



The Parent-Teen Relationship: How Parents Can Make the Most of It

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

“Enjoy them now, they’ll soon be teenagers!” Warnings like this from friends and relatives, together with media images of adolescents as irresponsible, rebellious troublemakers, can lead parents to expect trouble as their children enter puberty. It is a rare parent who does not approach a child’s adolescence without some misgivings. But family life does not have to be a battleground during the teenage years. Parents and teens can live together, more or less harmoniously, if parents know what to expect and are willing to make some adjustments in the way they think and act.

The purpose of these fact sheets is to help parents cope more effectively during their children’s adolescence. Although this information is intended mainly for parents of teenagers, it is general enough to be useful to parents of younger children as well. The first

fact sheet discussed the way teenagers develop and what parents can do to help them through this time in their life. This second fact sheet focuses on strategies parents can use to deal with typical teenage behaviour.

The Cultural Context

Teens get bad press. All too often publicity about teenagers highlights the ones in trouble: the runaways and the lawbreakers. You rarely hear about the hospital volunteers and the camp counsellors.

Teens have no status, no recognized place in our society. We no longer need them to do essential chores like milking cows or chopping wood — jobs that gave them a sense of usefulness and worth. (Even when teens work part-time, their earnings are not usually necessary for their family’s survival).

Young people used to grow up quickly. Now we require them to be dependent and regimented until they acquire the education they need to find jobs in a technology-oriented society.

Social isolation is another problem. The trend toward smaller families, increased mobility and the high divorce rate often mean there are no relatives close by to help teens and their parents get over the rough spots. When friction develops between parent and teenager, there may be no one to turn to for help and advice, no one who can step in and defuse the situation.

Not surprisingly, parents sometimes feel overwhelmed by the stress of bringing up teenagers. But there are steps we can take to make things better. We can begin by remembering our own adolescence. Asking ourselves questions like “How much did I share with my parents?” “How critical and argumentative was I at that stage?” and “What were my worries and dreams?” can help us accept our teens’ behaviour better.

Some things are true in every age and in every culture. Adolescence is always a struggle for independence — it is common for teenagers to challenge their parents.

Teens still cope, as we did, with major physical changes, emotional ups and downs, unfamiliar sexual urges, peer

pressure, a changing identity, important life decisions and the resulting loneliness and anxiety.

The world is changing rapidly and differs in many ways from the one we grew up in. Teens today face a more complex and impersonal society. Alcohol and drugs are more easily available. Today’s teens also have to worry about AIDS, violence and uncertain job prospects.

The pressures on today’s teens are intense. Young people have become a major target group for advertisers and media hucksters, who constantly urge them to grow up quickly and have it all — now!

Family Relationships

Teens are out of balance at the same time as their parents are struggling with their own mid-life pressures. While teens are dismayed by each new pimple, parents may be agonizing over each new wrinkle. While teens are thinking in terms of the time ahead and the opportunities it will bring, parents are beginning to think in terms of time remaining and the opportunities that are diminishing. While teens are gradually acquiring more personal power, parents are often beginning to confront their own limitations. Giving up power over their children may be difficult. Good parents aim at working themselves out of their job, but the difficult part is knowing how and when to let go.

Parents are not the only ones struggling with mixed feelings. As teenagers try to establish their identity, they have to adjust to the loss of childhood security and accept increasing responsibility.

As our children work toward independence and self-control, our attitude to their struggle is crucial to their success. Parents and teenagers will both do much better if parents can keep a sense of perspective.

When parents and teens are getting along, family life can be wonderful. Teens really are enjoyable and energizing. Their wit and high spirits make them fun to be around. But when parents and teens are at odds, the teenage propensity for sullen silence and rejection can confuse and frustrate their parents.

Life with teenagers is an emotional rollercoaster; certainly an adult marriage with so many ups and downs would be considered unstable. Luckily, for parents and adolescents this “on-again, off-again” relationship is normal and nothing to worry about in the long run.

Make the most of the good times with your teens. Think about your children’s likeable qualities even when they’re temporarily exhibiting their unlikeable ones. It is important for parents to see the instability in the relationship for what it is — a necessary part of the teen’s development in separating from his or her parents.

Handling Anger

Growing up is difficult sometimes and anger plays a key part in the process of separating from parents. Teens resent being dependent, but they’re afraid of having to take care of themselves. They are annoyed at being treated like an adult one minute and a child the next, but they often behave inconsistently themselves. And then they bristle when you point this out to them.

