

# Teenagers Need Gentle Guidance

by Don Mihaloeuw, Ed.D

**In** last week's article, the point was that teens' basic purpose in life is to separate, not just from their families, but also from their own dependent childhood. Unconsciously and with biological certainty, they move toward adulthood and the development of their own unique selves. Growing up means more than just doing things that parents approve of. It means finding their own style and pace, making mistakes along the way. Parents need not take any of this personally!!

Parents needn't pull teens up from the roots every day like plants to see if they are growing. They are! Trust this process. But don't get too relaxed, either. Humans make some very strange choices based upon some very personal assumptions, and having children, as the line goes in "The Fantasticks," is like planting cabbages—you may sometimes end up with sauerkraut!

Let's look at some things we parents can do to provide just enough guidance and avoid unnecessary conflict:

**Suggestion 1:** Teens have a dual role to perform and master. First, they must remain in the family until ready to leave. But teens are growing by moving on and moving out, and they must face and master their own individual challenges of developing a thorough and flexible self-concept. A wise parent does not thwart this, but in fact assists the teen.

As much bravado as many teens show, it is really a time of healthfully sobering anxiety for them. Sometimes, they even will act so abhorrently that they will get parents to say "no" or even throw them out rather than take that plunge off the high board unassisted. Healthy teens express these fears and can ask for assistance. Resistance to parental guidance bespeaks fear. Their adult posturing is a way to compensate for their anxiety.

Arguing with them ends in much strife for both sides, but it also helps them do what is natural; i.e., separate from the family cluster. There is no need to be at odds with them and certainly no future in letting them do whatever they want. What can parents do?

**Suggestion 2:** Essentially, because of the self-orientation of teens and their dual role, teens seem to have no functional memory of much that lies beyond their own intense focus!

Ever notice how long it takes to get the garbage emptied? Since brain damage is rare, there must be some other explanation. Teens ARE selfish to the ultimate degree, but it is highly functional, purposeful selfishness. It is not a moral issue; they are not "bad" for being this way. If they weren't self-oriented, they would end up being incomplete shadows of their parents' generation rather than people of choice and substance; they would be creatures who only know how to obey and follow and not create their own lifestyle.

Parents need to reconcile their own rather narrow view with the overpowering fact that their teens' future is not in the family home, but "out there" in their own generation.

I urge you to not just let them go; encourage them to go. First hear their interests, then hold them accountable for their behavior. You can't expect them to be aligned with the family in the same

way as when they were children. And you can't expect them to understand what it is like to be fully independent adult who is responsible for other persons. They may be young adults, but they are unseasoned.

What you can do is keep them accountable for this rip-tide-like dual role. They ARE, in fact, dependent upon the family, and they owe the family allegiance and confidence. In turn parents owe their teens fair, clear, yet negotiable boundaries and limits, and an understanding of how hard it is to grow up and through to adulthood.

**Suggestion 3:** Don't go overboard for "real communication." Instead, develop a relationship with teens by engaging in conversation as you would with a friend. The more often you converse with teens, the more confidence you have in them, and the less you look like an ogre. If the chief type of interaction you have is conflict-oriented, then they will see you only as an authority figure rather than as a leader, a critic rather than a colleague.

Small talk is also a potent type of communication. Let not everything be heavy. It is easy for parents to build up feelings of resentment and even hatred. These feelings need to be normalized. If you believe that everything should go the way you think best, you will be (1) disappointed and resentful and (2) controlling. Thus, you knock out the possibility of being just two human beings of different ages and stages and you become enemies. Life is too important to take seriously. So are teens. They need our guidance, not our neuroses.

**Suggestion 4:** See your teens as persons first and offspring second, needing what any other person needs: physical survival and mental, emotional and spiritual respect and opportunity. We love them and want the best for them. We just have to keep in mind that our loving them doesn't entitle them to all the luxuries of life, nor does it entitle parents to perfect kids. They are humans first and our kids second. See them that way and some pressure will vaporize.

**Suggestion 5:** Value them by the most potent and loving of all human interactions, that of listening and responding. All humans want to fit in somehow and offer their intentions and actions as proof of worth. If these attempts are acknowledged as well-meant, there is a greater chance that teens will feel valued and important in their own right.

Not every situation is a crisis. There are many opportunities to interact with teens on a casual, friendly basis. When this is done routinely, there is a stronger basis for dealing with them when hot spots arise.

Acknowledging teens is not the same as agreeing with them. As parents, we reserve the obligation to limit teens' actions and decisions. But when teens feel important because they've been treated respectfully, they are more likely to respond and listen to their parents' interests. This makes parenting easier and even exciting.

It's not about control; it's about forward-moving growth and self-development. It's about rounding out the "square peg" so they fit into the roundness of adult society the way they eventually see fit.

Don Mihaloew, Ed.D., is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a certified family life educator who practices in Eugene.

Original publication date: 04/05/1992 – the Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon