

Understanding Adolescent Behavior: Pathways, Peers, Parents, and Putting It All Together

A child, who was once sweet, kind and outgoing, suddenly becomes sullen and withdrawn. A child, who used to talk constantly to her parents about her day, suddenly tells her parents very little. This same child may also engage in risky behavior and engage in activities that are unexpected. What has happened to this child? Once you rule out alien abductions, you are left with the reality that your child has now become an adolescent. Even though we all were once adolescents, how can we begin to understand what our child is now going through? As we grow older, it becomes more difficult to understand the behavior of our adolescent because it may often become difficult not to take their behavior personally. In order to help us understand their behavior, it will be helpful to understand the following.

1). The brain of adolescents undergo significant changes as it moves from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. From the age of 13 to 15, an adolescent's brain grows in size, and motor skills and spatial perception improve. Pathways develop in the brain that regulate cognitive function and emotion, and learning and memory are at the highest point. These new pathways that develop cause an adolescent to seek out new behaviors. The frontal lobe that develops the areas of reasoning and judgment does not develop until age seventeen or older, so that an adolescent may engage in risky new behavior without understanding the consequences of their behavior.



2). The importance of Peer relationships: As children grow, develop, and move into early adolescence, involvement with one's peers and the attraction of peer identification increases. As pre-adolescents begin rapid physical, emotional and social changes, they begin to question adult standards and the need for parental guidance. They find it reassuring to turn for advice to friends who understand and sympathize – friends who are in the same position themselves. By “trying on” new values and testing their ideas with their peers, there is less fear of being ridiculed or “shot down”. But “peer Pressure” has negative connotations because the idea that someone, or something, lures our children into learning dangerous and destructive behavior by discarding all parental behaviors and values scares adults. The peer group is a source of affection, sympathy and understanding; a place for experimentation; and a supportive setting for achieving two primary developmental tasks of adolescence. 1 – identity- finding the answer to the question “who am I” and 2 – autonomy – discovering who they are as separate and independent from parents. It is the everyday social relations that peers have which help develop the social and emotional competence of the individual, providing them with a sense of identity and independence.

3). The importance of parents: The adolescent appears to be withdrawing from your family. Where once they enjoyed hanging out and doing family activities, now they act like they are physically being hurt if you suggest a family outing. Unfortunately, some parents give the adolescent what they seem to be asking for – lots of separation from the family. The parent is an important part of the puzzle along with the peer relationships. Adults need to recognize the importance of these peer relationships and acknowledge the crucial part they play in adolescent development. Parent's perceptions of their children's relationships with their peers play an important role in determining whether or not the relationships foster a positive or negative environment. If parents are accepting of these relationships, they are far more likely to be a positive experience. Parental disapproval of the peer relationship is likely to lead to conflict. There is a link between parenting practices and

the influence of peer relationships, and an adolescent's susceptibility to peer pressure is directly related to their family environment and parenting styles.

4). Key to family harmony: Dialogue – communication skill that encourages conversation to build relationships and help reduce conflict at its beginning. Dialogue is merely asking questions of everyone in the family – out of curiosity – in order to better know and understand one another. Parents often think that giving lectures is the best way to teach. This is true only when children are very small. As soon as they begin to think for themselves, it is helpful to engage them in dialogue. Dialogue should be safe conversation. Whatever is said and done when your family is together must not make people feel bad, disappointed, threatened, stupid or wrong. Since it is designed merely to find out information, dialogue is valuable in helping family members understand and appreciate one another. Dialogue is just asking simple questions to find out information, not to correct, not to change the other person, with no right answers. When people share their thoughts and



ideas, they take a risk. When the other person accepts their thoughts and ideas by listening and not arguing, trust begins to build.

Accepting what another person thinks does not mean that you agree, but only that you accept that he has the right to think his or her own way. This is very important to an adolescent who is trying to figure out who he is and what he believes. During dialogue some differing views may arise, but they are merely to be considered different rather than a source of disagreement. Dialogue will occasionally expose differences in some area where agreement is critical, but work on these differences at another time, long after the safer dialogue. Dialogue should be tried first at resolving differences. This way a solution can be found without conflict. Since disagreements are often the result of saying the same thing in a different way, asking a number of “why” questions will often reveal agreement rather than what was first thought to be disagreement. In other cases, all these “why” questions will help you understand the

difference and open doors to cooperative compromise or another peaceful resolution. It's amazing how many conflicts can be avoided at the start if we just listen to each other and try to understand each other better.

Now that we understand some of what our teen is going through and have learned to “talk” to our teen, how do we navigate those situations where we disagree with our teen's choices, behavior, or attitude? The following four ideas can help parents deal with difficult situations they encounter with their adolescent.

RESPOND RATHER THAN REACT!!!

