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How Teens Behave

Now that we have discussed some of the factors that make teenagers behave the way they do, let's spend a little time discussing exactly how they behave. The purpose of this part of the discussion is to help you realize that a lot of the things you are seeing in your teen that drive you crazy are really quite common and normal for this stage of development. It may not make it any easier, but it is nice to know that you are not suffering alone.

As we said before, the two new dominant forces governing your teen's life are his "Adolescent Drive for Independence" and his new found sexuality. Both of these things demand that he turn away from his parents and childish things. These forces stand opposed to his drive to remain a child. Now although the interplay between these two forces is the underlying cause of what we see in both boys and girls, the way it changes their behavior is different.

Your Teenage Boy

At about the age of twelve, boys go into their rooms, close the door and turn up the stereo. They come out six years later. This might be a bit of an exaggeration but it's not much of one. Teenage boys disappear, and even when their bodies are around, they themselves are somewhere else. Some boys spend a lot of time away from home, but even the ones who are still around become very, very private.

The main reason for this is the difficulty they have dealing with their new concept of sexuality. Sexuality is extremely powerful for the adolescent boy and he doesn't really know how to handle it. These new feelings are something that he definitely does not feel comfortable sharing with his parents. The drive of sexuality is so strong and the taboo against sharing it with his parents is so complete that the best solution most boys come up with is to just disappear, until they work it all out themselves.

Boys are particularly uncomfortable with their mothers. Since boys have a strong attraction to women, and their mother is the one woman with whom they had strong feeling, until they get their new and amorphous sexual feelings firmly focused on women outside the house, their mother's presence is a problem for them. So a previously warm and loving boy is going to start to shun his mother in a way that she often finds very painful. There is not much a mother can do at this point, as in this stage of her son's life he needs the distance. Trying to force the issue is going to cause problems.

Boys have less trouble relating to their fathers. This is because their intense and overwhelming sexual feelings don't get involved. However, their involvement is not usually a matter of relating to one another, it's more often the sharing of a common interest, such as sports.

Boys tend not to act out verbally. They usually don't have many screaming matches with their parents. However, when teenage boys do get into battles, they tend to become very

emotional, often losing control. They usually end up fleeing the house, occasionally punching a hole in the wall or kicking the door in on the way out. If boys do engage in a lot of fighting with their parents, it can be a sign that there are serious problems ahead. It usually indicates that they had a very strong attachment to their parents in their childhood years and separation now is going to be very hard for them, and everyone around them.

Another characteristic of the teenage boy is that he is absent when present. They seem to do nothing. You talk to them and they give you the blank stare. It's the "lights are on but nobody is home" look. The reason for this is that teenage boys have a lot on their plate to deal with. In addition to their new sexuality there is the ever looming threat of their future. They know that they are soon going to have to make it the world, and they don't know how they are going to do it.

When a teenage boy is home, all he wants is peace and tranquility. No, he does not want to clean up his room and he certainly does not want to take out the garbage. In this regard, parents become a special problem and a new source of aggravation. Teenage boys are the masters of doing nothing. They can lie in bed, listen to music, watch television or just stare into space, and they can do this for hours on end in complete bliss. They can achieve a state of complete passivity.

Your Teenage Girl

Girls also have the new feelings of sexuality and the need to push away their parents, but they react to these feelings in a completely different way than boys do. Boys disappear, girls do not. Girls would rather fight it out, and it is with your teenage daughter that you are going to experience the full meaning of what it is to be the parent of a teenager.

To escape the influence of parents and home, boys disappear. Girls fight. This is actually an advantage for them though it is going to make your life more difficult. It allows them to maintain an emotional connection with you while still declaring their independence. The reason girls can do this is that their sexual feelings don't have that vague undirected nature that boys experience. Their feelings are more focused inward and their new sexuality does not force teenage girls to isolate themselves. Due to a girl's sexual feelings being more in check, she can actually maintain a warm loving relationship with her father, provided that he can tolerate her behavior. It is much less common for a girl to remain close to her mother. In childhood, for most daughters, their closest attachment is to their mother, so for them the need to break away from childhood translates into a need to turn away from this relationship.

