



Why Your Teen Reminds You of a Preschooler

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Sometimes parents lament to me in a humour filled way, that they see similarities between raising teens and toddler/preschoolers. What is it that makes them feel similar? What do they need from us as we steer them through these developmental periods? There are three key developmental dynamics that are inherent to both tots and teens, despite their differences in maturity levels and performance. The more we can make sense of what drives their behaviour, the more we can help them on their journey towards becoming independent beings.

1. Separation Alarming Stemming from Increased Independence

Both young children and teenagers can be stirred up and alarmed as a result of their growth towards personhood and increasing separation from caretakers. For the preschooler their declarations of “I do it myself” thrust them towards independence and being able to figure things out for themselves. While this growth is healthy, it serves to create distance or separation from the adults who care for them because they need us less. The antidote to separation alarm in the young child is to foster a deeper relationship with them so they can better hold onto us when apart. The deeper the attachment roots, the farther a young child can stretch towards their potential, losing themselves to play, to their interests, and discovering the world around them (1).

Healthy development in teens can also bring increased separation alarm stemming from their growth towards separate functioning. Teenage years should bring greater self-sufficiency, the need to make decisions about their future, and taking the steering wheel in their own life. A teen once told me, “I don’t want to grow up and be an adult. I feel all this responsibility to make decisions and to get things right. When I look at my parents they don’t seem very happy and all they do is work.” The teen’s reflection on adulthood was imbued with sadness and separation alarm as she moved towards assuming greater accountability for her own life.

2. Resistance, Opposition, and the Counterwill Instinct

Parents often lament how their young child seems to instantly slow down when they are told to hurry or how they become resistant to parental directions like brushing their teeth, wearing clothes, or fastening their seatbelt in a car. It is as if young children have opposite buttons that become activated at whim, sending their parents into action pressuring them to comply with commands. The instinct to defy parental orders is often the result of having activated the counterwill instinct in young kids – the automatic response to resist coercion and control by others (2).

The reason young children are allergic to coercion is that this instinct paves the way for them to develop their own meanings and intentions. The first step in having your own mind and becoming your own person is countering the will of others. Their resistance isn’t personal but often developmental. They won’t ever outgrow this instinct to resist – only the need to operate out it once a solid sense of self is formed. When a young child starts to use “I” language, the counterwill instinct is on it’s way in paving the way for their growth as separate individuals (3).

When it comes to the teenage years there is also a healthy resurgence of resistance and opposition stemming from the counterwill instinct. In ideal

development, the instinct to counter another person's opinions and ideas is meant to pave the way for the teen to claim their own meanings and preferences in the midst of so many people and competing viewpoints. Teens often go through a period where they are allergic to the agendas of others and will fight against them. It is not uncommon for the teen to resist the directions of their adults, in fact, it is often best to try and communicate parental values as much as possible before the age 13 so as to avoid uphill battles afterwards. As Mark Twain once wrote, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." There can be additional reasons why a teen is resistant and full of opposition and not all of them are due to healthy developmental, such as peer orientation where their closest attachments have become their friends. Underlying healthy resistance in both tots and teens can be summed up in Louise Kaplan's statement, "The toddler must say no in order to find out who she is. The adolescent says no to assert who she is not."

3. The Need for Play or Creative Solitude

Preschoolers need time to play as it forwards their development as separate individuals by fostering emotional expression, allowing creativity to surface, as well as helping them discover their particular interests. Play should be a space free of consequences that accompany the 'real world' so that a child is able to experiment unencumbered by expectations of others. Play is an act of self creation and adults need to foster the freedoms necessary to allow a child to play such as freedom from hunger, screens, peers, too much instruction and structured activities, as well as having to work at getting their attachment needs met. Play for the young child is meant to be an act of self creation.

Teens also need to play but it often takes on a different form due to the difference in maturity level. Ideally, creative solitude starts to appear where a teen is able to fill their time with their own personal endeavours such as music, drawing, running, writing, or some other form of expression and exploration. Creative solitude can look different for every child but the purpose is to help them discover who they are through the process of reflecting inward and outward on the world. I remember watching my 11 year old hold her hands out in the rain after a long dry sunny stretch and tell me, "Mom, I forgot what the rain felt like, it's so wonderful." Teens need time and space unencumbered by other people's expectations and demands. Teens need the same freedom as young children do in order to foster creative solitude including the freedom from screen time, peers, too much instruction and activities. When a teen's primary focus is on what other people are doing, there is little space and time left to reflect on who one is in relation to the world – the hallmark of maturity.

What Tots and Teens Need From Their Caretakers

As adults we can celebrate our child's evolution as a separate being but for them it will involve some sadness and alarm as their identity shifts towards greater independence and away from the security of good caretaking. There are a number of things we can do to help make this journey better for them. What is true for all children despite differences in age, is that the deeper their relational roots with caring adults, the greater their capacity to grow as socially and emotionally responsible people.

- 1. Collect their attachment instincts** – Both tots and teens still need adult relationships and although this may be expressed differently at each age, the need is still there. Our children need to see there is a desire to be close to them,

warmth as we listen and give them our undivided attention, and tangible signs that we are holding onto to them. We need to find our way to their side and continue to cultivate our relationship with them, from shared hobbies to activities like eating dinner or playing together. There is no right way to communicate to a child we care, it is about letting our relationship evolve so that we are still the refuge they seek and are positioned to help them with feelings that arise as a result of healthy growth.

2. **Structure and Routine to Counter Resistance and Opposition** – The counterwill instinct to resist and counter directions is strong in both tots and teens as a result of being in the midst of critical periods of identity development. Focusing on more implicit ways to direct them is less likely to provoke strong resistance and opposition, for example, instead of saying – “you need to brush your teeth,” a parent could ask, “what story do you want to read once you are done getting ready for bed?” This naturally implies that teeth brushing is part of the routine. For a teen, the regular structure and routine around homework or chores is often a better strategy than telling them each night to do their work. Structure and routine are more subtle forms of control that can be decided on by parents in advance and are less likely to provoke strong counterwill reactions when they become habits.
3. **Carve out space and time to play** – One of the most important roles a parent has is to create a healthy environment for a child to grow in. For parents this means buffering against societal expectations, cultural pressures, and their own child’s desires as they foster time and space for them to play or engage in creative projects. Controlling the amount of screen time a child or teen has, the number of playdates or sleepovers they go on, and ensuring they have time to be bored and to play or engage in creative projects is critical. While we can’t make our kids play, we can try to lead them there by making sure nothing competes with their attention and giving them the materials they are naturally drawn to. Whether it means getting out the lego pieces to help them create their structures, having paper on hand so they can fill it with pictures or stories, or getting them out into nature and away from competing stimulation – we need to lead our children to the places where they can express and reflect on who they are.

What is remarkable about both tots and teens is how they are developmentally being thrust forward to evolve as separate beings. For the toddler a sense of self is just beginning, while for the teen, they should be moving to assume a critical role in their own unfolding as a separate self. Despite the age difference between them, the goals in parenting them are still the same: to support them and be patient with their immaturity, offer warmth, and be generous in our caretaking. While their bodies and psychologies are getting more robust, they still need what they have always needed from us. As I watch my two children move into their teenage years I feel as Jodi Picoult once wrote, “I would have given anything to keep her little. They outgrow us so much faster than we outgrow them.”

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