

SOURCE LINES

SURVIVING AND ENJOYING YOUR TEENAGERS: FOUR PILLARS, THREE GOLDEN RULES, AND SOME QUICK COOLING STEPS

This is a demanding time to be parents of teenagers. Many educators report that never before in history has there been so much information going to our children unfiltered by adult caretakers. This is the result of more parents working longer, and technological innovations that have changed how we work, live and learn. What it means for teenagers is that they have more choices to contend with. More opportunity to go astray. Meanwhile, parents are in more serious competition for their children's attention, when trying to teach them those lessons they value. Maintaining effective communication with your teenagers during these challenging times has never been more important.

Adolescence is the bridge from childhood to becoming an adult. It can present many faces. The most talked about ones include: intense moods that come and go at lightning speed, parents who are seen as not knowing anything (in the eyes of the teenager), and teenagers who have become ungrateful and unreasonable (in the eyes of the parents). Importantly, these dramatic changes in your child do not automatically indicate your failure as a parent or their imminent doom. It's a matter of persistence and degree.

Many teenagers can also go through this stage quietly, or industriously, and either more distanced or closer to their parents. There are many roads towards independence. Family counselors have come to understand the importance of family stability when children enter their teen years. It is family stability that provides a secure base from which the teenager can venture into the world. They also remind that, no matter which face teenagers wear, they all have in common an enormous underlying anxiety

(about their changing bodies, fitting in, achieving). The drama of this time for the adolescent may best be summarized as: *"I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I am going to be, but I am not what I was"*. This phrase could equally describes the anxiety of the parent facing the transformation in their children, and fearing for their future.

Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias and Brian Friedlander in their book, Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers, provide some good advice to parents. It is imbedded on four pillars that provide the scaffolding to make communication easier, and promote stability within the family.

Love:

Parenting that occurs outside of a caring relationship breeds frustration. Love can flow freely from you to your children when they are young and cute, but more challenging when they are seemingly turning their backs on established family norms. These are the times to least let go of your love. This involves continuing to show affection to your teenagers (maybe not in front of their friends), celebrating their accomplishments and special moments. It goes a long way towards promoting a sense of appreciation and sense of belonging that all teenagers need.

Two huge cautions, however:

- Don't show love with the expectation of having love showed back to you
- Don't wait to show love until your teenager "deserves" it

L **laughter:**

Humour is the best medicine at any age. It helps to maintain optimism, and reveals your lighter side, both to your teenager and to yourself. Humour diffuses conflict and tension, and can help open the way to difficult discussions. It is also less painful than pulling your hair out. It can be a very useful, alternative way to “nag” about chores undone. Most important of all, humour can neutralize the tendency for parents and teenagers to take things too personally.

L **imits:**

First of all, some limits should be non-negotiable; these are for those matters that involve behaviours that threaten the personal safety of your teen or others. Otherwise, flexibility should be the guideline.

Limits are best applied when accompanied with explanations, rather than *“Do it, because I am telling you to do it”*. Limits provide reassurance to your child, even if this might be challenged on the surface. Portraying parents as the “bad guys” may help them save face with their peers. Love and laughter will make it easier to set limits.

L **inkages:**

They say it takes a village to raise children. As parents, seeking out and maintaining positive relations with your spouse, extended family, friends, and community organizations can provide you with much needed support, encouragement and information. It will also show your children that investing energy in others, being accountable, and being part of groups will serve them in life down the road.

During adolescence teenagers take giant steps toward forming their own identity. This is often a time of huge challenge for both the youth and parents. For their part, teenagers become increasingly curious about new ideas and values and behaviours, many of which they “try on” to the point of seeming unrecognizable to their parents. Parents often become anxious at this point from imagining all sorts of dire

consequences befalling their heretofore well behaved children. And then we react as though it had already happened. The solution is to keep you teenager linked to the past by maintaining family history, rituals, and traditions, all of which contribute to creating a sense of continuity, belonging and ultimately pride for the teen. This is all best achieved when we can also link to our children’s new interests and ideas by showing genuine curiosity in them, and by refraining from dismissing them outright, but rather understanding what the attractive part is for our teenager. It requires us entering into their world with interest and respect.

All of the above pillars will be tested at some point, or quite frequently in some families. Therefore, remember to practice them with the following three golden rules in mind.

- **The chaos that can accompany adolescence is temporary**
- **Do unto your children as you would have others do unto your children**
- **You’re only really listening when you are prepared to be changed by what you hear**

Finally, for those inevitable moments where your teenager raises your blood pressure, here are some quick cooling steps:

1. **Look away from your child and say to yourself, “Stop! Stay calm!”**
2. **Breathe in through your nose to a count of five.**
3. **Hold your breath for a count of two.**
4. **Breathe out through your mouth to a count of five.**
5. **Repeat.**

We welcome your thoughts and comments on this topic. E-mail us at reachus@sourceline.net.

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