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What Is a Teenager?

I am going to give you a little window into what is going on in the life of your teenager. Although we have all experienced what it was like being a teenager we tend to block out much of what happened in our past. Most of us don't really remember all that we went through and how difficult and challenging that period in our lives was for us. We are going to really try to explain and understand what is going on with them, which I think is the key to a lot of the difficulties that we have with our teens. Understanding what is going on in the mind of your child will enable you to make immediate decisions as to how to handle the many challenges that you are facing. Part of being human is that you might not always make the right decision, but at least you won't be shooting in the dark. You'll be on the right page.

I also hope this discussion will put things in perspective for you. As we understand more, we are going to realize that most of the battles and difficulties we have with our teens are really quite meaningless. By the end of this discussion, and certainly by the end of this program, when you are faced with arguments and battles that used to send you through the roof, you are going to be able to smile quietly to yourself and think, "He's having one of those teenager moments that we were discussing."

Early Adolescence: What Happened?

Let's take the average child. He or she starts out as a small helpless infant. You care for this child and teach him or her to have the tools to slowly grow to become more independent. Everything is going along great. You made it through the tantrums of the toddler years. Your child eventually starts school and everything is going just fine. He starts to grow up a bit and soon, instead of being a complete burden, he is able to help out at home. He continues to grow and is more and more helpful. He is loving and sensitive to your feelings. He understands the things that bother you and tries to avoid doing them. He is a pleasure to be around. He listens to your requests and wants to fulfill them. He is extremely concerned about your opinion.

By the age of nine or ten your child is now very responsible and able to help you in a meaningful way. Everything is going along great and then **BAM...** Everything falls apart. Your child is now forgetful. He is not so interested in listening anymore. It is easier having your wisdom teeth pulled than it is to get your child to help around the house. So what happened?

Your child is now an early adolescent and for now on your life is never going to be the same. For now on your life and the life of those in your household is going to be governed by inexplicable forces that are completely out of your control. Well, since there is nothing you are able to do about it, you might as well sit back and enjoy it. It will help if you have a fatalistic sense of humor; but even if not, if you can learn to understand

what your child is going through, it will be a lot less stressful for you and at times it will even be funny.

The Life of Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is a period of rapid change. Your child is no longer who he was and he is not yet who he is going to be. This is the beginning of a lot of major transitions for your young teenager. He will be constantly changing physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally and psychologically. There is a lot going on and it's happening all at once. Suddenly, his whole world goes out of focus and, understandably, he gets overwhelmed.

Physical Changes

The most obvious changes are physical. When children enter adolescence they start to get bigger. Not just gradually, as they have been doing all along, but all of a sudden they start to grow a lot. But your teen doesn't just grow; he or she changes. Your son gets bigger and more muscular. He starts to grow hair in new places. His voice changes, sometimes in a very embarrassing way. For your daughter these changes are even more dramatic. Her body takes on a whole new shape. Her hips widen and her breasts begin to grow. In both boys and girls the hormones start taking off. This affects their thinking processes and more importantly it affects their moods. Your child may have wide fluctuations of up and down mood swings and you will have no idea why. However, the biggest result of this new hormone surge is that your child is now sexually becoming an adult.

Sexual Maturity

At this stage in life your child begins to reach sexual maturity. Girls start before boys. Usually at the age of eleven or twelve girls start menstruating and generally a year later they start to wear bras. Boys look down and see a whole new set of newer and larger genitals. They begin to make sperm and start having nocturnal emissions.

Your child's interest in sex changes. Preteens do have some interest in sex and can engage in sexual activity, but usually it is a low priority interest. With adolescence, the whole world is now filled with sexual overtones. The sexual feelings brought about by these biological changes are normal and unavoidable. They are also extremely powerful and for now on will play a dominant role in your child's thoughts and feelings.

I want to point out here that your child is going to have much more difficulty with this new sexuality than we did when we were growing up. In our culture today, sexuality is much more explicit than it was when we were adolescents. I remember growing up, the first X rated movie to win an academy award was "Midnight Cowboy". Since it was X-rated and I was way too young, I was never able to see it at the movie theater. However, I did get to see the uncut version of the film on national television a number of years later. The point is that open explicit sexual messages that would have been illegal when we were growing up are bombarding your young teen on a daily basis. These messages are in movies, on television, in their music and in the magazines and books they read. So

your young teen who is trying to understand and deal with his new found sexuality is being bombarded with sex in a way that we never were.

