

Flexibility Key to Positive Relations With Teens

by Don Mihaloew

Raising teenagers is not impossible, but parents must be able to handle a lot of uncertainty during this period. There is just no way to make things work out as smoothly as we envision.

Teenagers' thought and biological patterns and goals are different from ours. Once we understand this we can relax about our teenagers' seeming waywardness and count it as necessary for their development. Flexibility is key; also, a solid notion of what we are willing to support, limit and if necessary, fight for or against. It means clarifying our values and looking at the assumptions upon which we base our expectations. Parents' efforts and leadership are necessary to maximize (but not perfect!) these wonderful years when our children are 12 to 18 going on 25 to 30, and are really young adults.

Here are seven things to understand about teenagers, and how we can use these elements to bring about positive family relations:

- 1. Teens want to like us.** They'd rather get along; they don't understand the anxiety we go through because of their increased desire to make their own decisions. They resist and rebel only because they feel kept from making their own decisions about important personal matters. It confuses them that we only want to control them. Parents become strangers to them!
- 2. Their primary job IS to separate from us in order to become themselves.** Biology drives them. They have lived off our values, opinions, and feelings (and money) too long to feel competent and OK about themselves.
- 3. They cannot feel loyal to a person from whom they must be different,** so they act like they have to dislike (oppose) us.
- 4. They don't primarily want to fight with us; they just want to become adults.** They think we know this and are, first, shocked, then frustrated, then angry or depressed when we block their natural search for independence and self-determination. They don't know why we should worry. They feel they are in control.
- 5. Yet, because they have never been adults, they are frightened by the prospects.** This is why, outwardly, they act so brave and above it all while deep inside, they are quite unsure and run to the nearest form of non-critical support, namely, the peer group, or to parents if we understand what they are going through.
- 6. They want evolution, not revolution,** but if we fail to understand the first five statements above, we will block their trek into adulthood and they will fight us, actively or passively. They become side-tracked and are willing to sacrifice their own growth in order not to appear dumb or wrong. They do this by often doing just what they want and also by passive withdrawal into drugs and/or poor overall performance.

7. They are supposed to eventually leave home! Families are destined to “break up.” Help them separate (with boundaries, limits, expectations, structure and opportunities) and they will actually confide in us. They won’t just like us, they’ll respect us and tell their friends what great parents they have. And they’ll tell us, too—before they are 42!

Parents fear adolescence so much because any trouble teens cause could really be thought of as a result of poor parenting. Parents think their kids are supposed to grow smoothly towards maturity and not depart from family policy. Being afraid of exposure, parents are apt to overpower their teens in an attempt to bring them back on track (the parent’s track). It is what I call the “Vidal Sassoon Effect”: If you don’t look good, I don’t look good—so change.

Most parents don’t know there are definite stages in human development and that each stage brings a delight and a challenge. The delight about teens is that they are more reflective than when they were children. The challenge is that they are embarking on their own journey of personal development. This carries them away from family in ways that many an unaware parent interprets as insubordination or even rebellion and meets with resentment. Power struggles start that neither side can win. We lose sight of the fact that there are no sides, per se, just visions. Parents envision their children as being in the family forever (or, at least until age 18), and children, once into adolescence, envision themselves as fully competent individuals but don’t know how to do it and so act as if they do. They are not “bad seeds” who need criticism and control. They want what you want for them; i.e., to become developed, competent young adults. It calls for an enormous amount of informed trust on the parent’s part. Parents cannot afford to be too rigid or too naïve. It is very hard work.

Yet, many parents feel guilty. Even though we are the finest, most caring generation of parents the world has ever seen, we are not actually trained to perform the tasks of parenthood and continue to make mistakes. For example, we do not understand the prime focus of adolescence which in Latin means “to grow.” But is that growth up or away? If we think teens should only grow *up*, then their natural, necessary tendency to grow *away* from their family will be taken to mean insubordination. But this process of self-development is biological and physical in nature, and no one has any control over it. If parents try to control it, then negative behaviors result and can show up in the family and community-at-large. Trouble always seems better than losing!

Growing away, from the teens’ perspective, is the same thing as growing up, which they can’t do unless they can make their own decisions. And though the choices they make can be extremely troublesome, unless they do exercise this special human ability of choice-making, only their body will mature, their mind and self-concepts will remain child-like, unable to handle adult responsibilities well enough or at all.

If what you most want is peace and order, then don’t have children! But if you want contributing, young women and men, then expect adolescence to be one challenge after another. Within these challenges lie the seed not only of their growth but of ours as well. This could be a time during which both of you can begin resolving past issues that irritate you.

In “The Prophet,” Kahlil Gibran said, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself...and though they are with you, they belong not to you...For life does not go backward or tarry with yesterday.” It is common to think that control of our children and teens is the essence of good parenting. It is not! The essence of effective parenting is to instill the child and teen with high levels of self-esteem so they will want to manage themselves. This is much more difficult. Without relevant skills, family tension,

emotional distance and social problems will become more the norm than family communication, problem solving and conflict management.

The stranger in your house is not your teen. It is “life’s longing for itself.” It is a person who is different in age and stage of development from you. It has to be different from when it was a child in order to become the adult everyone wants it to be. Fight this process and both will lose. Understand it, use it and trust it and you both will win. Either way, parenting teens is not a spectator sport. The process requires increased knowledge, skill and awareness of self to go along with the great amount of care most parents already possess. Truly, when we are at odds with teens, we are rebelling against normal human development. So much joy goes unclaimed when parents attempt to control their teens rather than guide them.

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