



Making Sense of Adolescents (or anyone who acts like one)

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Mark Twain 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 he had learned in seven years.” Twain captured the arrogance, self-absorption, and idealism of the teenage years so well. While these characteristics are seen as deficits in the teen, they are byproducts of the changes underway. If a young adult successfully navigates the rites of passage that come with adolescence, they will leave their childhood behind and grow towards maturity.

One of my friends told me she sees adolescence as “one big seizure and period of upheaval.” I imagine her daughter would describe this period in a similar fashion, that is, if she could get enough distance from herself to understand what she was going through. The more we can understand what is going on for the teen, the more we can create the conditions that will help them grow up. The more we make sense of why they behave as they do, the less we are likely to be tripped up by their behaviour. Nature has a plan for our teens and it includes emerging from their ‘adolescent cocoon’ as a mature adult who is both socially and emotionally mature. If development is ideal then this period of transition should naturally resolve itself and bring with it more stability, perspective, and balance.

The dilemma for a teen is they are no longer a child and not yet an adult. These years require them to place their hand on the steering wheel in their own life and play a role in their own unfolding. It will require courage and the ability to handle strong emotions – from fear to frustration. For their parents, it will be a time to mourn the child they are no longer and to celebrate the adult they are becoming. It will mean they will have to find a way to hold onto a relationship with one’s child despite all the things that will come between them.

What Parents of Teenagers Worry About

When I talk to parents of teens, the common concerns they share with me are about drugs and alcohol, peer issues, social media and technology use, sexual activity, school success, and future aspirations. Some parents take a more hands off approach, while some struggle to maintain control over their teen. What I see repeatedly are the changes these years bring to the dance of relationship between a child and a parent. The relationship dance can feel tricky, unpredictable, requiring new moves, and new eyes to understand the emerging adult before you. The teen needs a parent still but doesn’t want to need them. They can push and pull, drawing a parent near only to distance them again quickly.

For those that have enjoyed parenting throughout a child’s early to middle years, the teen years can bring great sadness. The realization that one’s role is moving towards one of consultancy can be met with mixed emotions. Turning over the steering wheel to a teen to make decisions that impacts the rest of their life can seem daunting and alarming. It is a time of trial and error for the teen but for parents there is fear that some mistakes cannot be undone so easily.

What Teens Are Trying to Figure Out

With ideal development a teen will naturally experience strong emotions including alarm, frustration, and sadness. While they may be excited at having more freedom, they may also feel the weight of the responsibility it brings to make good decisions. They may feel more resistant and oppositional when told what to do by their parents as well, all part of the process in trying to figure out who they are. As my high school students used to tell me, “Every time my parents tell me to clean up my room I don’t feel like it – same with homework too. Why don’t adults know that it makes you want to do the opposite?”

The teen can feel bombarded with conflicting information, values, thoughts, and feelings. They may struggle with the lack of absolutes, realizing that nothing is as certain anymore. The childhood period where ignorance was bliss has come to a close and they feel the weight of making decisions where no clear answers can always be found. As they take the steering wheel in their life they will be faced with assuming responsibility for their mistakes and having to plan a reroute. Healthy development is often a time of struggle, one that a teen must face with courage and vulnerability, as well as with support from their adults, if they are to successfully navigate these years.

I often tell my teenage clients that adolescence can bring with it a time of alarm and sadness as much as excitement and expanding awareness. It can be a time of confusion as much as it can bring clarity in terms of one’s identity. It is a time of change, a time of tears, a time to hold on and have faith that the end may look very different from the middle.

How to Hold Onto a Teen

While our teens are trying to figure out how to let go of us and move into adulthood, it doesn’t mean we have to stop holding on to them. The biggest mistake we could make with is to assume they no longer need us. The challenge is we lack cultural practices to guide our teens into adult years. We lack rituals and structure through which they can naturally navigate their adolescent rites of passage. In intact cultures there were ceremonies to mark one’s coming of age, or the adoption of surrogate aunts and uncles to provide some natural distance from parents, and challenges for them to overcome. So many of our teens today feel lost because culture no longer serves as a guidepost to navigating these years of great transformation. The good news is parents can help provide direction to the teen by preserving and protecting their relationship with them.

1. Connect with them through shared experiences such as eating together, playing games, or music. Research shows teens who have adults in their lives that they eat with on a regular basis are more resilient in the face of adolescent adversity.
2. Give them space to voice their opinions and ideas, even if you disagree with them. When you listen to their ideas you communicate you are interested in who they are, rather than having them feel you ‘tell them what to do all the time.’
3. Take care of them in unexpected ways – from helping them to clean up their room to cooking their favourite meals.
4. Invite them to spend time with you – to go out with or cook with you, even if you think they will likely say no and will want their own space. The idea that you want them close is often nourishing all on its own if a teen has a soft heart.
5. Give them areas to be in charge of that are age appropriate, such as how they want to organize and decorate their room, making a meal for the family,

choosing when they do their homework. If a teen is developing well they should naturally start to take responsibility for areas in their life and parents can step in to play a supporting role when needed.

I love Gordon Neufeld's statement, "if you don't feed your cat and your neighbor does, you will surely lose your cat." This is as true for cats as it is of teenagers. If we are going to hang onto our teens we will need to find a new relational rhythm that honours the changes underway for them. If we are to hold onto our relationship we will need to find a way to ensure their big emotions, such as resistance, sadness and alarm don't pose a threat to our connection.

We need to make sure we don't leave them to their peers for guidance or in making sense of the world – nor to their devices. While they evolve as social and sexual beings, our teens still need their adults to anchor them into place. It is our relationship that provides a sense of home and place of refuge, and helps them feel grounded when the changes underway are overwhelming.

Adolescence brings with it the promise of maturity. We may watch in awe and with some alarm as our teens take the steering wheel in their own life. With enough patience, time, and good care-taking they will finally emerge and remind us of the splendor and beauty inherent to human development.

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