1). First, a sense of connection between a teenager and parent provides a backdrop against which all other interaction takes place. If the parent-child connection is consistent, positive, and characterized by warmth, kindness, love, stability, children are more likely to flourish socially. They are more likely to be self-confident in their relationships with others, and to be more cooperative with others. Also, teens with these kinds of positive relationships with their parents on the whole struggle less with depression, and have higher self-esteem. Relationships characterized by kindness and devoid of unkind words or acts appear to be important to healthy adolescent development. Some ideas that can help foster a stronger positive connection: Having dinner time together or finding an activity they really enjoy and have them invite three of their friends over to engage in the activity (making fun desserts for the kids to eat while watching a favorite movie).

2). In addition to the sense of connection between parent and teenager, the monitoring process is crucial to successful parenting. Teenagers who report that their parents take a genuine interest in their activities are

more likely to avoid trouble. Teens whose parents know who their friends are and what they do in their free time are less likely to get into trouble with their peers. In the context of a warm, kind relationship, parental monitoring of teen activities comes across as caring rather than intrusive. Parental monitoring of adolescent behavior inhibits not only the opportunity for delinquent activity, but negative peer pressure to be involved in such activity as well. Our kids may be sending out the message to stay away, but research has shown that teens flourish in an environment where the parents do not stay away but are very involved in loving ways. Some ideas: have your house be the house that teens can hang out. Doesn't take a lot of money – cheap popcorn and Kool-Aid or off brand soda could be bought and given to the kids. Or be the parent who volunteers to take the kids to a movie you approve of. Driving teens around with their friends gives you great opportunities to listen to what is important to them. (this is one situation where it is a benefit to be invisible to your kids).

3). Parents need to encourage the development of psychological autonomy in their teenage children. Psychological autonomy is nurtured in children when parents genuinely respect their teen's ideas, even when the ideas are contrary to their own. Encouraging independent thinking and the expression of original ideas and beliefs, validating feelings, and expressing unconditional love are ways to nurture psychological autonomy. The opposite of psychological autonomy is psychological control, which is characterized by changing the subject, making personal attacks, withdrawing love, or inducing guilt to stop your teen from thinking or feeling in any way that is different than the parent's way of thinking. This process is difficult because they are trying on your values and ideas to see if they agree with them. In an unconditional loving environment, teens will most likely accept the values of their parents, but they need to figure out if these values are their own. In the long run, we really do want our kids to have their own convictions. Some ideas: Have a time when you can sit down with your child and talk to them about the music they like. Listen together, and ask questions about it. This is a time where compromises need to be made. You can also do this with their clothes, hairstyles, etc.



4). Family rules and boundaries can provide a sense of stability to teens who are struggling to figure out relationships, roles, and even their own personalities. Although they may protest loudly against being required to live up to certain standards, when they have a hand in crafting those standards, and when those standards are demanding but fair, teenagers will flourish. As a parent, you need to decide what the non-negotiable rules are, defend those demands, but lighten up on lesser matters. Parents are spending the most time having conflict on those issues that are somewhat considered minor. This may mean you need to have a willingness to let her room look like a junkyard for a while. Close the door and pretend not to notice. Ask yourself "is this behavior to which I object bad enough to engage in conflict or can I let it go? If the behavior is that important, then brace yourself and take a stand. But we need to have as few non-negotiable rules as possible. On enforcing the rules, some of the problems of enforcing the rules can be eliminated by engaging teens in the process of setting the rules and assigning consequences before the rules are broken. When parents include teens in establishing clear rules about appropriate behavior and consequences, the arguments over rules and punishment lessen. Teens can no longer claim that punishments or expectations are unfair, and parents can take on the role of calmly enforcing the pre-arranged consequences instead of having to impress upon the teen the seriousness of the problem and scramble to find an appropriate punishment. Helping to set the rules may not stop teens from breaking them sometimes, but it can help parents to avoid a power struggle with their teens. Parents who expect that teens will sometimes act in ways that are inappropriate or undesirable, but prepare for such behavior by involving their teen in the formulation of rules and consequences, may discover that they are engaging in conflict less and enjoying their adolescent more.

Translating general ideas into specific behaviors, and then into patterns of interaction can be a challenge, especially if one or both parties are already engaged in less productive patterns of interaction. The task of establishing a warm, caring, positive, relationship characterized by kindness with a teenager whose favorite phrases are “you just don’t understand” and “leave me alone” can seem overwhelming. While it is true that



one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence is to separate from parents, and that peer influence takes on greater and greater importance during teen years, there is still no substitute for the parent-teen relationship.

Conclusion: Parents who give their teens their love, time, boundaries, and encouragement to think for themselves may find that they actually enjoy their children’s adventure through adolescence.

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