Intellectual Changes

The physical and sexual changes are what come to mind when we think of adolescence. But probably more significant in the long run are the intellectual changes that take place during this period.

Your young teen is developing the ability to understand abstract concepts in a way that he or she was not capable of doing before. He is able to relate conversationally in an adult fashion, although he may not choose to do so; and he can now see the world through adult eyes, although he most often refuses to do so.

In short, with that one small leap from preteen to adolescent, your child now sports a new body that he or she does not recognize, is bombarded by sexual thoughts and feelings which are exciting, compelling and completely out of control, and now sees a complicated, confusing world where previously a simple, straightforward one once existed.

Psychological Changes

So those are some of the major changes that are dominating your young teen's life. However, the one overriding force in your child's life which overrides and dominates everything that your teen does is the new psychological changes that he or she is going through.

The Adolescent Drive for Independence

Your child is now governed by a new psychological mandate, which we will call, for the purposes of this program, the "Adolescent Drive for Independence." This power is the primary force behind almost everything that is going on with him. Simply put the "Adolescent Drive for Independence" commands your child to turn away from childhood and everything that is associated with it and become an adult.

Your child is going to love this directive and he is going to hate it. He is going to long for it and he is going to be afraid of it. It is going to excite him and it is going to confuse him. The only thing your young teen can't do is escape it. This new force is burning within your young teen, commanding him to experience himself as a new independent being, capable of living on his own. He is compelled to deride and reject any hint or remembrance that he is dependant or is still in many ways a child. And just so you don't have any doubt, the biggest reminder to your teenager that he is not yet an independent adult, that he is subservient to and must answer to someone else, is **you**, his parent.

You are the symbol of his childhood dependence, and as such your child must turn away from you and reject you. This is normal and it is natural. It is part of growing up. The most important thing for you to remember is that it has nothing to do with you. This is

not a personal rejection. Your teen is turning away from you because that is his psychological and developmental need. This is the next stage that he must go through on the path from childhood to adulthood. It doesn't matter whether you are a good parent or a bad parent. It has only to do with your child and his stage of development.

Your child has a new need to turn away from family and childhood and step into the world as a new independent person. Life is no longer a game where Mommy and Daddy can take care of anything that goes wrong. It is real. The wonderful security of childhood is gone and the world takes on an exciting but desperate quality. In this new world, your young teen is going to feel more exposed and vulnerable than ever before. Life is going to be scary, sometimes terrifying, and even overwhelming. This drive for independence is the core of adolescence. It is the driving force that mandates everything he or she is going to do. As we shall see, it is going to be the source of, or at least somewhat involved with, almost all the arguments that you are going to have.

The "Adolescent Drive for Independence" is normal and it is natural, and it will require that your child turn away from you. But again, this rejection has nothing to do with you. The most important thing that you have to remember is to not take personally.

That's the first part of the problem. Now we are going to discuss part two.

Desire Not to Grow Up

It is great being a little child. You get pampered, taken care of, and you don't have to do anything for it. All pleasure and no responsibility. It's a great system. Your teen, however, is growing up and growing up is scary. It means that you have to be responsible for your own actions. The teenage years, in addition to being governed by the "Adolescent Drive for Independence", are also governed by the intense desire to remain a child, and not just a child, but a **small** child.

These two intense, diametrically opposed drives which are tugging on your child at the same time are what give the teenage years such spice. The major overall developmental task of the teenage years is to resolve this conflict, choose to grow up and take the final step into adulthood. The desire to remain a child doesn't go away easily. In fact, it never really goes away. It still exists in all of us to a greater or lesser extent. Even as adults we all still have the desire to be children.

