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What Should I do With my Teenager?

Parenting Teenagers

Children do not come with instruction booklets, unfortunately. When parents ask "Tell us what to do. We don't know how to handle our teenager", if only we could fish out a handbook, turn to the appropriate page and reply, "Take this, read that chapter and call me next year."

Although there is no formula for parenting, there are, fortunately, some guidelines that both teachers and parents can follow. But first, it is necessary to recall and understand what teenage is all about, and the kinds of problems that teenagers generally face.

Why are they "like that"? - Understanding the pains of growing up.

Put simply, a teenager or an adolescent is someone who is growing from a child to an adult. In fact the term *adolescence* comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means, "to grow up" or "to grow to maturity". This is a developmental period between childhood and adulthood during which the teenager must learn to adapt his childhood behaviours and adjust them according to adult expectations.

During this stage of a teenager's development, he or she tend to be beset by several problems. One is having to *adapt to physiological changes*. Both boys and girls may worry about the shape that their bodies are developing, whether they are able to match the ideal or the standard set in fashion or pop magazines. Any deviation from this may be considered unattractive. Teenagers tend to be preoccupied with how they look, and may react emotionally to problems of acne and pimples. In early adoles-



cence, girls overtake boys and are therefore more developed, both in size and maturity. It is not surprising to find girls in the lower secondary level being attracted to boys in their classes. Heartbreaks occur when these boys are unable to reciprocate.

Parents may be puzzled by sudden *changes in moods* of their teenage children. The teenager may swing from one extreme of emotion to another. The usual emotions of anger,

jealousy happiness or anxiety are experienced in greater intensity and for a longer period than usual.

Teenagers have to learn how to *handle their sex drive* without breaking the norms of society. The sex drive for boys is manifested in their being easily aroused, but in girls, their sexual needs are often intermingled with romance. Younger adolescents will have to learn to establish friendly relationships with the opposite sex. Older ones will need to learn how to cope with dating, going steady, making decisions regarding sexual values and behaviour, and selecting a future life-partner.

In *establishing friendships*, feelings of shyness, embarrassment or inferiority have to be overcome. Teenagers are especially susceptible to peer influence, and they will have to balance conformity to the group's demands with that of their parents.

During this period, the intellectual development approaches new heights as teenagers learn to think more



Handling sex drive...

abstractly and see problems in new perspectives. Parents are often taken by surprise when their usually quiet and submissive children suddenly retorts and challenges them as the teenagers begin the *search for new values and beliefs* of their own. Thus, in openly challenging traditional practices, they may appear to be very egocentric.

Teenagers constantly strive to *obtain good academic results* that would help them meet the criteria for admission into the school, junior college or course of their choice at a tertiary institute. Needless to say, this is one major cause of stress for both parents and teenagers. Parents worry if teenagers are sufficiently motivated and equipped to compete, and teenagers often complain that they are under too much pressure from parents. Sometimes, the blame is shifted to teachers for not doing enough to motivate their students. (What can teachers do? See the previous issue of ASCD Review.)

Teenagers who are unable to cope with these demands opt out of the school system and seek employment. These teenagers will have to make a transition from the protective atmosphere of home and school to that of the working environment. Decisions will have to be made with regard to their future vocational choice and opportunities for further training.

How can I be both firm and kind? - Providing Structure and Nurture

One set of guidelines for parents and teachers is provided by Clarke (1989). Parents need to provide children with care and support and unconditional love without which children would not be able to grow and thrive. This, however, is not enough because children seldom thrive alone. They need others, and must learn the skills to allow others to grow along with them. They need rules, standards of behaviour and values. They need to be responsible for themselves and for others. In other words, they need both *nurture* and *structure*. Clarke mentions six ways in which parents provide structure and six ways they can give care to their children. These are placed on a continuum, from left to right in order of strictness for structure (see Figure 1) and in order of

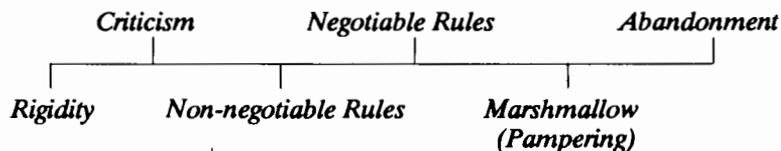


Fig 1. Structure

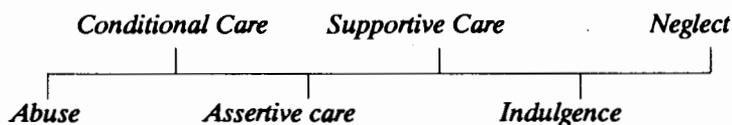


Fig 2. Nurture

hardness for nurture (see Figure 2).

