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## **Understanding Adolescent Development**

Teens are on an emotional seesaw, they experience extreme highs and lows. One minute they're charming and helpful, the next ranting and raving because someone drank one of "their" Cokes.

The teen is attempting to carve out a new "adult" personality. To do this he must distinguish himself from his parents. Rebellion occurs in almost all adolescents. For parents, the question has to do with the severity. Allow minor rebellion within the home so your teen doesn't have to rebel in dangerous ways outside the home. Safe ways to rebel are through "interesting" bedroom interior design and "distinguished" forms of language you can barely understand. They also challenge your values, intelligence and ideas.

Go ahead and complain, but don't be overly controlling of these superficial forms of nonconformity towards you. It just might harm the already shaky relationship that exists between you and your teen.

Peers play an important part in the lives of teens. Parents often wish kids could sidestep this need to be so attached to friends, but they can't. If they will ever be able to stand separately as full-functioning adults, they need this connection with peers to bridge the gap between parents and independence.

For teens to feel secure they need parents interested in their activities and they must be accountable for their whereabouts. Although their boundaries are expanded and they're given more independence, they still need clear guidance.

But when parents question their activities, they're insulted, even outraged. So keep track of your teens but don't expect them to say, "Thanks for caring. I know you do this because you love me."

Another important side of adolescent development is their increased capacity to think. This is most obvious in their ability to think abstract thoughts. Teenagers no longer just think in the "here" and "now", but begin to hypothesize about what "might be".

Teens' minds become flexible; they can combine logic and deal with many factors at

the same time. This is great for school; but at home they respond to our requests with many alternatives.

Also teens become introspective and are concerned about the discrepancy between their ideal and real self. Don't get too concerned about this and don't participate too much in these introspective discussions. This focus eventually disappears.

Allow your teen to argue points on politics, religion and social issues. Most young adults when in their twenties return to take on the values of their parents. This exploratory behavior of teens is temporary, so don't ruin your relationship arguing values. It's simply not worth it.

Teens need spirited interaction and questioning. If they can't question and explore ideas, if their efforts are put down or stifled, they may not be able to think on their own as adults. They need this mental exercise.

Teens are impulsive one minute and then exhibit excessive self-control the next. They desperately need help with judgments; so don't hesitate to offer guidance and share your experience.

Another recommendation: Develop and use your sense of humor. If you have the ability to lighten a tense situation with a bit of humor you'll retain your sanity through these turbulent years.

Keep in mind, the task of teens is to separate from parents and establish their own identity. Teens appear to push away from parent because they're trying so hard to figure out who they are.

Teenagers act like they know it all. They swagger, are cocky and self-righteous. But inside they're scared. Being an effective parent to teens is a delicate proposition. The parts of your parenting that have gone wrong may not be remedied during these years.

If you restrict too harshly, they might run away. If you demand better grades, they just might stop studying all together. If you insist on totally respectful and controlled behavior in the home, it's likely for your teen to rebel in dangerous ways the minute they step outside the door.

Teenage behavior is such a puzzle because one minute they're controlled, funny, likeable, helpful and intelligent and then suddenly, obnoxious, crazed, and out of control. The hardest part is for parents to remain mature and responsible themselves.

When teens are totally out of whack, more than anything they need parents to be steady. It's hard because there is so much fear involved in raising teens--fear for the future, fear for their safety--when fear takes over parents find it difficult to be the adult their teens need them to be.

Maintaining a relationship with your teen, nurturing your teen, is your best survival technique. Here's seven ways:

1. Provide lots of food for their growing and changing bodies.
2. When they sit down to eat this food, sit too and visit about your day and theirs.
3. Develop and use your sense of humor.
4. Compliment something each day about their appearance.
5. Let them keep their bedroom as their own.
6. Respect their need for privacy.
7. Show interest and support as they explore plans for their future.

### **Body piercing: classic parent-teen power struggle**

Let's say your 16-year-old son went behind your back while you were on vacation and had his tongue pierced. When you found out about it, you made him remove it. He also confessed that he lied to the piercing company about his age, claiming to be 18 years old.

You're in a quandary plus you're upset with him for rebelling and lying. Yet, on the other hand, you don't want to cause him to rebel even more and become distant.

You've explained your reasoning; he's unconvinced your reasons are valid. What should you do?