Girls also tend to fight more than boys because they are better prepared for it. Girls are better at expressing themselves verbally. That's how they fight with each other. They are also more used to dealing with their emotions, which means they are better able to handle the emotional ups and downs that go along with these battles. For the most part boys would rather just run away from it all.

How Teens Relate to Parents

The Parent Allergy

Children love their parents. They also need and desire the love of their parents. Your very presence makes your child long for your love, and this is a feeling that your young teen cannot deal with. It is from among the strongest feelings of childhood and as a result at this stage of his life he must reject it, and that means he must reject you.

Again, and this cannot be emphasized enough, your teen is going to reject you at this stage of his or her life, but this rejection has nothing to do with you. It is a developmental stage that your teen needs to go through. There will come a time when your teen will be able to resolve the tension of his love for you, his desire for closeness to you and his need for adult independence. But at this stage he cannot do this yet. Therefore, in order to grow up, he is going to have to reject you. He is going to want to have little or nothing to do with you.

I know, I just said that your teen needs your love and your warmth, that you need to make sure you tell this to him verbally and communicate it to him physically. Now I am saying that he is going to be repelled by your very presence. Seems like a contradiction, doesn't it? Well, it is. But still both are true. Your teen needs your warmth and when you offer it he is going to shove it back in your face. Your son is going to push you away and your daughter is going to roll her eyes. No one ever said it was going to be pleasant or easy to be the parent of a teenager. There is no universal way to deal with this contradiction, but there is a way that works for a lot of parents. The best way to give them the love they so much need and minimize the rejection that you are going to get for doing so, is to take somewhat of a passive role.

The basic idea is to be around. If you like to read or sew, do it in the living room where you can easily be found. Do it in such a way that your teen can easily find you, but not in a way that your presence is oppressive to him. What will happen is that when your teen is ready he will approach you, and at this point you can relate to and reassure him that you love him and are there for him. It may not happen often, but it will happen often enough that you can maintain your relationship with your child so that it takes you through the more difficult times.

The Parent-Servant

You may have had a conversation like this:

“Mom, can you drive me to the mall?”

“Not now Shelly, I have a headache.”

“But I need to get a new pencil case for school.”

“You can go to the supermarket around the corner. They sell pencil cases.”

“But those are really disgusting. There is one that I really like and they sell it at the mall.”

“But I really can’t drive you right now. I don’t feel well.”
“So how am I supposed to get it?”

So what’s wrong with Shelly? Is she really the ungrateful insensitive monster that she sounds like? Well, yes she is. But for a teenager, being inconsiderate and obnoxious is pretty normal. It doesn’t even mean that they are actually obnoxious, inconsiderate people. They may be quite considerate, but this is outside the house. At home they are like small children, and small children want what they want and when they want it, and your headache is your problem, not theirs.

Not all teens act like this, but many do. It doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t point it out to them that they are being inconsiderate, but don’t expect them to hear it for a few more years.

The Flawed Parent

Children see their parents as larger than life figures. They see them as perfect. Their parents know so much more and understand so much more than they do. This is normal for children. As your child matures and becomes a young teen, he develops a more adult ability to reason and he begins to see his parents as falling somewhat short of perfect. Teenagers begin to see adults in general, and parents in particular, as having glaring flaws. This is an important part of your child’s growing up. Your teen needs to find these flaws. He knows that he is getting older and will soon become an adult. He also knows that he too has lots of flaws and he has to make sure that it is normal for an adult not to be perfect.

Teens also need adults as role models. They need adults they can respect and look up to. Ideally what they need are adults who know that they are not perfect, but are not thrown by it. These adults are worthy of respect and the teen needs to see this in adults, particularly his parents. The worst thing you can do is to try to hide the fact you’re not perfect. Teenagers cannot respect that.

