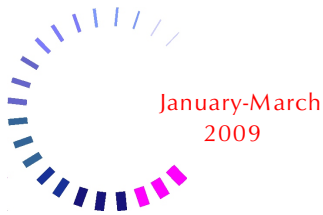


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Your Teenager: Friend or Foe?

So you say your friends, neighbors and the man on the street think you're slightly demented for taking in a teenager foster child, one of those unpredictable people caught between childhood and adulthood? Fear not their dire predictions that such a person will put your life into tumultuous orbit. It is possible not only to survive the care and feeding of this age group, but also to actually enjoy your teen. He or she may just be able to enrich your life and give you a large dose of satisfaction. Back in the days prior to those of your great grandparents, children suddenly became grown-ups with adult responsibilities when they reached adolescence. Not only did they work, they were catapulted into parenthood. Yet modern day parents are getting into hassles with their adolescents about chores, curfews, and various other sundry conflicts of expectations.

Have we gone against nature by treating teens as children when in actuality they are physically and emotionally (or so they feel) able to function closer to adulthood? Of course, with our present society, teens must live at home longer in order to be educated. Nature is pushing for independence while parents need to keep the child relatively dependent in order to assure the child's education. We can alleviate some of the problems of the dependence/independence pull by treating our teens in different ways.

How to treat them differently, you ask? I address several common "beefs" of adolescents:

1. My Parents Won't Listen To Me

Ah, communication - that word we hear so much

these days. Easy to say but magnitudes more difficult to practice effectively. Many teens feel their parents "pull rank" on them and say: "No... because I say so".

Kids need honest, straight explanations. You may not get agreement to your explanations but at least teenagers will feel they aren't being dealt with arbitrarily. Kids need to have a chance to express their views too. You may not agree, but there may be a basis for negotiations if all involved have an opportunity to speak. Of course such discussions go more smoothly when such phrases as "you always" and "you never" or name calling are eliminated. When expressing views, the other person tends to be less defensive if the sentence begins with "I feel". Such discussions also go better if one person is allowed to finish his/her view before fielding a rebuttal. Interruptions tend to make the speaker feel he/she hasn't been heard. (And don't forget direct eye contact.)

Because kids, like adults, can be stubborn beings at times, they may not want a heart to heart talk when you feel like it. After all, they have their moods too, don't they? If you really want your teen to open up to you, you may have to drop whatever you are doing (vacuum cleaning isn't really that important) and listen. Interesting tidbits get dropped when you're busy doing something else. Be prepared. How about a game of checkers? Kids seem to feel more comfortable talking while our attention is elsewhere. Car rides can be the epitome of setting a stage for a talk. (Again you are doing something else.)

How are you at expressing your feelings and vulnerability to your kids? Sometimes teenagers will be more likely to open up if you reveal yourself to them.

2. My Parents Don't Care About Me

Teenagers often feel that parents don't have time for them. A one-on-one outing or shared activity can help change that feeling. Touching can too. OK...so your adolescent won't let you hug him anymore, or in the case of a foster child, maybe they're not used to hugging. A touch in passing will do. Touches have a way of communicating: "I care."

Communication is important here too—and acceptance. Many teenagers feel parents (and foster parents) want them to be superstars, in school or in sports or other pursuits in life. Do we sometimes want our kids to be something we weren't? Yes, we want the best for them, but don't they have the right to choose their own ways of being themselves? We may want a child to become an accomplished musician. Isn't it okay for him or her to choose other areas of accomplishment?

It seems to be so easy to mention to a teenager when they do something "wrong". How about giving more positive reinforcement... For instance, "I like your dress." or "You did a good job on the lawn." This will not only improve self-confidence but help your relationship as well. Praise for the better report card grades goes a lot further than concentrating on the not so good ones.

3. My Parents Nag Me About Grades

Disputes over school are one of the most common areas of parent/child conflicts. It is important to express our concern about grades, but we also need to communicate that the teen will have to take the consequences of poor school work (i.e. being held back, summer school). We must learn to let our kids make their own mistakes even in school. When done gently, helping an adolescent to structure homework time may be appreciated. "Gentle" is emphasized.



Dictums from parents generally cause the child to become a "Mr. Monster" in the area of school work, and kids may goof up just to show you who's boss. These power struggles between parents and kids seem frequently to be fought on the battlefields of school work.

4. My Parents Won't Let Me See My Friends

Kids choose their own friends, period. Attempts on the part of parents to control teenager's choice of peers usually result in hostility and impaired parent/child relationships. Again in this area, mom and dad, you have a responsibility to explain why a chosen companion is causing you concern and what the consequences of the friendship may be. Beyond that there is not much you can do.



5. My Parents Don't Trust Me. They Always Think They're Right and I'm Wrong

Parents, we must be able to admit when we make mistakes if we want a good relationship with our kids. Kids will be more likely to admit their mistakes if they know that we are not setting ourselves up as omnipotent mini-gods.

Kids are more likely to do what is right if we expect that they will do so. Trusting or believing in the adolescent is very important even if they don't always stay on the right track.

Kids will have more trust in a parent who is honest. Kids are masters at picking up the inconsistencies in what parents say. And keep your promises if you want to increase trust levels.

6. Mom And/Or Dad Try To Copy Me

Kids seem to be especially insecure with a parent who tries to be a contemporary in language or dress. Adolescents need role models who are operating as adults. Being pals may be fun; but being a parent is required.

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