

UNDERSTANDING - ADOLESCENTS

by Kirsty O'Callaghan

Adolescence is a time of rapid and dramatic change. With the exception of infancy, the amount and speed of physical growth and change for adolescents is greater than in any other time in a person's life.

During these years of growth for the child, anytime from 10 years to 20 years of age, parents and/or other adults in the place of providing care for these children find they need to adapt their parenting style to suit the changing needs of adolescents.

Parents and/or care givers experiencing adolescent behaviour often are left feeling some or all of the following:-

Inadequate, unappreciated, unheard, unhelpful, confused, angry, loss of their 'babies', lack of control over the situation, left out, uninformed, undervalued and concerned for the future of the child.

These feelings can lead to stress or unease within oneself, as well as through the whole family or situation.

Parents may constantly feel their home has turned into a battle ground or a place of unrest instead of a place of harmony.

Being aware of the changes that are happening for the child, and seeking help, support and current information in this specific area, will allow the parent and/or care giver an ability to understand and manage the teenager more effectively.

Children entering adolescence face three big challenges during this developmental stage:-

- Biological (physical changes)
- Psychological (changes in thinking and feeling)
- Social (changes in relationships)

The Biological Challenge:

The first signs of physical changes vary from person to person. These can range from 'growth spurts' in height and/or weight to hair growth in private areas and face region for boys. Their bodies are also undergoing growth on the inside. A huge increase in production of hormones is happening

(testosterone for boys and oestrogen for girls) and glands in skin are becoming more active and often over active.

These hormonal changes lead to sexual growth, including changes in body shape, full development of sexual organs, changes to skin, and voice changes in boys and menstruation for girls.

No wonder a teenager gets so preoccupied in how they look. These changes can lead to a period of appearing 'gangly', out of proportion, and some things growing larger and others still catching up, all the while their skin may also appear blotchy or the experience of acne.

The Psychological Challenge:

Adolescents are starting to realise that they are different from their parents and the rest of the world and that their parents are imperfect. They are beginning to develop their own sense of identity and increase in independence. It is a time where they are working out their own values and beliefs. They are also realising that there are new possibilities open to them and are less likely to accept things the way they are or believe in something just because an adult says so.

Teenagers often refuse to believe that anybody, especially their parents could understand the new and intense feelings they are experiencing, however they have a tendency to take things personally, blame themselves and others when things go 'wrong' and jump to conclusions about what others are thinking of them and feeling.

In their search for their unique identity, adolescents may assume that they are invincible and that nothing bad will happen to them. They may engage in risk taking behaviour. They can show sound judgement and are capable of making good decisions; however this is sometimes overshadowed by how they can give more weight to immediate rather than long term consequences. Adolescents need help from their parents to make decisions that have long term implications and risks.

Adolescents can go from demanding autonomy at one moment to being very needy the next. This can be a confusing time for any parent wondering how much freedom to give whilst taking into account the level of maturity, as well as dealing with how the teenager is communicating their needs.

The Social Challenge:

Adolescents are predominately interested in themselves and their relationship with others, meaning they would rather spend time alone or with their friends/peers.

Although children become more focused on their friends during this time as they are seemingly getting their help and support from them, family will still remain an important influence. Ultimately, adolescents tend to follow their parent's lead and end up being more similar in their values, beliefs and behaviours.

In contrast to the widely held picture of adolescents having major conflict with parents, most teenagers report a positive relationship within their families.

However, adolescents are typically more negative and have more conflicts with their parents than usual at this time. These are usually over minor issues like homework, tasks to be done at home and television or computer time. Although this may wear on a parent's patience, it is a sign of growing up, seeking independence, developing confidence and taking responsibility. Arguing within a family can allow young people to express and assert themselves in a safe environment, before they assert themselves in the outside world. The child will learn through your example what is the best way to be true to themselves, be heard and achieve a desirable outcome.

Adolescents experiencing all this growth will go through periods of shut down (sleeping a lot or just sitting in front of the TV), malfunction (seeming crazy and irrational) and overactivity (can't sit still or jumpy or the inability to concentrate), and sometimes this can all happen in one day!

The good news is your child will survive all of this, and so will you. You will have highs and lows, however overall the outcome is generally one of producing an adult that you can be very proud of in the years to come.

The key is gaining the knowledge and communication skills to best understand your teenager and for all involved to be patient with this process. It is very important during this time to take a step back and oversee the situation and ask yourself are you being the parent your child needs, or are you being the parent you think you 'should' be or the parent your parents were. The most helpful parent is the one your child needs right now.

Coaching Exercises for Further Consideration

- Think about life with your teenager over the past two weeks. Have you noticed any physical changes described in the above information? How are they feeling about these changes? Think of some positive comments you can make to help your teenager feel good about the changes that you have noticed. This will help build up positive self esteem for your child as well as allowing your child to see you are still interested in them and what is going on for them now.
- Could you arrange regular one on one time with your teenager doing something you both like together? This will help you and them not feel so isolated or left out, and encourage sharing of ideas, thoughts and feelings about life in general.
- Next time you find yourself in conflict with your teenager, ask yourself “What is this really about?” Is this argument really about homework, or is it about the adolescent asserting their independence and their need to have more say in what they do? If you see it from their perspective you are less likely to take things personally and more likely to respond calmly and constructively as issues arise.
- How could you be more sensitive and responsive to your teenager during this time of growth? How could you better understand what they are going through? How could you be present with your child and listen more? How could you be more flexible with this stage? Asking yourself these questions may enable you to do something differently to get a better response from your child so you can find it easier to have the outcome you are looking for.
- How could you express your needs and feelings to your teenager without blame, judgement or criticism? In doing this you may allow your child to take in what you are saying, express their point of view and both of you come to an agreement that will more than likely be followed through on.
- What changes could you make to your life now that you are having more time on your hands? What hobby could you take up? Have you wanted to do something, like volunteer work but never had the time? What else could you be putting your energy into now that your teenager is growing up and taking less of your time each day?

- Have you considered writing things down for your teenager rather than just giving them verbal instructions that they don't always follow through on? You could create a list or a diary for them with what you would like them to achieve. You could also leave thank you and I love you notes to bring a smile to their face when you are not around. You could even implement a reward system when their list is complete. In this way there is no chance of them forgetting (as teenagers do). It also allows them to be responsible for the consequences of lists not being followed through on. Taking all this into account may avoid unnecessary conflict.

In closing a quote for your consideration:

“If a child sees his parents day in and day out behaving with self discipline, restraint, dignity and a capacity to order their own lives, then the child will come to feel in the deepest fibres of his being that this is the way to live”.

M. Scott Peck

Information in this document has been sourced from the following areas:-

- ABCD Parenting Young Adolescents - www.abcdparenting.org/index.php
- Wikipedia - Adolescent Psychology
- University of Missouri, Extension Live and Learn – <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/hesguide/humanrel/gh6123.htm>
- My own experiences and personal encounters.



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