

CHOICES Program

Tune In to Your Teen

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

When parents hold their newborn infant in their arms for the first time, they may be overwhelmed by the social, emotional and economic responsibilities that lie ahead. Today it costs \$85,000 to raise a child from birth to age 18 and the cost may double or triple in the next 20 years. The burden feels greater because it is often believed that parents are solely responsible for how their children "turn out."

Parents are often led to think that if they do the "right things," they will raise "perfect" children into adulthood. The optimism about future generations being "better" than past ones also has its price. No wonder the normal struggles which occur between parents and teens seem to take on such enormous importance.

As the parent of a teenager, it may be helpful to realize that these struggles occur in every family. Chances are that your teen will turn out just fine and that the rebellious boy or girl living in your home will grow up to be a responsible adult, just like you did.

The Task Is Autonomy

One of the greatest difficulties teenagers face in becoming adults is in trying to establish their own autonomy while maintaining a loving relationship with their parents. As children become teenagers, they sense that they can never grow into adulthood without assuming more control over their lives. For parents who have cared for the child since infancy and who have chosen their child's clothes, food, recreation, and housing, this "pulling away" is painful.

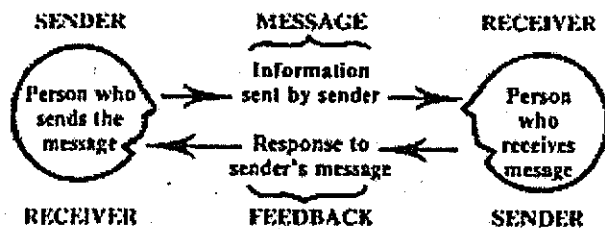
For teens, the struggle for adulthood seems risky because they fear the loss of love as they constantly push against the outer limits of parental boundaries. They push against regular eating patterns, curfew hours, choice of friends, whether or not to attend church, and a whole host of other family values they had previously accepted without complaint.

Parents who do not understand the teen's need to become more independent may feel rejected and hurt by the behavior of their once-obedient child. They often feel anxious about their teen's ability to care for himself and make the right choices. Every defiant gesture seems to be "proof" to the parent that they somehow failed. This period is doubly stressful because both parent and teen care deeply about each other.

Many times, the "teenage conflict" comes during the parents own "midlife transition" years -- a time when adults are having feelings of uncertainty about their own meaning and purpose in life. The soon-to-be adults may be an unpleasant reminder for the parents that they, too, are aging. For other parents, the question of what they will do as a couple after their children have "left the nest" may loom as a threat. Therefore, the problems that parents have with their teens may be viewed as another indication of failure in their own lives. A "good parent," after all, would not be having this struggle, or so they think.

If becoming an "autonomous person" is one task of adolescence, the parents' task is to help children through this stage by allowing them to make their own decisions, and mistakes -- to let them slowly take greater responsibility for their lives. The parents' responsibility is to be more in touch with their teen -- to listen as their child attempts to find a comfortable niche in the adult world.

Communication -- It Takes at Least Two



Communication affects all that goes on between human beings. What parents and teens talk about and how they talk about it is a pretty reliable indicator of the nature of the relationship. How the parents communicate with their teenagers is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships they develop with others and what happens in the teen's world.

The word communication comes from the Latin word "communis," which means common. Therefore, communication refers to the process of establishing something "in common" with another. Communication is the sharing of meaning, or information, with another. Effective communication means "message sent" equals "message received." It is a process in which a person decides what is to be shared, puts it into a format (language, gestures, symbols, or sounds), thus creating the message. The message then is sent in some situational context to a receiver who receives it, decodes it, formulates a response and sends it back to the original sender.

The necessary parts in the communication process are relatively simple -- two people interacting. Yet, communication is complex because people are complex, and parent-teen communication seems to be the most difficult and complex of all. Parents begin communicating their opinions to their children before they can speak -- not only by what they say but by their non-verbal actions as well. These actions include tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and body posture. If parents begin talking to their children with a harsh voice and threatening body posture and their words are put-downs like, "you dummy, can't you ever do anything right?" their children will avoid them, withdraw and tune them out by becoming "parent-deaf." By the teen years, their children will resist, either silently or openly, their every command.