You remember Peter Pan, the boy who refused to grow up? On a certain level all of us wish we could be like him. We want to still be children, too. This is what made Peter Pan so popular. We all can relate to him on a very deep level. Yet at some point in your life you made that jump from the desire to remain a child to becoming an independent, mature, decision-making adult. You began to seek your gratification from meaningful interactions with the world around you. You resolved this conflict between the drive to be independent and the desire to stay a dependent child. You accomplished this during your teenage years, and now, this is what your child needs to do too. But it didn't happen for you overnight and it won't happen that way for your child either. So although the "Adolescent Drive for Independence" dictates that your teenager must become

independent, it still does not remove the drive to remain a child. It just makes that drive to remain a child socially unacceptable. It is not something that he can let anyone else know about or even admit it to himself. The drive to remain a small child goes underground and it resurfaces only where your teenager feels his ties to childhood are the strongest. **It resurfaces when your teenager is at home with you.**

Your teen is going to fluctuate between these two drives, the "Adolescent Drive for Independence" and the drive to remain a small child, and it is going to bewilder and confuse you. This fluctuation is going to cause him or her to say things and do things that make no sense, and your teen will be completely oblivious to the contradictions. If you try to point out the contradictions he is not going to know what you are talking about. This is one of the hallmarks of the teenage years; complete unawareness and self-deception. This is why teens can be so infuriating. They are completely oblivious to their own behavior and this can really exasperate parents.

The Battle Ground: Your Home

Since your teen's deepest attachment as a child was to you, **with you** is where his childish self is going to be the most pronounced. His interaction with you is going to be where the childish self decides to entrench. This is where almost all the day to day problems parents have with their teens come from. They come from his underground desire to remain a dependent child. Believe it or not, the vast majority of arguments and battles you may be having with your teen is a byproduct of your teen's underlying and underground desire not to separate from you. Sounds crazy doesn't it. They fight with you because they need to feel close to you. This is one of the many contradictions that make up a teenager.

How does this play itself out? Here is a typical example:

Sarah asks her mother, "Can I go to a movie with a Julie tonight?"

Sarah's mother responds, "No, you know you can't go out on school nights."

"But Mom, I'll be home by 9:00."

"No, Sarah, you can't go out on school nights."

"Mom, you're not being fair. You let Joe do anything he wants. Just because I'm a girl you don't let me do anything."

"Joe is older and I don't let him do anything he wants. And I do let you do things. But the answer is no, you can't go to the movie tonight."

"I hate you. You never let me do anything. Why can't I go? I'll come home right away?"

"Look the subject is closed. I don't want to get angry at you."

"You're getting angry with me? You're the one who won't let me go to the movie!"

And so the argument proceeds. Eventually Sarah storms off in tears and her mother feels horrible.

So let's look at what happened. Sarah has had this discussion before. She knows the rules. So what was the argument all about? Was it about the movie? Sarah can see the movie on the weekend. Was it about seeing Julie? Sarah can see Julie tomorrow or talk to her on the phone. Sarah was asking for an exception to a well established rule. The answer was that no exception was being granted. An adult would have tried to appeal with one or two different lines of reasoning and then accept the answer and they would go their separate ways. Obviously, there was something more going on here than the desire to see a movie. If you ever had such a conversation with your daughter you probably sensed that there was another issue being discussed here. So what exactly was Sarah after? Why didn't she just accept the answer that she knew already was going to come and walk away? The reason is because walking away wasn't what she needed. Seeing the movie also wasn't what she needed. Sarah **needed** the argument.

When my three year old is tired or sad, he walks up to my wife, stares at her with his beautiful, almond-shaped brown eyes and says to her, "I need Mommy time." My wife then scoops him up and caresses him and fills him up with love until he is ready to climb back down and go back to the world. Remember we said your teen has a drive to be a little child. Well, he or she also needs Mommy time. But the "Adolescent Drive for Independence" doesn't let him ask for it, nor does it let him even to be aware of it. Your teen can't ask for attention from you so what's the next best thing to do? How about start an argument? It's intense, it's emotional, and if he does a good job he can draw it out for a long time and really make it last. Also you can just about guarantee it will take place by him choosing an issue where he knows the answer already. Plus if he argues along the lines that "I'm big enough to do this, why are you controlling me, " not only does he satisfy his childish drive for parental attention and contact, but also he does it in the name of independence so that his "Adolescent Drive for Independence" is also happy. Sounds like the perfect solution, doesn't it? All your teen's emotional and nurturing needs being met with just one big dragged-out battle; and he or she feels big in the process. If you are wondering why you have so many senseless, meaningless, but intense arguments with your teenager, this is one of the reasons why.

