got to be kidding*. I located my oldest son Greg. Greg was 19 at the time. I told him the bathroom qualified for urban renewal and needed to be cleaned immediately. Greg invoked a child's first line of defense, stating that it was Robert's turn to clean the bathroom. I said, *No*, that Robert had cleaned the bathroom the last time, and it was his turn. Greg flatly said, *No!* He was not going to clean the bathroom, and if it bothered me, I should close the bathroom door or clean it myself.

By the time Greg had turned 19, I had learned not to get excited or angry when he said, *No*. I had finally learned not to argue with my son. I said, *OK*, and drove to the nearest hardware store where I bought one of those tools that turn off the water at the meter. The next morning, I got up and took my shower; my wife took a bath and went to work, and Robert took his shower and went off to school. I quietly walked outside by the water meter and waited patiently for Greg to get out of bed and into the shower. When I heard the water running through the meter, I waited until Greg was probably in the shower and maybe even a little soapy.

I turned off the water to the house and drove to work with a very large smile on my face. You see, contrary to popular belief, smart parents know they can't control their kids. But parents can control everything in the house, and water is a thing! When parents of strong-willed kids finally come to this realization and control a thing or two, the winds of change start to blow.

When I returned home that evening, Greg was already back from work and acting a little smug. He started preaching something about responsibility and how I had not been responsible. When I asked him what he was mumbling about, he said that I had failed to pay the water bill and the water company had turned off the water in the middle of his shower.

When I said that I had turned off the water, a smile began to grow on Greg's face. He paused and said, *I don't care. I'm still not going to clean the bathroom.* I said, *You probably will. I heard you talking with Christine last night. I know you have a date with her this evening, and I can smell you from here!*

Well, that made Greg laugh. His mother and I also laughed, and he finally decided to clean the bathroom. But, at age 13, when Greg came home drunk for the first time, his mother and I did not laugh. At 14, when Greg announced that he no longer needed to go to high school and, in fact, had not attended for the last couple of days, his mother and I did not laugh. At age 15, when Greg came home with a new friend that had the look of a gang member, his mother and I did not laugh. From the time Greg turned 13, until about age 17, there was not a lot of laughter in our house.

If this story sounds familiar, you're in the right class. My wife and I wish this class existed when we were raising our children. It would have made the process of change so much easier. When we look back at those difficult times, we are able to laugh as a family. For you, the good news is that with commitment and hard work, you too will be able to look back at these difficult times and laugh because you were successful in changing your child's destructive adolescent behavior.