Teens will look to adults for guidance and help, but usually not their parents. More often it is a teacher or a friend’s parent. One of the things I did with my children is I tried to help them establish relationships with adults I trust. I did this while they were still nine or ten, so that when they became teens and would turn away from me there would be a reliable adult in place who could give them appropriate guidance. This has worked very well and my children have always had an adult that they could ask for advice when they didn’t feel comfortable approaching me.

Parents Are Embarrassing

Your young teen may be embarrassed by your presence. Teens see their parents as grossly flawed and this is a source of embarrassment to them. They are not going to want to be seen with their parents in public. They cannot resolve their need to maintain their childish self with their parents and their adult public image.

Social Tyranny

As mentioned before, one of the big changes the young teen encounters is the social change.

Teens turn away from family and childhood and begin to strike out in the world as new independent individuals, at least in their own minds. This leaves them feeling extremely vulnerable. In order to feel good about themselves and in order to feel self confident, they need the security of being socially successful. Everyone wants to be accepted by peers, even as children, but as teenagers this acceptance takes on a life or death quality. Their highs and lows, their sense of security, is completely dependent upon their relationships with friends. Other things may be important too, but their true happiness is tied to their friends.

With Girls

The early teenage years are rough for girls. In many cases the adolescent girl's sense of self worth is tied to her popularity. Cliques are the name of the game and the membership and rules are always changing. This leaves your young daughter with the feeling that at any moment she can lose it all, which she can. The need for social acceptance combined with this insecurity that at any moment everything can be lost, creates an atmosphere of jealousy, cruelty and nastiness that is so characteristic of young adolescent girls.

The purpose of the clique is to give each member a sense of self worth which in turn is tied to the exclusivity of that clique. A clique can only be good if it excludes and denigrates those who are below the level of that clique. And at any moment it might be decided that your daughter, who was once in, is now out. Your daughter knows this and it makes her life very uncomfortable.

Occasionally you come across a girl who chooses to opt out of this scene. She ends up choosing to be friends with mostly boys, and will quite openly state that boys are easier to get along with. This is normal and nothing to worry about.

Fortunately, this stage only lasts a few years and by the beginning of high school girls place more emphasis on long lasting, deeper relationships.

With Boys

Socially, boys have it a lot easier. As long as a boy is not considered odd, he can usually fit in somewhere.

When they were younger being good in sports was the most important thing. In adolescence the most important thing is being fun to be with. Also, with adolescence being tough becomes more important. There is a lot of talk about fighting, with an occasional actual fight thrown in. It is kind of like the way young ducks spar with each

other. As the boys get older fighting becomes less and less admirable until, by the time boys are in high school, fighting is considered dumb.

In high school, being cool replaces being tough. Being cool is sort of a sexualized version of being tough, but even being cool isn't so important. A lot of boys just don't care so much about being tough or cool or even about sports. Most boys are just content to be part of whatever group they belong to. Even dress, which for adolescent girls is so critical, for boys it is mostly a way to identify to which group they belong.

Personal Appearance

This is one of the biggest issues that adolescent girls face. Boys are also concerned over their appearance, but girls are tortured by it.

Not only are girls extremely self conscious about their appearance, but also they invariably find fault with it. They all feel they are ugly or at least a lot less attractive than they really are. One reason is that in girls, their sexuality is focused inwards on themselves, and this makes them obsessed with their own appearance.

The second reason is that in our culture, looks have taken an importance that is way out of proportion. Girls grow up seeing beautiful models and they think that is how a woman is supposed to be. They look at themselves and they feel they fall short. They don't realize that nobody, including those models, really look like that. Yet they will go on torturing themselves about their appearance, some to the extent that they make themselves sick.

Their obsession with appearance can result in one of several psychological eating disorders. These disorders are serious and can even be fatal.

Conclusion

There is no typical teenager. There are even some children who seem to skip the stage completely and pass quietly from childhood to adulthood with very little trauma or disturbance to anyone.

What I have tried to lay out for you is some of the patterns that we see in teens. I hope this will help you realize that much of what you are dealing with at home, though it might be difficult, is also quite normal. I also hope this will give you a little window into the life of your teenager so that you know how to respond, or more often you'll know not to respond, to many of the crazy and contradictory things that they do.