

Supporting our Adolescent Children

by Patty Wipfler



Adolescent life in our society is far from easy. We wonder why our children act so distant, seem so moody, and have trouble concentrating on the tasks before them. We wonder why they now stay at such a distance from us. We are often desperate for ways to build more trust and closeness into our relationships with them.

I think that we as parents are often out of touch with the harsh realities of their lives; realities that are taken for granted by all of us as “the way things are.” Our children can seldom tell us what’s wrong because it’s wrong everywhere they look. They see no model of life lived any other way.

Our teenagers most often blame themselves for the troubles they experience. When that is too painful, they become angry with us. But the real trouble is a force much larger than they are—one which they can’t even pinpoint, and so have little chance to fight. We need to understand the things that make life challenging for our teenagers, to become more deft at guiding them through these formative years.

A perspective on the lives of adolescents

The following thoughts on the situation for teenagers have been gleaned from listening to, connecting with, and reading the writings of many teenagers.

- **Young people in adolescence are figuring the whole world out for a second time.** They’ve spent their childhood finding out how things work, who they are, who their parents are, how you get things done, and what is to be learned and enjoyed in life. It has been a twelve- to fourteen-hour-a-day endeavor, and they’ve been eagerly learning at a great rate for ten to twelve years.

As their bodies change and adulthood approaches, they must rethink everything. This takes lots of time and energy. They do most of their re-figuring alone, unless we make ourselves available as listeners on a frequent and regular basis. It is important to them that they come up with their own thoughts and understandings, to their own ways of handling their lives. They are smart enough to know this. So advice and directives from us are ignored and resented.

Try to picture what is going on in their minds during this stage of life. If you know computers, you know that large machines run various key programs on schedule, and they solve other problems (like finding the millionth decimal of pi) in the otherwise unused seconds and moments.

Your adolescent is trying to find his place in the world as he brushes his teeth, and may be working on an understanding of how to make friends as he thumbs through his heavy metal bands magazine. He talks on the phone, and underneath the conversation there is the chance that he'll glean some bits and pieces of reassurance that he's OK, which he'll use to help him get out of bed the next day and face another day of school. Much thinking and sorting of importance is going on internally.

We don't hear about these complicated re-evaluations, but they do take place morning and night. Brain development researchers have identified this stage of development as one in which brain pathways little used in early childhood are pruned and eliminated. In adolescence, the brain is painstakingly re-tooled for the entry into adulthood. The effort takes energy!

- **Young people aren't respected.** The environment in which they are rediscovering who they are and what they can do in life is usually inhospitable. Adolescents are treated as "betwixt and between," with no real judgment and no significant contribution to make in the areas of community life, work, the arts, or political life. Adults rarely ask them "real" questions about their experience or opinions. Usually, this is a sad continuation of the lack of respect they endured as children, when instructions on what to do and when to do it were the mainstay of their interactions with adults.

Perhaps the most difficult effect of society's ingrained lack of respect for young people is that they internalize this attitude. By the time they become adolescents, they have been made to feel so unsure of themselves that they turn this attitude of disrespect on each other.

Rejection of young people by young people runs rampant through our schools. A young person is subject to rejection by his peers on the basis of his hairstyle, his favorite sport, the side of town he comes from, what he eats for lunch, and where he sits at break time. Every young person is searching for ways to understand himself, and ways to build a good relationship with others. A barrage of senseless criticism awaits him as he experiments. This is deeply hurtful to young people. This internalized disrespect compromises each adolescent's ability to experiment and learn in safety.

- **Young people don't get to play freely anymore.** In childhood, play in its freest form is the way children express their genius. They feel powerful, agile, creative, strong, and close to each other as they jump their bikes off the homemade ramps or bake pretend cakes in their backyard. Their whole intelligence is engaged, and

they can reach great heights of cooperation with other children as they make a large game unfold.

After a playtime that goes well, your child knows in his very bones that he is good, smart, and well-liked. Real play is one of the key building-blocks of self-esteem.

Even before adolescence, most children have to give up their unstructured playtime. Homework, chores, and lessons of various kinds eat into their time to pursue friendships, to come up with new and marvelous ways of being together.