Clarke advocates the use of *negotiable and nonnegotiable rules*, which will help children to internalize protection, safety, freedom and success, and the giving of *supportive and assertive care*, which will help children to feel joy, hope and self-confidence.

Providing Structure

There is *rigidity* when rules are enforced without taking into account the developmental needs of the teenagers who now may need to understand the rationale behind the rules before they can accept and obey them. Those who use this method of bringing up children believe that adults should always be right and that the rules they set should not be questioned. They tend to threaten withdrawal of love or physical punishment if not obeyed:

"I don't care whether it is a class party or the teacher will be present. As long as there are boys present, you are not allowed to go. If you don't obey, you may leave this house."

Children are sometimes given names and ridiculed. As a result of *criticism*, they feel humiliated, rejected and unimportant. As teenagers are in the process of finding and consolidating their identity, such labelling can be especially detrimental and self-fulfill-

ing:

"It's just like you to do such a thing. No one else is capable of such stupid and clumsy behaviour!"

Non-negotiable Rules are rules that must be followed, and there are penalties if they are broken. Although teenagers may express unhappiness at times and feel frustrated, these rules provide them with a sense of security, that adults are concerned about their safety and welfare:

"You must never drink alcohol or smoke."

Negotiable rules are rules that have first been discussed, then negotiated and enforced. The process of negotiation gives teenagers the opportunity to state their opinions as well as to see their parents' point of view. They learn to understand why rules are important and relevant, and takes responsibility for seeing that these rules are upheld.

"You may go out on dates only on weekends, after your homework and household chores are done."

Pampering occurs when freedom is given without responsibility. Pampering implies that teenagers need not follow rules or are not capable of obeying them. Their needs are always

taken care of and as a result of this overprotection or an unwillingness on the part of parents to allow their "kids" to grow up so soon, the children learn to be helpless.

"She's still too young to understand the consequences."

Children may feel a sense of *abandonment* when they feel that adults are not available when they need attention and protection, or when there are no rules set for proper behaviour. Although teenagers want to be treated and respected as young adults, they also like to have this kind of "security blanket" to fall back on:

"Do what you like so long as you leave me in peace."

Providing Nurture

Children suffer from *abuse* when adults are harsh and react to their needs with ridicule, scolding or assault. Such a situation may arise when adults react out of their own sense of disappointment or dismay, and displace their anger onto the children. They tend to be too preoccupied with their own feelings to think about the needs of the children. As a result, the children tend to feel unwanted, worthless and lonely.

"What's the use of crying over spilt milk. I'm already too ashamed of you."

Conditional Care is given when the care given is linked to threats and conditions. Children tend to feel that they are worthy only when they have earned it. They equate what they are worth with what they do.

"If you can't get into a junior college, you don't deserve to go on holiday with the family."

In situations where action is required, adults give *assertive care* when they take charge and do what is needed to help the teenager, even when the latter may feel that he feels that he is old enough to take care of himself:

"I want you to get ready. I'm taking you to the doctor now."

Supportive care is giving comfort, support and offer to help. Teenagers are allowed to decide and do what they are capable of, and are given a choice of whether they want to receive help:

"I see you are upset. Would you like to talk about it?"

Indulgence is when children get more than what is required or appropriate. These children do not learn to be responsible for themselves. When they become teenagers, they tend to be dependent on others.

"Oh you poor little thing. Let me find another date for you. Perhaps, Aunt Sue's son is free."

Children who suffer from *neglect* are often left physically as well as emotionally alone. Adults are seldom available or too busy to have time to listen to their needs or spend time with them. As a result, the children feel that their needs are not important.

"Why bother me over such a small matter? I have my own problems too, you know!"