You're in a classic parent-teen power struggle. When such episodes occur, don't hesitate to reprimand the teenager for his actions. "I'm angry and disappointed. I told you my opinion about tongue piercing, but then you had it done anyway. I'm also disappointed you lied to the company about your age."

Once you've stated your disapproval, let it rest. The teen is separating from you and developing his fledgling adult identity, and can't agree with you outright. If he did, he would be submitting to dependency, which is unthinkable at this age. Rebellion occurs with teens in different ways. Some take to drinking and smoking, which are dangerous and worrisome. Others alter their appearance with piercings and tattoos which to many parents are annoying and unappealing.

In this situation you have three options:

1. Assert your power and control. Tell your son, as you did, to remove his tongue ring. If your son complies without further discussion, so be it. He doesn't need to apologize or admit he was wrong. Removing it as told is all that's really relevant.

Now watch him. Notice if he now rebels in ways that are more dangerous or destructive. If he does, you might reconsider allowing the pierced tongue. It's a safe and easily remedied (pierced tongues heal quickly) way to define himself as separate from you. It's definitely better than a more dangerous alternative.

2. Compromise. Tell him you don't like the pierced tongue but you realize it's his body. He alone controls how he treats it. But ask him if he would please remove the tongue ring when home and for family and holiday gatherings. Such compromises

are often effective as children travel the developmental years, taking on more and more control of their own lives.

3. Drop it. State your disapproval but tell your son you realize you can't control what he does to his body. Then drop back. Don't talk about it further unless you can skillfully inject some humor into the situation. Drop it particularly if you think by asserting your control - making him remove it - you'll only up the power plays between you and your son. This could deteriorate your relationship and cause more rebellion.

The magic of this option is that by disapproving, but still claiming the truth - that you're not able to control what he does to his body - often the issue loses its importance. Your son may come to realize the tongue pierce is irritating, unattractive, and no longer necessary to prove his independence. It simply becomes a nonissue.

On the proactive side, step back and ask yourself if there's some way you can give your son more power and control in positive ways - more responsibility, more freedom, more decision-making ability.

Also realize tongue piercing may not be about you and your child's relationship at all. It may be about an element in the popular culture that influenced your son beyond what you're able to leverage. Also, tongue piercing may represent being part of a peer group that offers camaraderie and support for your adolescent as he breaks away from you to eventually stand on his own as an adult.

## **Teens Think Like Adults, Sometimes**

Physically they're as big as parents, often bigger. Some drive cars, many baby sit or hold jobs in fast foods. They appear adult-like in many ways, but parents, teenagers are not adults, they're kids, don't forget it. Don't make the mistake of expecting adult judgment, behavior and thinking skills from the time your teen start looking like an adult.

Yet they'll fool parents. Sometimes they operate on an adult level. They'll fix dinner for the entire family including the shopping and clean up. They'll be editor of the year book, scorekeeper for basketball, or engage in conversation about the environment with details parents never considered.

Parents think this child who occasionally operates as an adult, is an adult. Then parents expect grown up behavior all the time and when they slip up and regress to the real kid they truly are, parents are mad and disappointed. Parents can't help but project five years ahead and panic because parents fear this person will never

function full-time in the adult world.

One Mom was astounded when her daughter, new driver's license in hand, asked for directions to Fred Meyer. They had driven there weekly for ten years; surely this child had paid attention. Nope, the mother made a foolish assumption. The route to Fred Meyer meant nothing to this girl until now when she was driving there herself.

Think back to the time your child first learned to ride a bike. Did you expect that kid to climb on and know exactly what to do? No, you were there to guide him all the way. And when you finally found the courage to let go, you knew at some point he would fall.

You also knew you'd be there to comfort, help him up, and be by his side when he tried again. You didn't need to add to the frustration or pain of the moment by yelling, advising, and demanding better performance. You knew that the only way for him to learn was to have him evaluate the situation, get back up, and try again.

So why is it so different when our teens are in the process of learning and practicing how to be adult?

Of course, the biggest reason parents react hysterically to teen's poor judgment is fear. You're afraid for their safety behind the wheel of an automobile. And you're afraid they'll get involved with drugs and alcohol. No doubt, these are legitimate fears.

To reduce your fear, walk your teen through each new situation.

Prepare them before they go off to a party. Practice and model ways to say, "No thank you," to a beer, without rejecting the person who offered it.

Discuss ways for getting out of a car driven by someone who is drinking. One teen's suggestion was to let the driver know she is sick and about to vomit. That would get any driver to pull over.

