

Becoming the Parent Your Adolescent Needs

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One of the most important factors when trying to help your teen is considering the importance of connection or 'attachment' between your child and you. The stronger the attachment the more influence you will have on your teen. Every parent-child relationship is different and changes over time. But no matter where you are in the relationship with your teen it is always possible to improve the connection and foster a deeper attachment.

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### The Developmental Stage of Adolescence

The developmental stage of adolescence is not an easy one for you or for your child. Teens are going through not only physical changes, but also changes in terms of their thoughts, feelings, perceptions of themselves and the world, as well as their desires and expectations for what they want. All this is occurring while they try to understand and meet their deeper needs for acceptance, validation, understanding, freedom, etc. In other words, there is a lot going on underneath all the seemingly confusing behaviour that teens exhibit at times.

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Dr. Gordon Neufeld, author of 'Hold On To Your Kids' writes:

-- The stage of adolescence entails being neither an adult nor a child. It is in this transition period that makes life difficult.

-- Even in this transition period adolescents need and long for some kind of adult attachment to help them through this time of growth. Parents can help with their adolescent's struggle to come to terms with all their conflicted thoughts and feelings in a safe way.

If parents are not present (both emotionally and physically) for their teens during this crucial time there is a tendency for the teen fail to come to terms with these internal processes because they are too overwhelming. Ultimately, this can lead to all kinds of problems and unhealthy life choices.

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### The Importance of Attachment by Dr. Gordon Neufeld

-- Attachment is about closeness, belonging, connecting, love, emotional intimacy and psychological intimacy.

-- The desire to attach is the most powerful driving force that shapes

personality and behaviour.

Fostering and strengthening attachment or some kind of trusted connection is key to helping your adolescent through to adulthood.

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Understanding Your Teen's Struggles

Common adolescent struggles are as follows:

- Turbulence & Chaos
- Shyness and Embarrassment
- Emotional flooding (feeling several different emotions all at once)
- Longing to connect BUT wanting independence
- Vulnerability of real or perceived weakness
- Anger
- Loss and grief
- Questions about how they want to be in life

When teens are faced with some of these struggles they will long for an attachment to people that can help them through this period. Now in an ideal situation a parent or responsible adult will be there for a teen to turn to for help and guidance. In a less than an ideal situation, a teen without parents or available adults to step in to help him or her often leaves the teen with a void. This void then gets filled with attaching to other teens that are not grown up themselves and may not be the best source for positive guidance. The power of gangs on youth is an example of a lack of strong and stable adult attachment. What happens is the attachment needed from a parent or other adult is replaced by gang members.

What frequently happens when an adolescent lacks a strong supportive adult is what Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls: "Teen Orientation"

Teen Orientation is when teenagers do not turn to adults for guidance, but instead turn to their fellow peers. This is like the blind leading the blind in many circumstances. Having close peer friends can be very positive and teens do need this in their life. However, when you have a teen that is trying to deal with the struggles of growing up, turning to another teen who is facing similar challenges for help often leads to more chaos and isolation.

The advantage you have as a parent is that you are not your child's best friend. You certainly can be 'friendly', caring, loving, compassionate, understanding, and offer a grounded adult base line for your teen to grab hold of when turbulence hits.

In my experience as a counsellor with teens, it seems that boys and girls do not need to impress me because I'm not one of them. Therefore, so-called tough 17-year-old boys have actually shed tears of sadness and hurt with me because I am an adult and not one of their fellow peer friends. Girls have vulnerable feelings and perceptions as well and can be just as frightened

to face themselves or let peers see them as weak, unpopular, or their “nasty” side. With an adult, these same teens actually feel some relief and safety about sharing what they would never want their fellow peers to know.

Attachment to an adult is also about knowing that someone is there to help a teen explore himself or herself without embarrassment. The more grounded a parent is when talking to a teenager, the safer a teen will feel to share and open up to form an attachment.

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Caring For Your Teen By Caring For Yourself  
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In today’s society parents may be experiencing:

- Confusion and turmoil
- Isolation and embarrassment
- Scared and concerned
- Anger and disappointment
- Loss and sadness

These are some of the common feelings that you as a parent may be struggling with as you raise your children.

Hal Runkel, in his book ‘Screamfree Parenting’, talks about how parents need to take care of themselves first. What this means is that parents need to get support through parenting groups, information workshops, personal therapy, etc. Parents need to take responsibility and care of their own turbulence and not rely on their son or daughter’s behaviour to change in order for them to feel better.

This is the kind of parent adolescents’ need and also the kind with whom your child will be more likely to share and connect with. At the very least, adolescents will respect their parents more for taking care of themselves than if the parents rely on the adolescent to change in order for the parent to feel better.

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The Bottom Line is Adolescents Need Their Parents and Other Adults.  
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In order to be present for your teen, you must ensure your own needs are being met through proper and appropriate support systems.

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10 Steps to Ensure You Develop a Stronger Attachment with Your Adolescent
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1. Be In Control Of Yourself

Emotional reactivity pushes your child away – being grounded and calm brings him/her closer. This is more easily said than done, especially when YOU are the parent of your child. However, teenagers will be more likely to tell you the truth and share things with you if they know they won't be put down or yelled at.

