

## **Parenting Adolescents: Does Your Parenting Count?**

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Adolescence is a time of metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. It is a confusing journey in which a teenager matures into a person who can be equally separate and connected to the important people in her or his life. Adolescents, unlike a monarch butterfly, undergo this metamorphosis without the protection of a cocoon. Parenting, when facilitating the growth of an adolescent, can serve as a protective shelter. Adolescents emerge into new interpersonal and psychosocial experiences, which require that they learn new skills in ever expanding social domains (Dekovic, Noom & Meeus, 1997). Adolescence is like a rapid explosion of biological, cognitive, and relational growth all at the same time. It requires creative adjustments within family, school, and peer relationships (Steinberg, 1999; Rice, 1999). These adjustments can be made more effectively if we are able to adjust our parenting approach to fit the developmental needs of our teens.

As an informal “rite of passage”, or perhaps because there is no formal rite of passage, adolescents and parents can easily find their individual and relational experiences overwhelmed by confusion and frustration. As a result, adolescence is often negatively identified as a time of storm and stress. A more proactive perspective of adolescence is a “period of growing competencies”, which requires sufficient understanding, support, and shelter to get through successfully (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Wow, that’s a lot to put into two paragraphs. What it suggests is that parenting still counts in adolescence. But not just any parenting style, and not necessarily the same parenting approach we used when our children were small. A parenting style that helps an adolescent continue their metamorphosis into early adulthood with good psychological health is very possible if we are willing to adjust our needs and expectations to become more focused on what our teenagers are facing.

Many parents simply keep the same parenting approach in their child’s adolescent time of growth as they used through their childhood development. After all it feels good to be in charge, and don’t we parents know what’s best for our children. This can be especially true in homes where protection from an imperfect world is paramount in the minds of parents. That attitude often comes from a good heart. Yet, adolescents are certainly different from children and are engaged in different developmental tasks.

It seems, from research, that teenagers require less and less formal direction and more and more training and support as they begin to make more of their own decisions. That's not always comfortable for parents. The reasons can be varied and there's not enough space to cover that. Let me share this, there is a significant relationship between the style of parenting used in a child's adolescence and the resultant adolescent psychological health. So, it may mean that we parents need to work out a new relationship with our teenagers. The research data suggests that parent-teen relationships should look more like teamwork and coaching than simply telling them what "we" want and enforcing rules.

Dr. Baumrind (1991a, 1991b & 1991c), a research psychologist, talks about four general parenting styles that capture a lot about parenting approaches: Authoritative, Permissive, Neglectful and Authoritarian. It seems that positive psychological health, at least with children raised in the United States, is most associated with *Authoritative* parenting – *Not Authoritarian* parenting (there is a huge difference). Authoritarian parenting is seen to have the most negative effect on adolescents' psychological health. Neglectful and Permissive parenting styles fall in the middle of the trend respectively.

*Authoritative parents* guide their adolescents in a *relational manner*, with a good deal of required responsibility, while remaining highly, *emotionally and behaviorally responsive* to the adolescent's perspectives and needs. Authoritative parents *promote dialogue* around the rationale of decision-making. They *value self-determination* and *social responsibility equally*. They guide their children's activities while not becoming too restrictive. *Clarity and consistency* mark their interactions with adolescents. Emotionally, authoritative parents *respond with love, with support, and with commitment. They protect without being intrusive.*

*Authoritarian parents* are highly demanding and provide little emotional responsiveness. These parents shape by controlling and insisting on an absolute obedience to authority. Order and respect of authority are valued greatly by this style of parenting. Varying from household values is often met by punitive discipline or psychological manipulation. Parental authority alone dictates what is right.

Unfortunately, a teen's developing sense of whom they are becoming and what they want has no place in the mind of the authoritarian parent. Authoritarian parenting is sometimes called *Intrusive Parenting* and is a

factor in the lives of many of the young adults whom I see in my therapy office. You can easily see how this style of parenting may lead either to blind adherence to parental demands or open rebellion, depending on the combination of the teenager's and parent's personalities. Either outcome stunts the adolescent's psychological development and will likely lead to difficulties in adult intimate relationships.

Now, I realize that parenting adolescents is like *going through the terrible two's again*. Let me suggest that parenting with adolescents can be non-judgmental, relational and still provide positively healthy limits. Your teen may fuss and argue with whatever decision that needs to be made, if it opposes their desires. That does not require that we parents fuss and argue as well. Nor does it mean that coming down harder on them will improve their behavior. In fact, research suggests that if "my way or the highway" relationships (authoritarian), is chosen instead of emotionally supportive adolescent-parent relationship (authoritative), psychological health in adolescents is seen to be significantly diminished.

I know that this short description of adolescent parenting is just not enough. You can purchase any book on Authoritative, not Authoritarian parenting, and learn more. My main point is to convey that we have to be willing as parents to radically adjust our perspectives and actions as we change from parents of children to parents of teenagers. Because, whatever parenting approach we use *Does Count*; its only that the outcome will vary. We really do enter as a family into an adolescent process. *Here are some basic suggests:*

- 1) Become a coach/encourager. Let every action and word imply that you believe in them and have their best at heart.
- 2) Give space for your teen to figure out what they want in the safety of your support.
- 3) Always support your son's or daughter's perspective (you don't have to agree). Support does not mean giving into them, just letting them have their opinion.
- 4) Avoid being judgmental about your teenager's perspective.
- 5) When you have to set limits or give guidance (and you will) supply your reasoning behind the action.

- 6) Give choices whenever possible.
- 7) When you have to make a final decision, avoid taking their responses personally. This way you can set limits and stay open to the relationship.
- 8) You're the adult so take in their frustrations. Give your frustration to someone else; don't be hesitant to seek personal and/or professional consultation and support for yourself.
- 9) Above all make the sacrifice to parent in adolescence. Avoid falling into a "Cause I Say So" or "Whatever You Want" pattern of interaction.

Blessings,

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Vital Sources  
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