By the time they reach high school, it's not "cool" to play anymore. Goofing around, laughing with friends, creating games and fun out of nothing becomes far too rare. This lack of play, laughter, and lighthearted fun robs young people of one of the key ways human beings express their good will and their creativity. Less play means they get less immediate information about how good they are, and how much people like them.

- **Young people are separated from simple affection.** Parents and age-mates alike commonly withdraw from showing open affection when adolescence approaches. No more snuggling at bedtime, no more sitting on laps while talking, no more lighthearted piggyback rides on Saturday morning.

Simple affection is at the heart of close relationships and trust. The cultural habits that pull us away from being affectionate with our teenagers create loneliness and self-doubt that is almost unbearable. Remember?

- **The state of the world is confusing.** The world and its institutions do not make much sense to young people. They were born for finer stuff—more fun, more love, more cooperation, more adventure without peril, more invitations to make a difference, more praise for their brilliance and creativity. They simply, naturally expect a more rational world, and it is deeply confusing to find that hope and expectation dashed against a reality that doesn't explain its cruelties.

Young people feel powerless. There is a real vacuum of leadership toward broadly human goals at every level of our society. Most adults act like they have no power to solve the ongoing conflicts which threaten our existence and which divide our communities. Without the example of hopeful, savvy adults who seed and sprout change, young people are left with the impression that they, too, must be powerless to guide their own lives wisely.

What parents can do



We can build relationships with our children that strengthen them against the harshness of their environment. If times are already difficult between you and your adolescent child, the most important step you can take is to find a good listener. You need to talk, and probably laugh and cry about how confusing it is to try to support your child. It's important to look at your hopes and love for your child, as well as the disappointment, frustration, fear

and anger you feel. Support for you, a place for you to unburden your heart is the first order of business. In any relationship tangle, the people involved need good support to unravel the problems. Your child needs your support, and you'll be in a much better position to give that support when you've had a chance to talk and to release some of the tension you've gathered in your efforts to care.

What follows are general directions that parents of adolescents have found helpful. To navigate your relationship with your child, you'll need to think afresh: most likely none of these directions will exactly fit your situation. Use them like a compass. They'll keep you hiking in the direction of warmer, closer relationships, however rugged the terrain. Don't forget to use a listener to help you strategize and vent your frustrations before you come to the end of your rope.

Listen, listen, listen

Young people are constantly sorting things through, and can use our help if we make ourselves unobtrusively available to listen. This means "hanging around." It may mean watching TV with your son, bringing your magazine or the mending into his room and plopping down on his bed to quietly do your work while he does his homework. It may mean sitting in the bathroom with your daughter and watching her or helping her while she applies her makeup. It may mean showing an interest in her newest nail polish color, and spending time listening to her favorite rock or rap group.

Usually, the questions we ask our teenagers are questions that arise from our fears, suspicions, or curiosities. They can tell when we want to know something because we are upset or anxious. So listening to build trust doesn't involve directing the conversation in any way. It's often just being around, willing to listen if a young person wants to talk. (When your child is in immediate trouble or danger, you must take

stronger initiative. This article is not about handling these crisis situations. It's about preventing them.)

When your child begins to talk, stay interested and delighted in him. Most likely, the subject of the conversation won't be anything you consider important. Remember this: your child has chosen a subject he feels safe talking to you about. In your mind, you will be waiting for a subject of importance to you to surface. You'll want your son to talk about why he's getting a D in geometry, or want your daughter to talk about how badly she felt that she wasn't chosen to be a cheerleader. But what your child can safely talk about is which CD he wants to buy next, or whether or not she should streak her hair. Hang in there!

If you listen well to your child, he will move to topics that are harder to approach. The longer you listen with interest and quiet approval, the safer it will get. A conversation about rap artists can turn into a talk about cliques at school, and how they have hurt your son. A long talk in the bathroom while trying to make a new hairdo can become a good cry about how unacceptable your daughter feels. You won't know where the conversation that seems so petty to you will lead. Trust that your child is gathering safety as you listen. Over days and weeks, safety will build if you continue to be pleased, interested, and quiet about your reactions.