A key principle of effective communications is "*-- if a compliment and criticism are given in the same sentence, the other person will only remember the criticism.*"

Talking With Your Teen

Unfortunately, poor and ineffective communication is the style of most parent-teen interaction.

As a parent, ask yourself: "Do I talk *to* my teenager?" Or, "Do I talk *with* my teenager?"

The parent who "talks to" the teenager is usually reminding, threatening, blaming, ordering, questioning, judging, or evaluating. This style is used to pressure the teen into doing what the parent wants him to do. The result is that it diminishes rather than promotes communication.

Parents, ask yourselves this question: "Would I want someone to talk to me this way?" Imagine how you would feel if someone were threatening, criticizing or lecturing you! Would you remain friends?

On the other hand, the parent who "talks with" the teenager is usually listening to what he is thinking, feeling or wanting to do. This style of communication will enhance the relationship rather than hinder or destroy it. This approach indicates respect, understanding and acceptance.

The most common criticism teenagers have of their parents is: "My parents don't listen to me." From this assumption comes another common complaint, "My parents don't understand me," and from there the conclusion, "My parents don't care about me."

Emotions often run high during adolescence because both parents and teens want to be heard, understood and accepted. If this is to be achieved, parents especially must listen with their hearts as well as with their heads. It means recognizing the feelings behind what their teens are saying, as well as what they are not saying.

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Listening With Your Heart

The most basic causes of frustration, confusion and unhappiness between parents and teenagers is due to ineffective or inappropriate listening skills. In situations in which parent and teenager had differences of opinion, what was said? Were there such statements as, "Why don't you let me finish what I am saying?" or "You just don't understand at all; you just don't care!" or "I don't care what you think!" And how often do you use these responses? "Because I told you so, that's why!" or "If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times...!"

Remarks such as these indicate that neither the parent nor the teenager is listening to the other. The need for listening appears so obvious that we generally take it for granted.

Parents have probably told themselves over and over, "I really ought to listen more..." But do they? Until they recognize that there is real value in listening; that their teens are inviting them to share in the frustrations and joys of their life, they will continue to listen (or not listen) the way they always have.

Here are some ideas for the parent and teenager to help them become more effective listeners:

- Pay attention! Look at the person talking to you. Do not interrupt.
- Do not form immediate judgments about the "rightness" or "wrongness" of what the other person is saying. Put yourself in your teenager's shoes. "The ear that accepts is better first than the tongue that suggests."
- Listen for what is **not** said. Ask the other person to clarify or be more specific. What a person hesitates to say is often the most critical part. What is the tone of voice saying? What need is not being met but being expressed in nonverbal ways?
- Keep your own emotions (anger, hurt, enthusiasm) from interfering with your listening efficiency. If you get "hot under the collar," it will almost always cause you to distort what the other person is saying.
- Final point: effective communication takes time and patience. It takes regularly scheduled time so you can share your wants, needs, thoughts, concerns in a physically and psychologically "safe" environment.

Probably the most difficult task is adjusting to the unpredictability of teenage moods and behavior. Parents must "play it by ear" as they find themselves dealing with a child one minute and a responsible adult the next. Both they and their teen experience this "yo-yo" effect. They must maintain a balance of flexibility with enough control to help adolescents regulate their inner impulses.

Guiding Teens

Parents need to realize that they know their own teen better than anyone. They often have an intuitive sense of what their teenager can handle and the meaning of their teen's behavior. These guidelines will assist them in guiding and understanding teens:

- **Give teenagers clear rules.** Adolescents need help in setting limits on their behavior. And, they can be involved in the setting of these rules. Often, teenagers resent rules and test the limits, but parents should not be afraid to insist on behavior that reflects their values. Parents can show respect for their teenager's feelings and opinions but should reserve the right to limit some of their actions. Teens gain strength and self-respect from parents who are clear and consistent in their expectations and willing to discuss reasons for their decision.