"What shall I do when they misbehave?"
- Providing Discipline

Hoffman (1970) and Baumrind (1978) provided another set of guidelines regarding the discipline of teenagers.

In Hoffman's study of the effects of parental disciplinary techniques on moral development, he identified three forms of punishment that are frequently used by parents - power assertion, love withdrawal and induction.

Parents who are *power assertive* use physical punishment, deprivation of privileges or possessions or the threat of the withdrawal of these. Parents use the *love withdrawal* technique when they express their anger or disapproval verbally or by ignoring the teenager. Hoffman argues that these techniques of discipline with teenagers may not be appropriate. In power assertion, control is taught through the use of physical force and love withdrawal adds to the teenager's anxieties and may undermine his feelings of self-worth. Both methods do

not provide the teenager with examples of acceptable alternative behaviour. Hoffman is in favour of *induction*, which provides reasons for disapproval of behaviour, and stresses the consequences of undesirable behaviour. This method takes into account the cognitive development of the teenager and encourages the development of moral reasoning.

Baumrind studied how disciplinary techniques are related to the teenager's sense of social competence. Social competence is defined as "the ability to delay gratification, take the perspective of others and generally obey the written and unwritten laws of the social order." She identified three types of parenting styles - authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. *Authoritative* parents allow their children freedom within reasonable limits. *Authoritarian* parents are rigid, power assertive and respond harshly to their children's needs. *Permissive* parents are indulgent and uninvolved with their children.

Baumrind followed up the parents who exhibited these styles and their children from preschool to adolescence. The following results were reported. Children of authoritative parents were better developed in terms of self-esteem, adaptability, competence, internalized control and popularity with peers. Children of authoritarian parents grew up to be lower in social competence and intellectual performance. This was especially so for sons. They were unfriendly, lacking in initiative, leadership and self-confidence.

Other studies of children of uninvolved or parent-centred (as opposed to child-centred) homes have found that these teenagers are more likely to have drinking problems, play truant, spend time on the streets, associate with friends that their parents disapprove of and are more sexually active.

What shall we do if they ask about sex? - Providing sex education

Several research findings have indicated that the relationships between parents and children make a difference in teenage sexual behaviour. Teenagers are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse when they perceive themselves to be unhappy at home and

do not communicate well with their parents. Parents are seldom cited as a source of sexual information, but Darling and Hicks (1982) found in their study of parental influence on teenage sexuality, that positive and negative messages are communicated to their children. The most common one, especially to daughters, is that sex is dangerous. Darling and Hicks feel strongly that sex education for parents is critical:

"Parents need to know that they transmit, verbally and nonverbally, sexual messages to their children. They need to be aware of what messages they are communicating and to be able to identify and clarify their values, so that the messages they transmit are the ones they desire to transmit. Parents are also likely to need a command of biological facts about growth and development in general, and sexual behaviour in particular, so that they can be more explicit with their children. It seems clear from the findings ... that if reality is to become congruent with expectation, youth must have an accurate information base."

Strouse and Fabes (1985) feel that it is important for parents to counteract the distortions of the media. They suggest that sex shown over television be used in discussions. Parents can then expose what is unreal, exploitative, immoral and irresponsible.

Parents who want to provide sex education may find that they are handicapped by several factors. Their own knowledge of sexual matters may be lacking, or they may not have the skills of finding the right words to say the right thing. Some questions that teenagers ask may be too personal or embarrassing. Mulholland (1984) suggests some guidelines:

- Give what information you have as clearly and as simply as possible.
- There is no need to provide all the information all at once. It may be useful to ask "What have you heard about that?"
- Don't be afraid to admit uncertainty or ignorance, but find the answers later or provide the means whereby the teenager can find the answers.

- Don't be afraid of embarrassment but accept it. It may be useful to talk about such feelings and why people feel that way.

What shall we do when there are misunderstandings? - Providing solutions to conflict

Building trust

Problems may be perpetuated and conflicts can escalate when there is lack of *trust* between adults (parents and teachers) and teenagers. A teenager may believe that he cannot trust his parents to understand, and parents may say that they cannot trust their teenager to listen to them. Under such circumstances, both parties may refuse to communicate, each believing that sitting down and talking about the problem would be a futile effort. Both the adults and the teenager must make a conscious decision that they would trust each other to communicate, to find solutions to the problem and to resolve the conflict.

