Living with your teenager

The Changing Parent-Child Relationship

Struggles Between Parents and Teens Are Normal

Holding their newborn infants for the first time, many parents are overwhelmed by the child-rearing responsibilities that lie ahead of them. Parents commonly believe they are solely responsible for how their children "turn out." Parents often think that if they do things "right," they will raise children who will become "perfect" adults. This kind of expectation and pressure can make the normal struggles that occur between parents and teens become exaggerated.

Parents may see teen-age fads in clothing and music that set them apart from others as evidence of their failure to raise their children properly.

It's important to realize that these normal struggles occur in every family. Once you know that, you can relax more and worry less about how your children are turning out. Chances are they will turn out just fine, and the rebellious teen now living in your home will grow up to be a responsible adult, just like you did.

In the early years of your children's lives, you are the most important figure in their world. Your approval—in the form of assurances of love and support—is critical to your children.

Much of what your child does and says is aimed at maintaining your love and approval. As your child gets older and has more contact with other people such as child care providers, teachers, coaches, neighbors, and friends, they also will influence your child's behavior and attitudes.

Despite other people in a child's life, parents remain central figures. In fact, one of the greatest difficulties in trying to become an adult is establishing independence while maintaining a loving parent-adult child relationship. The teen's struggle for independence becomes especially difficult when it is viewed by teens and/or parents as a struggle for control.

Many parents believe that the best way to ensure that children will grow up "right" is to maintain control over most aspects of their lives. Such parents try to choose their children's clothes, friends, hobbies, classes, and so on. As children grow older they start to realize that they can never grow into adults without assuming control of their lives. Consequently, they begin to seek control.

For teens, this struggle for adulthood is scary and risky because they fear losing the most important thing in their lives—the approval and love of their parents. At the same time, parents feel rejected and hurt. Also, they feel anxious about their teens' ability to care for themselves. The struggle is stressful because everyone cares so greatly about each other.

It's Not Just a Teenage Problem

There's a growing belief among professionals who work with parents and teens that the adult problems of parents contribute to difficulties in the parent-child relationship during the teen years. As one father has put it, the parent/teenage child relationship comes "at a most inconvenient time." This father was all too aware that the parent of a teenage child is likely to be entering the middle-age years. These years are a period that is often accompanied by extreme unrest, discontent, change, and self-evaluation.

Upon entering middle age, many adults are asking themselves what they have done so far and what they want to do next. Some may be depressed by a sense that they have not achieved personal or professional goals. Some may be experiencing difficulties in their

own marriage/partner relationships. Others may be anxious about the fact that their children are growing up and leaving home and that they are forced to answer "now what?" In these situations, the rebellious teen undoubtedly adds to the parents' feelings of uncertainty about themselves.

Failure to Live Up to Parental Expectation

A common complaint from teens is that parents "want me to be the way they want me to be." In other words, many parents have specific ideas for how their teen should spend his/her time and their teen's future. They may want their teen to participate in specific school activities (e.g., plays, sports) or to have a job. They may want their teen to plan to attend college or perhaps even a specific college. They may have ideas for what kind of a career their teen should pursue, or perhaps want their teen to follow in their footsteps in a business they own. When the teen doesn't follow their advice or wishes they may experience varying amounts of disappointment—and sometimes anger—because their children fail to live up to their expectations.

It can be difficult for parents to accept teens as individuals who will have to make their own decisions about how to live in the world. But healthy teens will grow up and do just that. Parents who reject their child for failing to follow their plans or parents who reject some aspect of the adult child's life may find themselves painfully alienated from their child.

Easing Parent/Teen Conflict

What are some ways that you as a parent can begin to break the cycle of disagreement with your teen? First, it helps if you recognize that teenagers gradually 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 the mother, and the first "no, I won't" are the beginnings of growth toward independence, the task of every healthy child.

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 lives.

Try to look at your own role in your struggle with your teenager. Sometimes it can require professional assistance to help you see how you contribute to the struggle. You may need to learn new ways to work through issues in your own life, rather than allowing the teen's struggles for independence to get mixed up with your questions about your own life.

The changing parent-child relationship is bound to cause some problems and stresses in all families. Time goes forward, however, and the infant will grow to adulthood with or without the approval of parents. The reward for allowing and encouraging gradual independence in teenagers is to have them become healthy, responsible adult children who will enjoy coming back home to visit their parents.

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