Young people, like the rest of us, look for ways to release emotional hurt and tension. When they're grumpy and hard to live with, they are carrying a heavy burden of bad feelings. When things become safe enough (or hard enough) that your child begins to rage or cry, stay with him. Don't talk much, except to say you're sorry that things are that difficult. But stay. Most likely, your son or daughter will not want you to be nearby.

In times of deep feelings, most adolescents feel like their parents are part of the problem, not part of the solution. If your child is telling you to go away, you need to cooperate with that request to some extent, or once again, you aren't listening or respectful of their wishes. So you may go to the door of the room, or you may say that you'll leave for two minutes.

In order to build new bridges between our children and ourselves, we have to learn to stay thoughtful and supportive through the worst of their feelings about us. We have to keep letting them know that, no matter how they feel about us, we love them and want their lives to be good. We'll stand by them, no matter what. Your child needs to cry and rage his tension away. And if you stay, without reproach, you will be right there when he begins to recover his perspective. You will have passed the test—you cared about him when it was very tough to care, when he was telling you to get lost.

This kind of listening is very difficult for a parent to do. We get angry with our children for being as upset as they are, we blame them for their troubles, and we feel overwhelmed and badly treated.

But listening is a powerful way to build bridges where none existed before.

In order to listen to our children while they are feeling most separate from us, we have to hold on tight to the understanding that they are unloading painful emotions that haunt them. When the crying or raging has ebbed, your child will be relieved of that part of his burden, and will be much better able to take in love, help, and new information. He'll feel your love more easily. When problems have been sitting with a child for a long time, it can take several long cries and upset times before the young person can substantially change his viewpoint and regain his feeling of connection with his family. Listening to feelings does work, even if it is a slow process.

Make time to nurture your relationship

Spend Special Time alone with your teenager, doing what he or she likes to do. It's a very busy world we live in, and time alone together for fun and adventure is precious. This kind of time can be a powerful builder of close relationships between parent and child. Going to a baseball game, the video arcade, shopping at the mall, and watching MTV together are the kinds of things you can begin to do with your child once you set up the time. Let your child decide what he wants you to do together.

Show respect for your teenager

Praise the good you see. Remember that your child is subject to criticism daily for the smallest things. You can counterbalance this lack of respect by letting your teenager know that you value him. His good looks, his good taste in clothes, his love of music, his sense of adventure, and his thoughtfulness in keeping his mess in his room—you can find many things to praise and enjoy.

Stuck? Find a listener, and talk about the things that bug you. When you've talked long enough, you'll be able to remember what you enjoy.

A second significant area in which we can promote respect for our young people is by supporting them to find work or projects that are worthwhile. Volunteering at the local hospital, delivering groceries to shut-ins, assisting the local veterinarian, and paid work available in your town are examples of good avenues for building a young person's understanding of his importance to the community.

Support your teenager's sense of fun and play

He may need rides to see the friends he laughs with most. He may need you to be delighted when he and his friends, who were watching a video, begin to laugh and stuff popcorn down each other's backs. In the serious business of building a grownup identity, your help in hanging onto laughter and play will be invaluable.

Be affectionate with your teenager

The best way to go about being affectionate is not to stop your hugs, wrestling around, hair-ruffling, cuddling while watching TV, or snuggling at bedtime just because your child is growing up. If you have let your cuddling lapse, start it up again, a little here and a little there.

One warning. Let your child determine how much affection you show between you when his friends are around, at least at first. Your child may be subject to harsh treatment because of any missteps you make in this area.

Stay hopeful about your child's capabilities, and about the ability of people to solve problems big and small

The news media concentrate on problems, seldom on solutions. The information we get is about scoundrels, not heroes. Our children need us to fill in the large gaps in information and perspective with exposure to people who make the world a better place, and ideas that are useful and uplifting. Their confusion won't be as deep if we work to supply hope and determination to make life good.

We can counter the harshness of adolescent life: Our attitude of unfailing respect and interest, our hopefulness about our children's future, our affection and even playfulness, our confidence in their ability to uncover their own good thinking, and our example as active, undaunted adults will gradually readjust their perspective on themselves.

Above all, teenagers are starved for genuine, open appreciation for who they are, struggles and all.