

LIVING WITH ADOLESCENTS: DOS & DON'TS

On the threshold of adulthood, adolescents go through that miserable period of growing pains and confusion. It's not a great time for parents either. Here are tips on how you can ease the tension

My neighbor was in the kitchen when her 15-year-old son dashed in with friends after skating. "How about some hot chocolate?" she asked. The boy sulked for days.

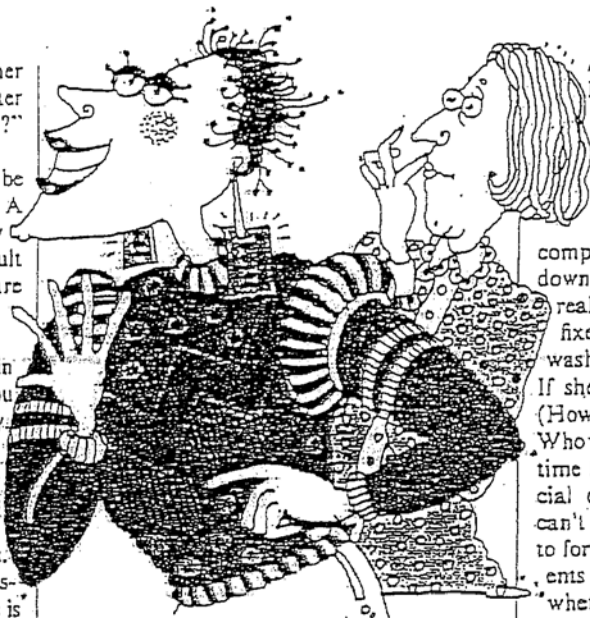
To understand this story, you have to be an adolescent's parent. (*Hot chocolate*. A kid's treat. What humiliation!) And only an adolescent's parent knows how difficult it is to survive the turbulent years. Here are some suggestions:

Don't attempt to fence the adolescent in with an elaborate code of regulations. You can't just throw up your hands and say, "It's your life." You have to establish a delicate balance between rules and freedom. The way she wears her hair may drive you wild, but it doesn't really *matter*. The way she keeps her room is her business. You can always close the door. The adolescent who is left free in nonessential areas is more likely to respect his parents' standards when it comes to liquor, drugs, smoking and sexual behavior.

Don't pry. You'd like to know what your child is up to. There's an understandable temptation to eavesdrop on the phone, to rifle through the contents of a desk or read a letter. Resist. The adolescent is thin-skinned, vulnerable, passionately concerned with privacy. Violate that, and you risk a real breakdown in communication.

Don't lecture. The lessons life has taught you are neither interesting nor relevant to your child. He knows his world is very different from the one you grew up in; he feels (and he's right) that the most important lessons in life he must learn for himself. He can learn a lot from what you *are* but he will not profit greatly from tales of what you have done. As for what others are doing: avoid like the plague the invidious comparison.

Don't expect consistency. The adolescent is very much a between-ager. Rejecting, sometimes violently, the world of childhood, he secretly hankers for its comfortable assurances; he demands the privileges of adult life but fears its responsibilities. So he may not be the same person two days in a row, or two hours in a row. This is the period when a child fights to achieve a clear and stable self-identification. How can he be consistent when he doesn't yet know who



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he is? He tries on attitudes and opinions as if they were hats, to see how they look on him. Yesterday, he accused you of overprotecting; today, he wonders why you didn't clean his sneakers when you *knew* it was gym inspection time.

Don't embarrass. A kiss, a question, a word of encouragement can all, badly timed, be mortifying. ("Washing your hair again? You must be in love.") Any teasing is dangerous. The adolescent's inner balance is precarious, and she's in no position to laugh at her own absurdities. Worst of all is to shame her before friends. Better she should catch cold than that you should ask, as the kids head for the door, "Are you wearing your warm gloves?"

Don't criticize associates. You want your child to have lots of friends. *Nice* friends. Maybe all his pals will meet your standards of neatness, courtesy, family background, intelligence and moral character. But it's not likely. Sooner or later, your adolescent acquires an "undesirable" companion. You're tempted to comment on the newcomer's atrocious table manners, his punk costume or bad reputation. If you do, your child's judgment is questioned, as well as his right to choose. A passing whim may take on the importance of deep-rooted conviction. Let him find out for himself whether the new friendship works for him.

And suggestions on the positive side: Do establish basic rules in those matters which can be regulated, and make them stick. Though adolescents talk about freedom, they really want to know what the limits are, and will be uneasy or alarmed at a complete absence of restraint. Laying down limits is one way of showing you *really care*. Every child should have certain fixed household responsibilities—dishwashing, cleaning, lawn mowing, whatever. If she drives, there should be clear rules. (How often does she get the family car? Who pays for gas?) There should be a fixed time for getting in at night, except on special occasions. Avoid making rules that can't possibly be enforced. (You might like to forbid going to friends' houses when parents are out. But how could you know whether these rules were being observed?) There is something subtly demoralizing about breaking rules and getting away with it. In some of the most sensitive areas, like sex, a parent ultimately has to rely, not on rules, but on the built-in controls that come from years of education in the family.

Do make an effort to keep up with the adolescent's world. No one would suggest that in order to get along with their children, adults should immerse themselves in adolescent culture. But any parent would find it illuminating to listen to a new wave singer his child admires. What is it that The Police or Bruce Springsteen say to the young? You urge her to watch *Masterpiece Theatre*. Do you know about *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Have you read Judy Blume—or Robert Cormier?

Do give your adolescent a sense of involvement with the family. This doesn't mean being best pals. But give him a voice in matters affecting the whole family. Should you build a porch, or buy a sailboat instead? You have the chance of a job in another city; how does he feel about a move? You can't expect a child to respect his family responsibilities unless he enjoys a sense of family privilege.

Do recognize your child as a separate individual—not you, not an extension of your hopes. You can advise and support. But you can't steer his ship.

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