

Treat Young Teens With Respect, Sympathy

by Jim Slempp

Young adolescents, transescence, in-between-agers or tweens? Language influences our attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about 11- to 14-year-olds and these in turn cause us to treat them with pre-formed expectations. Young adolescents are at a crossroads. They often feel frustrated because they fit in neither a world of childhood nor that of adolescence.

Young adolescents receive the worst press this side of the “terrible twos.” What other period in life gets the negative scrutiny which 11- to 14-year-olds endure? Ultimately, the image of sulking, awkward, and acne-ridden young adolescents is demeaning and destructive to the positive guidance they so desire from adults.

Perhaps our language doesn’t help their identities. Educators and parents sometimes refer to young adolescents as “hormones with feet,” “hopping hormones,” or with negative descriptors. Adults talk about the stages or phases young people experience and usually advise, “They will grow out of it.”

Although these descriptions of young adolescents are generally used in humorous ways, such a designation demeans them. I believe that negative, long-term effects accrue when we fail to consider the deeper reason for actions or when we limit our expectations of young adolescents. They are highly capable people.

For young adolescents to realize their potential, we must think of them in a more positive way, one that recognizes their capabilities and their unique qualities.

Conventional wisdom for parents of 11- to 14-year-olds is to cope as best they can. Adults talk about the stages or phases young people experience and usually advise, “They will grow out of it.” Those are hardly inspirational words.

Young adolescence is an exciting time of discovering new abilities, friends, and relationships. Although many challenges present themselves, the years from 11 to 14 are much more than yet another “stage” to be endured. We must learn to enjoy and savor the moment, for our youngsters will never be this age again. We must learn to thrive, not merely survive. Language we use to name young adolescents and to think about them does make a difference. So, let’s watch our choice of words and celebrate the great 11- to 14-year-olds that each of us comes in contact with.

Parent Quiz

Do you talk to your child enough? Studies show most parents talk to their children for only about 10 minutes a day. How about you? (Give yourself five points on a question if you feel you do an “excellent” job, 0 points for a “poor” job, and any score in between that you think you deserve.

1. I set aside some time to talk with each of my children every day.
2. We eat meals as a family at least three times a week.
3. I know the names of my children’s best friends.
4. If my child received a gift of \$50, I know how he would spend it.

5. I know my child's favorite and least favorite subjects.

How did you score? Here's the rating score: 10 to 25 points means you talk and listen to your children regularly, 15 to 19 points means you're doing an average job, below 15 points may mean you need to spend more time talking and listening to your children.

Tips For Talking With Teens

These tips for talking with your teenage child could revolutionize your communication:

- Express your desires and fears directly. Teens need clear guidelines and boundaries and they need to know how we feel: "I get angry when you do that." "I worry when you stay out too late."
- Don't bombard your teen with questions.
- Don't beg. You give away power when you do.
- Negotiate boundaries, but do it from a position of strength. Some decisions must be yours.
- Don't be intimidated or manipulated by your teen's attempt to plant guilt feelings.
- Relax and slow down. Control your feelings. If you are under stress from a situation that doesn't involve your teen, don't let that tension spill over on her. Discuss one topic at a time.
- Share your childhood. The best way to get information from your teenager is to share yourself, especially your own fears, uncertainties, and difficulties.
- Share real feelings. Begin by asking questions such as: "How do you feel when...?" or "When...happened to you today, what did you feel inside?" Sharing your own feelings about some family event or decision can set the tone.

Weekly family meetings can help solve problems. Finding time to talk wasn't always a problem. Families once sat down to dinner together every night. But today, family meals are all too often disrupted by work and hectic schedules. A weekly family meeting brings everyone together. The meeting is good for airing gripes, and it is also great for passing out praise. There is no set agenda. If someone has done something especially good, praising that child in front of the entire family makes it more special.

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