And let your teen know your reasons for these discussions---tell them you care and love them to distraction. Let them know your life would never be the same if they were injured or killed in an accident, or became addicted to or died from drugs or alcohol.

If teens think for a minute parent's advice is motivated from their need to control, overpower and dominate their lives, parents are going to lose. Your teen may need to prove their independence and it might be in dangerous ways.

So when your teen goofs up--forgets a baby sitting job, loses the hidden house key,

forgets about an important test--operate just how you would have when he was six and fell off that bicycle.

Soothe the pain, don't add to it, then when their emotions have evened out and if the teen is receptive, help figure out a plan so it won't happen again.

If the consequences for the goof up are enough---being locked outside in the rain because she locked the hidden key inside---no need to dwell on the subject, just hope it won't happen again, but realize, it might.

And then when your teen climbs into another's car for the first time, or drives the gang himself, treat the situation as you would if your twelve year old were taking his bicycle on a twenty mile ride.

Have a plan for emergencies and the unexpected. Make you're your teen is equipped will a mobile phone. Tell your teenager you would always come to the rescue, no questions asked. Your child's safety is the bottom line.

Whenever you see the tiniest little glimpse of adult behavior emerge, celebrate. Tomorrow your teenager may put a pizza in the oven on "self-clean," rather than "time bake." This happened to one teenager, the family survived. You probably will too.

## **What Choices and Decisions are Appropriate for Teens?**

What kinds of choices and decisions can teenagers make for themselves? How much control do parents have, and how much control belongs to the teenager?

Teens definitely want to choose their own clothes. They feel strongly that how they dress is up to them. Is this true, parents? Do you feel the same? If your son or daughter leaves for school in some outrageous outfit don't you have the right to make them change? Can't you at least give your opinion? Sure you can. But if your teen insists and a battle ensues, you'll probably lose.

One Mom's quote says it all, "When I finally backed off bugging my daughter about her appearance, you know what happened? Her appearance miraculously improved about 75%."

What about schoolwork? Can parents "make" teens study, can they insist school work be a priority? Teens don't feel this is necessary. By the time high school rolls around, kids are making their own decisions.

Teens want to choose their own music, but parents can insist the volume be lowered. Teens actually form groups according to the type of music they like. Obviously music choice is extremely important.

All the teens agree that parents can't pick their friends. But a parent added, if it's obvious a certain friend and trouble go hand in hand, he would feel perfectly justified refusing to let his teen spend time with that person outside of school.

Teens definitely want control of their bedrooms. They want to decorate them as they choose, if it's a mess it's their problem and the parents shouldn't worry about it.

Of course, parents have a somewhat different view. Most have come up with compromises: Bedrooms must be vacuumed and tidied up on Saturday by 3:00. If they aren't, no allowance. Here kids have a choice: They can clean and get an allowance, or they can choose to keep it a disaster area and spend the week in the poor house.

It may seem parents, don't have much control by this age. Yes you do, and this you want to hold on to desperately. You control whether your child gets a driver's license or not. You control the keys to the car. You control the amount of money you give out.

Although it may not feel like it sometimes, you do control the TV, telephones and computers. These belong to you, exert your power here especially if it involves your sanity. Develop some rules, if you don't your teen will take over and run the house.

Both parents and teens agree curfews are necessary. Parents have a lot of say about how much kids can be gone and when they need to be coming in. This will probably be most effective when approached as a point of negotiation and compromise.

Don't you wish kids would do as parents say, follow our advice and be under our control until they're 18, and then march out into the world as full functioning competent adults?

Unfortunately, it doesn't happen that way. Kids learn bit-by-bit how to function on their own and be under their own control. Parenting is a gradual turn over of power from the parent to the child.

Parents do have influence over their teens. Remember, however, direct confrontation may force teens to make an about face and forge in exactly the opposite direction.

Influence in subtle ways to instill your values and keep your kids safe. Say this from time to time, "I have a lot of fears about the teen world you live in. More than anything I want you to be safe and to become the person you were meant to be. Sometimes you may feel like I'm trying to control your life. Forgive me if I come on too strong, it's just because I love you relentlessly. I just don't always get it right."

**Final Tips:**

\*Let your budding adolescent make decisions that affect him directly. Kids feel powerful and in control when they can choose between French or Spanish, when they can choose their athletic activity and weekend fun. Be interested and available for discussion but don't take over---that's when power struggles occur.

