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# **Plain Talk About Adolescence**

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In the United States, adults generally view adolescence as a period of friction, change, and problems. Many teenagers would agree. For most boys and girls, adolescence starts between the ages of 10 and 14 and continues to between 19 and 21.

For the teenager, it is a time of concern about acne, weight problems, menstruation, late development, early development, sexual arousal, school pressures, boredom, parental hassles, peer pressures, and money problems. It is a time of confused feelings, particularly in relationships with parents. Teenagers fight for independence yet fear too much freedom. They resent overprotection but need and want parental attention.

For parents, it is a challenge to keep a balanced perspective on their teenager's emotional roller coaster ride. As their children bounce back and forth between childhood and adulthood, alternating irresponsibility with responsibility, blatantly testing parental authority one moment and depending on it the next, parents often do not know what to expect. They must maintain needed discipline, yet they understand their teenager's growing need for independent action, even for rebellion.

It is easy to understand why many parents and adolescents find this a difficult period to survive. But, once it is over, even the most rebellious child often becomes appreciative, affectionate, and devoted. With maturity comes the realization that much of their parents' behavior, once so irritating, was motivated by feelings of love for them. Also, having children of their own brings understanding of the pressures their parents faced.

Parents should also be aware of their own imperfections. At times, lack of knowledge, poor advice, community pressures, or their own stresses can cause them to overreact to teenage behaviors. To avoid making the same mistakes as their parents, or to make up for what they missed in their childhood, parents sometimes make mistakes themselves.

Adolescence is a trying period, but it is also an exciting one. If parents and teenagers keep tuned into each other, this period may seem less trying and more fun for everyone.

## **How Parents Can Help Keep Communications Open**

When asked about their problems with parents, teenagers most often cite "not being listened to." Really listening is not always easy. Nor is communicating. Some of the following suggestions may help.

- **Give your undivided attention when your teenager wants to talk to you.** Don't read, watch TV, fall asleep, or make yourself busy with other tasks.
- **Try to listen calmly, even though there maybe a difference of opinion.** Concentrate on hearing and understanding your teenager's point of view. Don't start preaching when a give and take discussion is wanted.
- **Develop a courteous tone of voice in communication.** Respect brings respect—even in the way we speak. If we talk to our offspring as we talk to other people, our own youngsters might be more likely to seek us out as confidants. Gruffness or abruptness can arouse hostility, whereas a pleasant tone of voice can pay great dividends in improved relationships.

- **Avoid making judgments.** Anyone avoids confiding in someone who is critical of his or her behavior. It is not necessary to approve all of your teenager's behavior, but it is important to understand the feelings involved. Putting yourself in another's place is not easy, particularly as attitudes, pressures, and choices change. It is a challenge for a parent to be firm about important values while being flexible enough to bend with changing times.
- **Keep the door open on any subject.** Too often teenagers avoid discussing things that may make their parents feel uncomfortable. Belittling, humiliating, and laughing at youngsters can cause deep wounds and short-circuit the lines of communication. Teenagers often pay a very high price for not having the right information about many subjects, including sex.
- **Permit expression of ideas and feelings.** Many young people have their own ideas about morality, marriage, work, education, time, money, and whatever else is a part of our way of life. Just because their views and philosophies are different from yours does not mean that they feel certain about them. Often young people "test" their ideas in conversation. To communicate, you must be willing to listen first and acknowledge their opinions, even if they alarm you. Then give your viewpoints as plainly and honestly as you can, recognizing that love and mutual respect can exist even when points of view are different.
- **Encourage positive self-worth.** Help your youngster build confidence by encouraging (but not forcing) participation in sports, music, art, dance, or any other hobby or interest.
- **Be aware of how you treat other children in the family.** Do you show favoritism? This could make a child feel rejected, unloved, and jealous. Try to be fair and consistent. It will pay off.
- **Make an effort to say nice things.** Too often parents tend to focus on poor performance and behavior. Every human being needs acceptance and appreciation.
- **Hold family conferences.** Most teenagers feel they have little or no voice in family affairs. Family gatherings offer an excellent opportunity for children to participate in decision-making and to work things out together.

