



The Changing Parent/Child Relationship

Struggles Between Parents and Teens are Normal

In America today it is commonly believed parents are solely responsible for how their children "turn out." Parents are often led to think that if they do things right, they will raise perfect adults. With this kind of expectation and pressure, it's little wonder the normal struggles that occur between parents and teens take on such enormous importance.

Parents of teenagers or preteens should realize these normal struggles with fads, music and other efforts of independence occur in every family. Once they know that, they can relax more and worry less about how their children are "turning out." Chances are they will be just fine, and the challenging teen will grow up to be a responsible adult.

In the early years of children's lives, parents are the most important figures in their world. Their approval, love and support are critical to children. Consequently, much of what children do and say is aimed at maintaining that love and approval. As children get older and have more contact with people other than their parents, their behaviors and attitudes will be influenced by other people.

Establishing Independence

As teens establish independence, parents need to understand a number of points.

- Parents are still the most important influence in their children's lives.
- Teens are trying to become adults. One of their greatest difficulties is becoming independent while maintaining a loving relationship with parents.
- The teen's struggle for independence becomes a real problem only when it is viewed by the teen and/or parents as a struggle for control.

Struggle for Control

When children are young, many parents maintain control over most aspects of their child's life. These parents choose their child's clothes, friends, hobbies and so on. As children grow older, they realize they can never grow into adults without having control of their lives. Consequently, teens begin to fight for control.

For teens, this struggle for adulthood is terribly risky because they risk losing the most important thing in their lives -- the love of parents. At the same time, parents may feel rejected, hurt and anxious about teens' abilities to care for themselves. Their struggle is stressful because everyone cares so greatly about each other.

It's Not Just a Teenage Problem

Both parents and teenagers are experiencing change. There's a growing belief among professionals who work with parents and teens that adult problems contribute equally with teen problems in making these years difficult between parents and children.

As one father put it, the parent/teen relationship comes "at a most inconvenient time." This father was all too aware that the parent of a teenager is likely to be entering the middle-age years. These years are a period of unrest, discontent, change and self-evaluation for adults.

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 all they had hoped to personally or professionally. Others may be anxious that their children are growing up and leaving home and they are forced to answer "Now what?" In these situations, the rebellious teen may add to parents' feelings of uncertainty about themselves. "Good" parents, after all, would not be having this struggle with their child, they think.

Failure to Live Up to Parental Expectations

A common complaint from teens is that parents "want me to be the way they want me to be." In other words, many parents want a certain career, appearance or college for their teen. For example, a farmer has a son who wants to be a teacher rather than his father's successor, and a lawyer has a daughter who hopes to be a police officer instead of joining his firm someday. These parents experience varying amounts of disappointment and sometimes anger because their children fail to live up to the parents' expectations.

Accepting teens as individuals who will have to make their own decisions about how to be an adult in the world can be extremely hard to do. But the healthy teen will grow up and do just that. Parents who reject their teen for failing to follow the parents' plans or who reject some aspect of their teen's life may find themselves painfully alienated from this person who they care about so much.

Easing the Parent/Teen Crisis

What are some ways parents can begin to break the cycle of disagreement with their teens? First, recognize that teenagers must become independent to become adult, 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), talk (and make mistakes) and slowly take control of their lives. Parents should try to look at their roles in their struggle with teens. Sometimes it may require professional assistance to help parents see how they contribute to the struggle. Parents may need to learn new ways to struggle with their lives, rather than allowing the teen's struggles for independence to get mixed up with their questions.

The changing parent/child relationship is bound to cause some problems and stress in all families. Parents can no longer control every part of their teen's life, but they can keep the communication lines open and be a positive example for their teen to follow. The warmth with which mature parents speak of their relationship with their teens is evidence that the struggle to help and let children go is well-rewarded, for only then will they want to come back.

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