

A Way to Parent a Teenager

A good relationship with your teenager is the foundation of good parenting. In some ways, a good relationship with a teenager takes years to build. In other ways, children and adolescents hunger so much for a relationship with their parents that goodwill in a relationship can be built up rather quickly with the right effort. A good way of thinking about this effort, in either case, is that the right effort is non-effort: more a way of being than of doing.

To begin, having fun and just spending time together is vital for a good relationship with an adolescent. Enjoying each other's company is a pleasure for both of you and shows your child that you both love and like them. Enjoying each other strengthens your connection and is essential to a young person feeling prized. Here, the effort is in making the time and figuring out an activity, but its value comes from just being together.

Also, having conversations where you give room for an adolescent to reveal themselves to you at their pace and at the depth they choose while you reveal some of your thoughts and experience with them without an inkling of a lecture, advice, or judgments-- without any attempt to change them or their views or to fix the problem-- is key to creating a trusting relationship that is meaningful for both of you and helpful to your teenager. The conversation does not need to be deep, but your adolescent needs to sense that you care for them and are interested in their life. The emphasis for the parent is on attentive listening and attempting to understand their child rather than on doing anything.

Aside from creating a strong connection, talks like this where you respectfully offer some of your thoughts and experiences provide a good opportunity for an adolescent to reflect on life or on a particular situation with a trusted person. They can think out loud and use you as a sounding board and make use, or not, of your insight. This process can aid them in deepening their understanding of their lives and to make decisions about what to do or how to live.

Another virtue of this kind of dialogue is that your adolescent hears information from somewhere besides their friends, their own mind, and popular culture. Their friends and their mind do contribute good ideas but the insights of a caring parent can add something unique to their internal conversation: knowledge and appreciation of the human experience that comes from years of living.

Such a dialogue also sends the message that you have faith in your teenager: in who they are and in their ability to figure out how to live. This faith builds confidence, self-acceptance, and connection. Instead of making an effort to give sage advice, you are just in conversation about life. You are emphasizing the importance of the long-term relationship and of your child learning how to live over short-term input about a specific issue. In my experience, I don't see teenagers coming to their parents often for this kind of interaction primarily because they want and need a private life and to believe they can figure things out on their own. However, they do come often enough that it can make a significant difference in your relationship and in the teenager's self-knowledge, self-acceptance, confidence, and directedness. These talks do not involve you being their friend but their parent and a mentor.

Mentors, traditionally, have a perspective on a child that parents often don't have because parents are so invested in their child's future. Parents often have dreams for their children which do not accord with the child's vision for himself/herself. Good parenting of a teenager involves developing *detached attachment* and an ability to *perceive* the distinguishing talents, motivations and soul of your child: qualities common to mentors.

Detached attachment is loving, caring for, and being involved in your child's life at the same time that you can detach yourself enough from your dreams to allow your teenager the freedom to find their own passage into adulthood. Good parenting/mentoring also involves perceiving your child's gifts, interests, soul and admiring and encouraging them. It requires accepting *their* life direction as well as having talks with them so that they can explore *their* values and dreams with small doses of your humbly offered perspective.

Knowing your adolescent involves not only perceiving their individuality but having some understanding of the nature of adolescence and modern adolescent culture. Adolescence is a time of great upheaval in the body and soul. The energies of adulthood are pushing through and exerting tremendous pressure both in their power and novelty to the young person. Adolescents *feel* this so intensely and are learning how to deal with these forces. You may be able to play a role in their learning if you can cultivate the right mindset.

Even though we have all been teenagers, we can easily forget what it was like because it has been so long ago-- several lifetimes it sometimes seems. But making the effort to remember ourselves into their skin through our own youthful experiences and through our ability to imagine and empathize with this time in their lives can help us better know our children. Understanding the world of adolescence can go a long way toward comprehending who they are and what their lives are like.

One of the key things to realize is the importance of friends and peers. Belonging to a group and being with friends is so important, enjoyable, and just plain fun for teenagers and so critical to their confidence that they emphasize this aspect of their lives. And the more they hang around friends, the more they are immersed in adolescent culture. This is all perfectly natural.

Therefore, being irritated with their social desires and adolescent culture creates automatic animosity. This does not mean we don't have a respectful dialogue about adolescent culture with our child but we must be able to see through its surface presentation into its more harmless attributes, powerful attractions, and unique expressions of life. We do not need to criticize adolescent culture because in a respectful conversation your child will be able to see and acknowledge the weaknesses instead of having to defend it against your attacks. In being critical, you needlessly create resistance. Offer your thoughts in a spirit of humility-- as just your tentative personal opinion instead of as an expert condemnation of youth culture. Trust your own life experience, have quiet confidence in what you have learned, and they will respect your response. However, in acknowledging your adolescent's autonomy and intelligence, you also give him more confidence-- increasing his ability to make independent decisions.

When we rail against peer pressure and adolescent culture, we may forget how peer pressure affected us when we were teenagers and how it still influences our actions today. We are all influenced by our peers, popular culture, and the sub-cultures we move in, even as adults. If we become more aware of how we are influenced by our peers and by our culture then we can have more empathy for the role it plays in their lives.