## How Teenagers Can Help

What responsibilities does a teenager have in trying to bridge the generation gap? The following code of communication was formulated with the assistance of both young people and adults:

1. *"The first barrier to communication that I must cast aside is the attitude of ignoring anybody over 30 years old. If I expect my parents to tune in to me, then I must be willing to talk to them."*
2. *"Our generation wants understanding from our elders. In turn, it is only fair that we try to understand them—they have needs and feelings and reasons for their decisions."*
3. *"I will listen to my parents with an open mind and look at the situation from their point of view. That's the way I would expect them to treat me."*
4. *"I will share more of my feelings with my parents. They may have experienced some of the same problems. I need to give them a chance to help me."*
5. *"I want my parents to express trust and confidence in me, to grant me more freedom and responsibility as I mature. It is necessary, then, that I live up to their confidence. What I do reflects on them, and they are held accountable for my actions and behavior."*
6. *"Exercising the right to criticize my family, school, or government includes the responsibility to suggest how practical improvements can be made."*
7. *"To promote better communication in the family, I will practice courtesy and consideration for others. I will let my parents know I care about them. They are affected by pressures and problems of everyday living just as I am. I will try to cheer them up when they need a lift."*

## Some Extra Tips for Parents

In addition to improving communication, there are actions parents can take to help their adolescent through the teenage years. The old say, "actions speak louder than words," is particularly appropriate where parental influence on children is concerned.

- **Try to set a good example.** Children learn by what they see. Too often people say one thing and do another. "Do as I say and not as I do" will not carry much weight. Eventually children will ask such questions as "What's wrong with smoking pot when my parents get stoned on alcohol?"

- **Supervise and guide.** Although teenagers are capable of handling certain privileges and responsibilities, they still need help in setting limits on their freedom and behavior. Deciding *with* the teenager what these limits and policies are usually elicits more reasonable attitudes. Moderate and selective guidance is one of the best ways to prevent a breakdown of communication.
- **Communicate, in words and actions, what you expect of your children.** Although teenagers may appreciate a share in some decision-making, they do not want parents to give up authority or to be wishy-washy. Parents who appear confused about firmness and discipline, who are inconsistent, or who disagree between themselves can be perceived as weak and divided. Teenagers need the security of knowing where their parents stand and what parents expect of them.
- **Respect the adolescent's desire for individuality and independence.** Parents do, and should, attempt to influence their children, but this is quite different from trying to force them into preconceived molds to fit parents' desires. Parents can accept and respect their teenagers as individuals without accepting all their ideas. The reverse is also true; teens can maintain respect for parents while rejecting some of their beliefs. One expert in family problems suggests that parents assume the role of watchful bystanders, ready to come forward when help is needed.
- **Take an interest in your children's activities and friends.** This helps to reduce the distance between the generations, since it demonstrates your acceptance of their world. Give the youngsters time to be with their friends and make their friends welcome when they come to visit. Taking an interest in your children's activities and friends does not mean taking on the role of friend or invading your child's privacy. Teenagers need separateness and privacy just as parents do.
- **Try not to overreact.** Many parents brace themselves for the onslaught of adolescence, convinced that it is bound to be a long, hard struggle. Consequently, they are quick to overreact the first time their teenager steps out of line. They punish severely, withdraw trust, and lose confidence in the youngster, thus severing the lines of communication. It is only natural for adolescents to test their parents' authority while trying to assert themselves. At the same time, they are trying out their own competence. Parents must let their children make mistakes—and at the same time be ready to help when help is needed.

It is not realistic to expect complete harmony between the generations. Nor is it pleasant to live through a period of bickering and strain, no matter how temporary. When both parents and teenagers make efforts to communicate and respect each other, adolescence can be an exciting period of discovery for all concerned.

**Mental Health America of Franklin County** is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at [www.mhafc.org](http://www.mhafc.org).