The Challenge of Being a Teen

It is very popular to talk about the time when our children become teens as a time of tension, rebellion, conflict, and frustration. We may hear someone say: ‘Watch out! He’s about to become a teenager!’ or ‘Of course she’s self-centered, she’s a teenager.’

Such negative views of teens are not accurate and not helpful. In fact such ways of thinking about teens can make things worse than they are. Most teens grow into adulthood fairly smoothly. Most teens become adults who hold values much like those of their parents. There are a few things that can make this time of life less stressful.

Be patient. Teens may be starting to look like adults. They may start expecting some of the freedom that we generally reserve for adults. But they are still learning. They will do things that seem very stupid to adults. At the same time they may appear to be very confident. They are progressing from childhood to adulthood. Our attitude can be: ‘We enjoy watching you grow into adulthood.’ We should show the same patience toward our teens that we want people to show us when we are learning something new.

Stay involved with your teens while allowing them to take increasing control in their own lives. It is helpful to monitor teens in respectful ways; they want respect just as much as we do. When they ask for permission to go out, we can say, ‘Tell me about your plans. Who are you going with? What will you be doing?’ When asked in the spirit of interest, most teens will discuss this with their parents. If there are parts of their plans that concern us, we can say so and discuss the possibilities. Take time to listen and talk.

Expect some stress. It is not easy being a teen. They often feel very self-conscious while acting very confident. They will be especially stressed at times of transitions (for example, when the family moves or when they graduate from one school to the next). At such times, they may be more anxious and tense. During these times there is likely to be increased bickering and squabbling. But when we are aware of the stresses they are dealing with, it is easier to be patient with them.

When there are times of disagreement, we should not hold on to feelings of frustration. Let go of the frustration. Don’t dwell on or worry about disagreements. Most teens get over disagreements fairly quickly. We adults should be careful that we don’t keep dragging the emotions along behind us.

Allow them freedom in matters of taste. Do not make fun of their clothing, grooming, music, or room decor. While parents may see some teen decisions as violations of customs and good manners, wise parents allow teens increasing freedom in areas of personal taste. Negotiate limits in areas of safety and morality. ‘We don’t feel good about you being out after dark, but you are
welcome to bring your friends here to talk or snack or listen to music.’ We should neither command them nor abandon them. We should negotiate with them.

**Love them.** While teens may act tough, they still need to be assured that we love them. Regularly let them know that you enjoy them, and are proud of them.

**Applications:**

Do you remember your teen years? Did you sometimes feel lonely, confused, and self-conscious?

What kind of parenting would have helped you better deal with your feelings as a teen?

Did your parents sometimes disagree with your style - grooming, room, clothes? What did your parents do that helped you? What did they do that was unhelpful? Can those recollections help you relate better to your own teenager(s)?

What are some of the things your teenager does that are commendable? Actively look for those qualities and behaviors you want to encourage. Tell them ‘Thanks’ or ‘I’m proud of you.”

Help your teen discover his or her talents. What does he or she love to do? What natural abilities does he or she have?

Avoid comparing your teen with anyone else. Don’t compare them to you when you were a teen. Don’t compare them to siblings or other teens you know. ‘Why can’t you be more like _____?’ is never helpful. Enjoy the unique combination of talents that each child is.

Help your teen find ways to be of service that make good use of his or her talents. If your teen is very compassionate, he may like tutoring other children. If your teen is very good with her hands, she may like making things for children or people in need. Work with your teen to discover ways she or he can use those talents to make life better for others.

For more information on helping your adolescent, you might enjoy reading “Between Parent and Teenager” by Haim Ginott.