Cultivating these qualities of *being* is an important aspect of modern parenting where hierarchical styles of family structure have diminished and a more egalitarian approach to parenting is more growth promoting and fulfilling for both parent and adolescent. You might ask "if this is the case, in what ways do I influence my child?"

Several ways of thinking about your influence on your adolescent are that: you most influence when you least *try* to influence; you least influence when you most *try* to influence; you have little *direct* influence; you should

not even *try* to influence; you influence by *perceiving* them for who they are; and on occasion, you have to *intervene*.

Influentia- medieval Latin- “fluid flowing off of the stars that affects character and destiny.”

You most influence when you least try to influence. Mostly, your influence flows over your child through who you are in the daily activities and interactions of living and in the open, respectful conversations you have about life. *Trying* to influence them has a negligible effect compared to the influence you exert through the person you are. One of the most critical efforts you put into your relationship with your child is not an effort on them but an effort on yourself: attending to your own soul, mind, and behavior so you can be a model for living, so the family atmosphere envelops your child in certain values, and so you can embody this parenting style.

A corollary of the above statement is that *you least influence when you most try to influence.* The more effort you use to attempt to input insight into your teenager the more likely it is to be shut out. If you pretend to have an open, respectful conversation but instead are trying to convince them of something or are irritated, you create resistance and reduce your influence while your child is contemplating aspects of their life. If they sense that you are trying to control them or persuade them in a particular direction, they will instinctively rebel against that control. Teenagers are skittish creatures, especially around their parents, and want freedom just like all of us. It requires from you a certain way of being for them to allow you to be more involved in their life.

You have little direct influence. Your teenager has an individual soul with its own motivations and inclinations and therefore, they themselves are their major influence. Most of us have the experience of being different than our family members in many ways. This is no different with your child in comparison to you. They have their likes and dislikes, talents and weaknesses, fascinations and blind spots which will greatly influence their lives. Part of a parent’s role is to perceive, accept, and allow their individuality. Parents don’t have a choice about whether an adolescent will express their individuality because an adolescent will express their individuality whether a parent likes it or not. The question is, can you appreciate who they are so they can better accept that individuality?

In addition, *you should not even try to influence.* You should not interfere with the individual soul of your child. It is critical to perceive and honor their individuality because it contains the talents they have brought to the world and the motivation to follow their calling. This blessing gives them more confidence to accept who they are and it strengthens the relationship that you have with them. Therefore, you influence by *perceiving* and encouraging them for who they are which can aid them to have the courage to live their own life.

I say all this with the caveat that at times *you have to intervene.* At times, their actions or potential decisions are such that you have to *do* something. However, the intervention is likely to go better and your relationship maintained if you have built this strong foundation: a level of trust and connection that helps your relationship weather this storm. You have not been regularly interfering in or commenting on their life but only step in or make a statement when it is very important. They haven’t felt hassled by you but have been allowed the autonomy to live their life so they are much more agreeable to temporarily giving up their freedom when it happens rarely. Also, by seldom intervening, the interventions you do make have more impact and cause your teenager to take them more seriously. Less is more.

Mostly, you should let life provide its natural consequences. If life provides the consequences the vast majority of the time instead of you intruding, then your teenager will also be more open to talking about life’s consequences with you. In this situation, you are working together to deal with their life instead of having a

power struggle over control of their life. However again, you do have a responsibility to intervene when the severity of life's consequences demands it.

In the end, if your relationship with your adolescent is not going well, it is your duty to make it better. This relationship is too important not to make the effort to improve it. Even though adolescents may seem difficult to deal with, you have to remember that after all, it is their job to exert their independence. However, it is your role to develop the rapport that betters your relationship and also improves the quality of life and the growth promoting opportunities for your child.

Contrary to popular belief, adolescents desire a relationship with their parents. They obviously want to be with their friends and spend the vast majority of their social time with them but they want to be connected with their parents too. Sometimes they do not even realize this because they are so busy with their friends and lives. And at times, it can be so difficult for them to have a relationship with their parents. Living together for many years makes us all sensitive to each other's personality quirks and teenagers are especially sensitive to input by their parents because they are attempting to individuate. However, they desire connection with you even though they are often preoccupied with their peers. Even though, at times, you might be hurt by their lack of involvement with you or you might be too busy with your own life to notice your lack of connection with them, you need to be ready and available for them when they are ready for you. At times, you also need to initiate an effort to engage them when they are not.

The effort in parenting is in attempting to forge a relationship but it takes non-effort, more a way of being than of doing, to make the relationship work. Put another way, the right effort is to love, like, enjoy, admire, listen, understand, perceive, model, accept, and allow. The right effort is to care for and allow freedom to the adolescent's soul.

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Licensed Professional Counselor
Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor III
www.northwestpassages.com
mike@northwestpassages.com
503 858-8770

Tao Te Chi'ing- Chapter 10, translated by Stephen Mitchell

...Can you love people and lead them
Without imposing your will?
Can you deal with the most vital matters
By letting events take their course?
Can you step back from your own mind
And thus understand all things?

Giving birth and nourishing,
Having without possessing,
Acting with no expectations,
Leading and not trying to control:
This is the supreme virtue