In other words, no matter what your son or daughter may say or do, you're in charge and in control of your reactions. How you handle yourself can either foster respect and closeness, or can push your child away. The more you can handle your own fears and anxiety, the greater the impression you will leave on your teen that you can handle what they are going through. This helps them feel secure and nourishes attachment.

2. Be the Adult Your Teen Attaches To For Help

Your teen can fall apart – but you need to be calm, grounded, and not get triggered. You are the adult that can handle their turmoil.

Remember that if your child is coming to you with a 'hot issue', take that as a vote of confidence. Adolescents want to be confident that you as the adult can handle what they are going through because maybe they can't. This is why they would come to you in the first place. When your teen is struggling with something, this is an opportunity to foster attachment. The control you have over your own anxiety can determine how your adolescent relates to you.

3. Get In The Habit of Saying To Your Teen, "Tell Me More..." And Listen First

Invite your adolescent into a conversation. Take that first breath, be aware of your own feelings, and practice being calm. Now being calm does not mean being passive or submissive, far from it. You are taking control of yourself and staying present with your teen at the same time. There is no guarantee that they will open up completely or at all in the beginning, but reacting emotionally will certainly not help. However, taking that step to control your feelings and inviting them to talk, to tell you more, might bring some surprising results. It also gives you time to focus on yourself and come up with a more creative and intelligent response that strengthens the relationship rather than a reactive response which is likely to push your child away.

4. Validate At Least One Emotion Or Idea You Have Heard Your Son/Daughter Express

Validating what you heard means validating only what YOU heard. Not that you agree, but that

you have been patient enough and present enough to listen. Many times what a teenager needs is validation for their emotions. This can actually help calm them down and see their behaviour more clearly.

You can say to them:

- "You're really upset about this."
- "You seem really frustrated."
- "That must make you angry."
- "That must be hurtful."

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5. Communicate Something Positive, But Genuine

You can appreciate that they shared something with you or acknowledge that they calmed themselves down and spoke respectfully. You can also thank them for being open and honest.

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6. Make Statements - Do Not Engage in Arguments

Your son or daughter may have a different opinion or idea about things than you do. However, you don't have to convince your teen to 'like or believe' your ideas. You need to hold firm to your values and ideas regardless of what they might believe. Making statements about what you believe is different than trying to convince your son or daughter to change their point of view. Usually the more you try to convince a teen to change their perspective to match yours the more they will try to convince you to change to theirs. It becomes a no win situation and with parents and teens just exhausted, frustrated, and angry.

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7. Use The Two Positives And A Lemon Technique

When speaking to your teen, start first with a positive statement. For example, "It's good to see you," or "I noticed you helped your sister," or "I hear you're enjoying your new job". You may need to take a few minutes to think of something, but be creative, there is bound to be something positive that you can find to say.

Then once you've established the connection, you can bring up an issue (lemon). For example: coming home after curfew, not doing chores, being disrespectful at times, not doing homework, etc.

Then end with something positive. For example, "Thanks for listening", or "I appreciate that you talked with me" or "Thanks for your time" or "I know this was hard but you were willing

to try”, etc.

Starting with something negative or difficult is a good way to get a teenager on the defensive right away. So begin with something positive and sincere in order to get their attention. Then bring up what it is you need to talk about that is more difficult to communicate. Wrap up with something positive about the conversation.

8. Admit to Your Adolescent When You’ve “Lost Your Cool”

Model adult behaviour by taking responsibility for your own. Keep in mind that apologizing for your behaviour, such as shouting or saying something inappropriate, is not the same as apologizing for your values or concerns. It takes a big person to admit a mistake, as a parent, you are that big person.

Apologizing also models what you hope they will someday do with you. Again, you are the source of guidance and influence for them to learn from. I once got into a shouting match with my son over doing his homework. Later when I cooled down I apologized for my angry outburst. However, I still held him accountable for doing his homework only without letting myself get triggered and angry.

9. Avoid “Nasty Sarcasm” – It does not work

Watch what you say and your body language. The roll of the eyes, the “oh you think you’re so smart” attitude only makes a teen want more revenge. If you catch yourself using negative sarcasm, this is a sign of neglecting your own self-care. Sarcasm is usually the result of built up frustration from trying so hard at something that just doesn’t work. Step back and pay attention to yourself and what’s going on with you when you feel the urge to be sarcastic with your teenage son or daughter. Remember that being sarcastic will not help to improve a situation. In fact it will more likely create more resentment between you and your teen, which is the last thing you want.

10. Maintain Self-care, Self-awareness, And Self-control

Kids do not appreciate nor want a martyr for a parent. Sacrificing your life for your kids is not what they ask for. As parents, we love our children and do make sacrifices often without even thinking about it. But if we cross a line with self-sacrifice and expect our kids to behave better because of our suffering, we are inviting a losing situation.

Adolescents will look up and respect people who are happy and content with themselves -- and that person is you.



Final thoughts:

“It’s easy to be an angel when nobody ruffles your feathers” – author unknown

--“Your kids are going to ruffle your feathers” — Klaus Klein

“Who you are as a person has far more influence on your kids than any lecture you give them.”
– Hal Runkel LMFT



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