What I have described for you may not explain everything, but if you look into the battles you have been having you are going to find this type of unconscious reasoning behind a lot of them. I just want to stress that your teen does not know why he or she is arguing, so definitely do not try to confront him or her on this. In your child's mind she is arguing to see a movie because she is big and you are treating her like a child.

Defusing the Explosions

So what do you do about this? Now that you know why your teenager is arguing with you all the time it still doesn't make your argument any less stressful. Yet if you recognize that the underlying reason your teen is fighting with you is to achieve closeness, you can look for different ways to fulfill that need - without all the battles.

Like any child, your teen needs the intense emotional connection with you, but in a way that he can still feel like he is big. That's what he gets by arguing. So the solution to eliminating many of the senseless battles is to make sure that you give him an intense

emotional connection with you in such a way that he feels like he is big. That means you have to convince him or her that you are the one who needs it.

One thing you can do is to tell your child you love him. This is a lot easier for mothers to do than it is for fathers, but your child needs to hear it from both of you. Even if it is hard, you have to force yourself. It doesn't matter to your teen how hard it is for you. If necessary, you have to practice saying, "I love you" in the mirror. It doesn't matter how uncomfortable it is for you to say it, this is what your child needs to hear. Now your child is going to roll his eyes and say, "Oh come on, Mom," but this is what your child needs to hear from you. If you can find a way do this, you will cut back significantly on a lot of the senseless arguments and bickering.

Teens also need warm physical contact just like all children do. You should make sure you give them hugs and casual loving caresses. The message is to make sure that you give your teen warmth and love, but in such a way that it doesn't make him feel like a child. Your message is that you are doing it because **you** need that warm connection with **him**.

Living in Two Different Worlds

Your teen lives in two different worlds: the world at large and the world at home. And in his mind, in a way that makes no real sense, these two worlds have nothing to do with each other. What they do at home, how they behave, has nothing to do with who they think they are. They don't judge or evaluate their own behavior. When they are home the small child is the dominant force and small children don't judge their actions. They aren't good and they aren't bad. They just are. This is why your teen can do things at home that they would never consider doing out of the house and then think nothing of it.

Here is a typical conversation someone could have with a teen:

"Are you an honest person?"

"Yes."

"But you've been stealing money from your parents."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm still an honest person."

"But isn't stealing dishonest?"

"I guess."

"So how can you say you're honest when you just said that stealing is dishonest and you've been stealing from your parents?"

"I don't know. Stealing from my parents is different. I mean, I would never steal from anybody else."

So your teen can be the perfect slob at home, but can preen for an hour before she goes to school. He can prefer death to taking out the garbage, but will help out at the old age home three hours every week. He will be foul mouthed and rude to you, but everyone you meet on the street will remark to you what a fine, well mannered child you have.

So which one is your teen? Is he the rude, loud mouthed, egoistic monster living in that filthy cave at the end of the stairway or is he the clean, refined young man who always has time to help others? The truth is that he is both. Both selves are normal and necessary. However, if you want to know which person your teen is going to be as an adult; his out-of-the-house image is more reflective of his future self. That is the person he is going to be with you too, but just not while he is a teenager.

The Passion of Youth

The teenage years are unlike any other time in life. Your child turns his eyes away from home and begins to look outward at the world around him. Your child is infused with passion. Part of it stems from the new sexual awareness; part of it comes from his new intellectual capacity to grasp the exciting and complex world around him. He is living in a new exciting world. But there is a price to pay.

He lacks perspective. As an emerging adult, he has not yet found himself in the world, yet he can no longer fall back upon the security of being a child. Teenagers are on their own. They feel very exposed and insecure. As a result they cling together for survival and depend upon each other to such an extent that success and failure with friends takes on preeminence. Fitting in becomes critical to survival.

Teens live in the moment. They rise and fall with the moment. This gives everything that happens to them a desperate quality. Everything is an emergency and now is the only time that exists. The teenager is filled with excitement and passion. He is infatuated with life. He is enthralled with his new sexuality and sensuality. But this passion is unfocused. He is in love with the world and filled with longing, without knowing what he is longing for and always feeling like he is missing something. He is always waiting for something to happen, but nothing ever does.

Teenagers are on an emotional rollercoaster, going up and down as they react to what is happening around them. There is so much going on inside and around them that they find it very hard. It is a period of great excitement and stress, and it is how they react to this stress that may lead to many of the problems that we shall be discussing.