



Living With Your Teen: Understanding the Changing Parent-Teen Relationship

Disagreements between parents and teens are normal

Many parents are overwhelmed by the responsibilities that accompany child-rearing. Often, parents believe they alone are responsible for how their children turn out. Many parents believe that if they don't do the right things, their children won't become well-adjusted adults.

This misconception may cause the normal struggles that occur between parents and teens to take on exaggerated importance. Parents need to understand that although they are very important in their child's life, other influences also are important. Peers, teachers, counselors and popular public figures also influence the developing teenager.

The teen's growth toward independence becomes an issue when viewed by teens or parents as a struggle for control. For many parents, the method used to ensure that a child will grow up "right" is to maintain control over many aspects of the child's life.



Such parents may choose their children's clothes, friends, hobbies and courses of study. As the children grow older, they begin to realize they can never grow into adults without assuming control of their own lives. Therefore, they begin to fight for control. They argue with their parents, defy them and demand control, which can lead to ongoing family struggles. For these children, the road to adulthood is difficult because both parents and children risk losing the closeness they once enjoyed. Both parents and teens can feel rejected and hurt by the behaviors that threaten their relationships. Parents also are concerned about their children's ability to care for themselves and make good decisions.

To some parents, defiant behavior is proof they must have failed as parents. The struggle is doubly stressful when each person cares so deeply about the other.

It is not just a teenage problem

Many professionals who work with parents and teens believe that parents' own issues also contribute to the problems with teens. Often, the parents of teens are middle-aged. They may experience unrest, discontent, change and self-evaluation during middle adulthood.

During this time, many adults ask themselves what they have done so far in their lives and what they want to do in the future. Some adults may be depressed because they haven't achieved their own goals. Others may be anxious because they don't know what they will do after their children have grown and left home.

In these situations, a rebellious adolescent may add to a parent's feelings of uncertainty about himself or herself. Problems with a child may be viewed as another indication of failure in the adult's life. As one father put it, the parent-teenage relationship comes "at the most inconvenient time."

For some middle-aged parents, the fact their children will soon be adults may be an unpleasant reminder that they, too, are aging. These middle-aged parents may try to keep their children dependent, despite the fact that their children are getting older and more independent.

Failure to live up to parental expectations

Frequently, teens complain that they can't fulfill their parents' expectations. Many parents have selected a certain career, a certain dress code, or a special college for their child. The farmer whose teen wants to be a physician and not take over the farm, or the lawyer whose teen hopes to be a carpenter instead of joining the firm, may be disappointed or angry because their children failed to live up to their expectations.

Teens have to decide to lead their own lives. Accepting the decisions their teens make, however, can be extremely trying for parents. Parents who reject their adolescents when they fail to meet their expectations might alienate their teen.

Improving the parent-teen relationship

How can you improve your relationship with your teen? First, it helps if you recognize that teenagers must become independent in order to become adults, just as they had to learn to walk and talk to grow from infancy to childhood.

The first toddling steps away from a parent and the first "No, I won't!" are the beginnings of growth toward independence, a task of every child. The task can be completed only when the child learns to function independently from his or her parents. If becoming independent is the task of children, then the task of parents must be to help their children reach independence by allowing them to walk (and fall), to talk (and make mistakes), and to slowly take control of their own lives.

Take a look at your role in your relationship with your teenager. You may want to consider counseling to help you see how you may be contributing to a negative situation. You may need to learn ways to cope with your life, rather than allowing questions about your life to get mixed up with your adolescent's struggle for independence.

It's common for the changing parent-child relationship to cause problems in families. It is helpful when parents are able to accept changes and support their teens towards independence.

Sources:

Judith A. Hooper, University of Wisconsin – Extension.
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