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- **Don't over-react.** Some parents are so anxious about their child's teen years that they react with severe punishment any time their teenager "steps out of line." Frequently, punishment does not help a teenager with self-control. Usually it is better for parents to discuss their feelings about problem behavior with their teenager and work out and enforce mutually acceptable behavior standards.
- **Accept adolescent behavior.** Sometimes adolescents are moody, restless, critical and self-centered. This can be hard to tolerate. Remember that these behaviors indicate the inner turmoil that is part of personality growth. Learn to accept unlikeable behavior without approving of it. Most teen behavior is transitory -- it too shall pass away.
- **Give support.** Teenagers still need and usually react positively to parental help and encouragement. If teenagers make mistakes or behave irresponsibly, avoid criticism or blame. Describe what has happened and discuss what can be done about it. Encourage independence and allow them to make decisions about their own lives whenever possible. Resist the desire to intervene. Allow teenagers to take responsibility when you see them handling it well.

Parents are in the process of "people-making." And with teens, it appears to be the toughest job in the world. There are no holidays, no paid vacations and parents are on duty 24 hours a day for at least 18 years -- and probably longer. We used to think that when children graduated from high school and moved away that responsibilities would lessen and everything would be smooth and easy. Not true! But for most parents all the struggles seem worthwhile.

The keys to satisfying parent-teen relationship are expressing words of appreciation, mutual respect and listening beyond the words to hear with the heart. Virginia Satir, nationally respected family therapist, said, "The greatest gift I can receive from anyone is to be seen by them, to be heard by them, to be understood by them, and to be touched by them."

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Parent Exercise With Teens

Here is an exercise designed to help parents better understand their teenager. Parents should read each question carefully and answer as best they can. For each question, respond "Most Always," "Sometimes," "Not Very Often."

1. Do you regularly spend a 15-30 minute block of time alone with your teenager, just listening to his/her life experiences?
2. Are you and your teenager in conflict about expectations, rules, or differences of opinions?
3. Do you discuss personal matters, such as sex or personal fears, with your teen?
4. Do you give the impression that you really trust your teenager to do what is right for himself?
5. Do you take the time to patiently explain your reason for saying "no" or not letting your teen do something?
6. Do you patiently listen to your teen's reasons for wanting to do something?
7. Do you really support your teen's interests and encourage him in his accomplishments?
8. Do you have regular family meetings in which the whole family gets together to talk things over and make decisions?

Complete these statements:

- What worries me about my teen's behavior is: _____
- What I want my teen to do in life is: _____
- I can help my teen most by: _____

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Teen Exercise With Parents

Here is a communication exercise designed to help teens better understand their parents. The teen should read each question carefully and answer as best he can. For each question, respond "Most Always," "Sometimes" or "Not Very Often."

1. Do your parents wait until you are through talking before "having their say?"
2. Do your parents tend to lecture and preach too much to you?
3. Do your parents really listen to your needs, frustrations, joys, sorrows?
4. Do you discuss personal matters, such as sex, with either of your parents?
5. Do your parents seem to trust and respect you and your opinion?
6. Do your parents explain their reason for not letting you do something?
7. Do you help your parents to understand you by telling them how you think and feel?
8. Does your family talk things over with each other regularly through regular family meetings?
9. Do your parents support you in your interests and encourage you in your accomplishments?

Complete these statements:

- What worries me most about my future is _____
- The most difficult subject to discuss with my parents is _____
- What I want most for my life is _____
- My parents can help me most by _____

Now that both of you have finished these exercises, the next step is to discuss them with each other as soon as the three of you are able to sit down together without any interruptions. It is okay to ask each other to explain answers in more detail and to clarify an answer, but it is not okay to argue with them or make them defend their answers. The more parents and teens talk, the more they learn.