Understanding your teenager’s anger will help you respond to it more constructively.

In a society that often appears to condone violence as a way of solving problems, we need to help our teens control their anger and express it safely — especially their anger at parents. Remember that anger is a normal emotion and that other feelings like helplessness, hurt, frustration, confusion and guilt are often expressed as anger. Ask yourself: “How can a teenager in our home express anger in acceptable ways? Do we provide our teenager with any safety valve to blow off steam?” We must make it clear to our teens that yelling, cursing, hitting and other forms of aggression are unacceptable.

There are *non-violent* ways to work off anger: stomping off to one’s room, pounding a pillow, twisting a towel, crying, talking it out, writing in a diary or doing some form of physical

exercise. In helping teens to deal with their anger, the example we set is crucial.

Like younger children, teens take their cues from us. It is therefore important that we be aware of our own behaviour, so that we don't become part of the problem. Teens often like to bait their parents, and mothers and fathers who overreact can be drawn into a destructive pattern of pointless arguments. The last thing an out-of-control teen needs is an out-of-control parent. Mothers and fathers need to ask themselves "How do I behave when I'm angry at my teen? Would I want my teen to imitate me?"

Parents can work off anger using the techniques suggested above too. When you feel your temperature rising over something your child has said or done, consciously force yourself to back off. Take time out. Give yourself a chance to cool off and relax a little before confronting the issue. It will help you keep things in perspective.

The way you talk is important. In the heat of argument, if you can't help "sounding off" about your teen's behaviour, do it without attacking his or her personality. A practical approach is to start your sentences with the word 'I' followed by a statement of your feelings. "I don't like it when you use that kind of language" or "I'm really upset when you take your anger out on

me." This way you will avoid laying blame. In other words, speak as you would be spoken to.

The way you listen is important too in draining off your teen's anger. It can be passive listening — silence is sometimes golden. A more useful way to listen is by trying to understand what feelings lie behind your teen's actions or words. Your response should start with the word you, as in "You sound like you're pretty frustrated," or "You look like you're really fed up." We all know how important it is to feel heard and understood, especially when we are upset. Remember that you should listen twice as much as you talk.

The 'Dos' and 'Don't's' of Parent-Teen Communication

- **Don't** argue with the way your teen sees things. Instead, state your own case and speak from that. "I have a different opinion," "This is what I believe," and "This is the way I see it."
- **Don't** talk down to your teenager. There's nothing more irritating than a condescending tone.
- **Don't** lecture or preach. Again, this only provokes hostility. Besides, the average teenager goes "deaf" after hearing about five sentences.
- **Don't** set limits you can't enforce.
- **Do** focus on the behaviour, not the person.
- **Do** think ahead to what you will say and how you will say it.

- **Do** keep your messages clear and concise.
- **Do** stick to one issue at a time.

Rules and Discipline

It's normal for adolescents to try to test the rules. Because adolescents are dependent on their parents for a long time, they can build up a great deal of resentment. This resentment can be expressed by defying parental restrictions.

Some rules are non-negotiable — like “Don't drink and drive” — but keep these to a minimum. Parents who make a major confrontation out of every minor issue risk losing all their influence with their teenagers. In demanding quiet submission, they may unwittingly create a simmering foe. Whenever possible, state rules as guidelines rather than ultimatums. Otherwise, family life will become a series of power struggles.

Parents need to help their children make the transition from parental discipline to self-discipline. For this to happen, teens need to learn how to negotiate and how to cooperate in setting rules and solving problems. Today, as their horizons expand, teens are more often out of our sight; they need to learn how to think for themselves so they can make the right choices when parents are not around.

You can help your teen practise negotiating, and redirect energy that might be wasted in power struggles.

Successful teen-parent negotiation depends on three things:

1. Involving your teen in the process when you make rules, set limits or reach decisions.
2. Keeping as calm and rational as possible even when emotions run high. It is especially important to control your anger.
3. Using the following specific problem-solving method, which helps keep negotiations focused on the issue.

Problem solving has several steps: identifying the issue for negotiation, brainstorming solutions, evaluating and narrowing down the alternatives until you get a solution that you both can live with, making an agreement and evaluating the outcome.