Johnson (1990) outlines the nature of trust as involving the following elements:

- trust involves making a choice.
- there is risk involved, and one would suffer the consequences if this trust is betrayed.
- whether the consequences are beneficial or harmful depends on the behaviour of the person who is trusted.
- Trust is having confidence that the person who is trusted will behave in such a manner that the beneficial consequences result.
- Trust is confirmed when the person trusted behaves in the expected manner to bring about the beneficial consequences.

Either the adults or the teenager can initiate the building of trust. When a person decides to show support, acceptance and cooperation, the other would feel that it is safe to share his thoughts, feelings and reactions. When a person decides to take the risk

and share his thoughts, feelings and reactions, the other would tend to reciprocate by showing support, acceptance and cooperation, and this would encourage the first person to share more. The process can be illustrated in the following diagram:

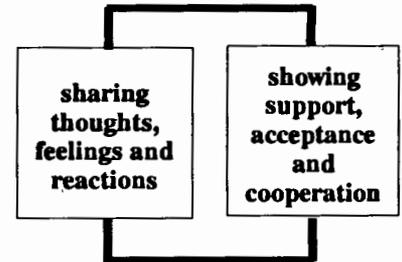


Fig 3. Trust Process

Communicating effectively

When adults and teenager sit down to talk, their conversation may be hindered by *communication barriers*.

Too often, adults are only too ready and enthusiastic to give advice and suggest solutions, before listening to the problem and really understanding it. Sometimes, adults find it hard to resist being judgemental, or may want to avoid the problem altogether when it gets too uncomfortable.

Listening is crucial for overcoming communication barriers. Hearing describes the process by which sounds are received by the ears and transmitted to the brain, but listening invol-



Communication Barrier

Children of authoritative parents were better developed in terms of self-esteem, adaptability, competence, internalized control and popularity with peers.

ves a more active and complex procedure of interpreting and understanding the significance of what has been said. Listening is therefore an art as well as a skill. According to Bolton (1987) listening involves a cluster of skills that would help the listener to understand and empathise with the speaker. These are attending, following and reflecting.

Attending skills is the sending of physical signals to the speaker to show that the listener is paying attention to him. *Following skills* convey to the speaker that the listener is "with" him, following his trend of thoughts or arguments. *Reflecting skills* are needed to show the speaker that the listener has really understood what has been said. It also gives the speaker the chance to correct the listener should there be any misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Managing anger

Adults' pride and the demand for respect by virtue of their authority ('I have eaten more salt than you have

eaten rice') may form other barriers to the relationship. Emotions may also get in the way. Both pride and emotions are often expressed in anger, which has to be overcome or managed.

There are several harmful effects of not expressing anger. The angry person would feel frustrated and often the angry feelings build up over time. The issues are not confronted and problems are left unsolved. The hidden anger often manifests itself in physical symptoms. But anger has to be expressed constructively. Johnson (1990) suggests the following steps:

1. Describe the other person's behaviour that has made you angry.
2. Describe your feelings verbally without being accusative or judgemental. Instead, be specific about the feelings and describe it as being temporary and capable of change.
3. In the description of feelings, the nonverbal messages must match the verbal communication sent.
4. Use listening skills.
5. Take into account the impact your anger will have on the other person. Give him a chance to respond and clarify his feelings.

Finally, Gordon's summary of his attitude towards improving communications with teenagers, in his "Credo for My Relationships with Youth" may be useful.

You are I are in a relationship that I value and want to keep. Yet each of us is a separate person with his own unique needs and the right to try to meet those needs. I will try to be genuinely accepting of your behaviour when you are trying to meet your needs or when you are having problems meeting your needs.

When you share your problems, I will try to listen acceptingly and understandingly in a way that will facilitate your finding your own solutions rather than depending on mine. When you have a problem because my behaviour is interfering with your meeting your needs, I will listen and then try to modify my behaviour, if I can.

However, when your behaviour interferes with my meeting my own needs, thus causing me to feel unaccepting of

you, I will share my problem with you and tell you as openly and honestly as I can exactly how I am feeling, trusting that you respect my needs enough to listen and then try to modify your behaviour.

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