\*Don't preach about drugs and alcohol but do state your opinion. Read drug and alcohol related stories from the newspaper out loud. This keeps kids informed with the harsh realities of abuse without being moralistic.

\*Find one activity that you and your adolescent enjoy. Baseball cards, sports, cooking, shopping, or fishing can hold your relationship together. When situations explode into battles, this interest can help shake off your emotions, and serve to build rapport once again between you and your teen.

\*Learn to listen. Talk about feelings, offer advice sparingly, and then look for the right moment to inject your ideas and values. Parents need their kids talking to them. Nothing will silence kids quicker than a righteous parent with all the answers.

## **Avoid Alienation During the Teen Years**

Alienation. A harsh word. One dictionary defines it this way: "a turning away in feeling or affection; making unfriendly; estrangement; not feeling interested in or involved with one's family, associates or society." Alienation from family, friends, school or work spells disaster for teens. All people need to know they belong to a group, for teens it's essential.

Now, if your teen is involved in sports, a positive peer group, and student government or is a star student, stop reading, you have nothing to worry about. Your child is socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually strong and will probably survive these teen years without trouble.

But for many teens this need to connect and find their spot away from the family isn't easy. They struggle to find a peer group; they struggle academically, athletically or are not school leaders. This doesn't mean they're destined for a disastrous adulthood, it just means they need more time to mature and they don't need rejection from you. Rejection at school and rejection at home is a losing combination.

Parents can't go to school and tell kids to include their child in their group. You can't sign your teen up for Photography Club and expect him to participate. You can't call the coach and plead to let your son or daughter on the basketball team. You can't find your teen a job, although you might guide him through the process of applying and preparing for an interview. But you can provide an accepting and tolerant home atmosphere.

Picture your home as the post for a tetherball. It's the steady strong solid post that your teen is tied to, but the rope attached to your child is longer than ever during the teen years.

Your teen will be out there whirling around more than ever but he still needs to come home and wrap himself around that post to find security, to build himself up so he can fly out into the world again tomorrow.

But teens make it difficult for us parents. On the outside they're saying, "stay away," on the inside they're saying, "I still need you." They criticize our mannerisms, attitudes, politics and appearance. They complain about doing chores, family traditions, household rules and responsibilities. And when you try telling them how nice they look or how much you love them, they reject your affection.

Then there are pressures on parents. Most work full time, many are divorced and parenting alone. Some care for aging parents. Some face financial problems. So connecting positively with the obnoxious antics of a teen who is pushing you away might be low on our priority list.

And then there's the moodiness factor. It's this emotional roller coaster your teen is on. One minute she's sullen the next, then overly exuberant. And sometimes she's simply delightful. This moodiness weighs on parents. It's hormones, it's the result of being caught between adulthood and childhood. It's pressure from school, friends, work and family.

Just realize unless you have a very unusual teen, you'll witness this moodiness syndrome. Don't be controlled by it. You didn't cause it and you can't remedy it, and you can't talk your teen out of her mood. But don't let this moodiness regulate the emotional thermometer for your home.

Acknowledge your teen's feelings, "I know you're feeling rotten today, is there anything I can do to help? You just want to be left alone? That's fine." Now get on with your evening.

Because of these prevailing mood swings, some parents can justify rejecting their son or daughter: "Jason cuts himself off from us." And although this appears true on the surface, underneath your teen needs more from you. You need to give your teen space

and keep a distance without cutting him off. Letting him go--especially on an emotional level--is not advised.

When you start to side-step your teen to avoid confrontation, when you say, "I give up, I'm done, I can't parent this child anymore," think of that word alienation. Cutting the tetherball rope now only sends your teen whirling out into the world bouncing from here to there without any safe, accepting and steady sanctuary to return.

Insist your teens keep up with the responsibilities of home life even when they complain. The garbage still needs emptying, the dog must be fed. Your teens still need to attend family birthdays, holidays and outings unless there's a really good reason. And you and your teen need to keep track of each other: leave notes, call frequently, access voice messaging.

But parents please, don't expect this from your teen: "Thanks for insisting I empty the garbage. I'm so glad you make me do this; it makes me know I still belong to this family. Even though I complain, I know emptying this garbage prevents me from feeling alienated as I break away from the family and attempt to find myself in the world."

It will be years until you receive the appreciation you deserve.