In matters of discipline, it is helpful to see inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour as a mistake in judgment or choice that carries consequences for your teen. If your teen behaves badly, make your feelings known immediately. Expressing sadness or disappointment about your teen's unacceptable behaviour is more constructive than expressing anger. The former leaves the problem where it belongs — with your teen — while the latter shifts the focus to *you*.

The next step would be to negotiate with the teen the appropriate consequences for the misbehaviour so that the teen can make amends and be motivated to do better in the future.

By asserting themselves, parents project by word and action the message “I love you too much to stand by and see you do something hurtful. When you show me by your behaviour that you can handle things better, I’ll back off.”

While resolving the immediate issue at hand is important, it’s even more crucial for parents to take a long-range view. Their job is to help teens develop the ability to make good decisions for themselves.

Young people not only lack experience, but also often have little foresight. Parents should teach their teens to think like chess players: before they make a move, they should try to anticipate the consequences. “What will happen to me if I make this next decision or choice?”

At the same time, parents should be asking themselves “What can I do in this situation to help my teen be more responsible?”

Positive Parenting

Growing up is often discouraging. Telling your teenagers “I love you” is less important than showing in tangible ways that you care. One of the best ways is by helping your teenagers

believe in themselves. And teens will only believe in themselves if they know we have confidence in them.

Try to recognize their efforts and the good things they do, and reassure them, at every possible opportunity, that they have the qualities we want for them. Give them the message “I don’t always understand what is going on with you but I’m on your side and I have faith that you will sort things out and land on your feet.”

Caring for the Caregiver

Our culture is often as unhelpful to parents as it is to teens. Parents are expected to know how to rear their children, and to do a perfect job with very little support.

When our children reach adolescence, we are caught in a classic double bind. We have to give up control, but society does not allow us to relinquish responsibility. Parents are still held accountable for the behaviour of their offspring — sometimes even after they’ve left home.

With the loss of power also comes the bittersweet experience of giving up being needed. After years of doing for our children, the fact that they can now do for themselves can bring on a sense of loss. This is especially true for parents who have put their whole heart and soul into childrearing.

You have to take care of yourself through the teen years as your children begin to need you less and challenge you more. This means setting aside time, each day if possible, to fulfil *your* physical and emotional needs. This will restore your energy and sense of perspective.

Relationships with other adults are important. If you are a single parent, friends and other parents of teens can be valuable confidants. If you are married or involved with someone, take time out to nurture and enjoy the relationship with your partner. Marriages can often come under stress during this stage. We need to take care of ourselves and sustain our relationships if we want to provide stability to our teens during this turbulent time in their lives.

Where to Turn for Help

Every parent feels overwhelmed from time to time. If you feel your family life is continually in turmoil or if you are always worried about your teens, you can reach out to other parents, as parents have always done, for ideas and support. You can look for family life education groups or groups for parents with special needs. There is also a great deal of family life education material available in audio, video and printed form. Similar material for people of different cultural backgrounds is beginning to become available. You can also ask your school, doctor or clergy

for names of agencies where you can get professional counselling and parenting advice.

Suggested Readings

Bibby, Reginald, and Donald Posterski. *The Emerging Generation*. Toronto: Irwin Publishing Co., 1980.

Brenton, Myron: *How to Survive Your Child's Rebellious Years*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1980.

Briggs, Dorothy. *Your Child's Self Esteem*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1970.

Cloutier, Richard. *Mieux vivre avec nos adolescents*. Montreal: Éditions le Jour, 1994.

Falardeau, Guy. *La sexualité des jeunes. Un pédiatre raconte*. Montreal: Éditions le Jour, 1994.

Fleming, Don. *How to Stop the Battle with Your Teenager*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall Press, 1989.

Ginott, Haim. *Between Parent and Teenager*. New York: Avon Publications, 1981.

Kolodny, Robert et al. *How to Survive Your Adolescent's Adolescence*. Toronto: Little Brown and Co., 1984.

Lamarre, Johanne. *Le défi de la discipline familiale. Pour mieux vivre avec votre enfant de 2 à 17 ans*. Montreal: La maison d'édition — Les productions Cognition, 1994.

Patterson, Gerald and Marion Forgatch. *Parents and Adolescents Living Together: Part I.* Eugene, OR. Castalia Publishing Co., 1987.

These and other helpful books on parenting adolescents are available in your local library.

Audio-Visual Resources

Preventing Family Violence – A Catalogue of Canadian videos on family violence is available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. It contains over 60 titles which may be borrowed from the regional offices of the National Film Board of Canada.

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