

Questions and Answers for Teenagers

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Question: Everyone complains about teenagers, but I guess you don't really know the pain until you have one. A couple of years ago, my son was sweet, caring, curious and well-behaved. Today, you wouldn't know he was the same boy. He's 15 years old and he is rude, arrogant and misbehaved. He is getting into trouble with the law for petty vandalism and I am afraid it will get worse. He yells obscenities at me and I can't control him. What is wrong and how can I keep him from getting worse?

Answer: My two oldest boys are about the same age as your son and thus, your question is helpful for me to reflect on just what is going on during the teenage years. Let me first briefly mention some of the factors which can help you to understand teenage behavior.

The teenage years are a time of tremendous change, which is not only confusing for us as parents, but also for the teenagers themselves. Physically, they are going through puberty, with the accompanying growth spurts and sexual maturation. The human brain, which is not mature until about age 22, is also undergoing many changes. One of these changes involves the maturing of connections in the brain which allows the reasoning centers to inhibit the messages from the emotional centers. Until those pathways are well developed, the emotional centers of the brain are free to send impulsive and irrational messages, which results in immature behavior.

Looking at interpersonal factors, teenagers are in the throws of forming their own identity, trying to prove their adequacy among their peers, and awkwardly both wanting and being afraid of independence from parents. Sometimes adolescent rebellion can be related, at least in part, to an attempt to not grow up and be part of adulthood, which is seen by some teenagers as synonymous with boredom and drudgery.

Many psychological factors are also changing, including a growing ability to comprehend multiple viewpoints on a given topic. More concrete black-and-white reasoning begins to give way to considering other viewpoints, which also results in questioning their parents' values and rules. This is all taking place in a

society of unstable and changing values. Combine all these factors, and no wonder life seemed smoother for you and your child before all this hit!

But there is hope. If turmoil is the problem, then I would like to suggest that the solution is PEACE (Patience, Example, Attitude, Caring & Courage and Evidence). Let me explain.

Patience: The last chapter has not yet been written. Don't let worrying about the future crowd out the natural wisdom you have as a parent to deal with the current situation.

Example: There are three ways to teach -- example, example and example. Show your teenager by example that adulthood is an interesting place by developing a satisfying and well-rounded lifestyle, including hobbies, fun and other things to be more fully alive. This helps give them hope to keep paddling toward the shores of adulthood.

Attitude: When you are personally enjoying life, your health brings a lighter mood in the family. Where mood is low and heavy, I.Q. is also low. As parents if we are brighter and have a sense of humor, somehow solutions are more easily visible.

Caring & Courage: Teenagers need and (deep inside) want firm limits placed upon them by people they know really care. Small acts of acceptance and devotion demonstrate love, as does the courage to have firm limits and consequences. Teenagers are experts at insecurity and are comforted to be around the strong security of love and limits.

Evidence: Keep a keen eye out for evidence of the strengths and goodness in your child. He is still in there and you can see him come up for air now and then. When we are personally more in touch with our own health (physical and mental), we are better able to see and appreciate strengths in our children -- even teenagers!