

Communication with Teenagers - I

You may have been used to having a child whom you have often needed to tell or ideally show what to do, but now you have a teenager who needs to learn to be an adult. They still need guidelines so that they know where they stand, and help with some things too, but you can let them know that there are times when they can really help you as well.

You could include them in discussions as if they were another adult about the place, asking their views about family and other things. You might be surprised at their insight, but you will need to be prepared to accept their honesty!

They need to learn how to deal with practical household things, and financial details too, so if there are decisions that need to be made about how to handle bills, or set up, fix, or replace something, do include them in that too. One day when they move out, they will need to have an understanding of these things if they are going to be successful at living independently. Of course they should help with the chores and DIY, but be careful not to turn this into a battle, and make allowance for their busy study schedules etc. It needs to be about willingly showing a little responsibility rather than doing things under duress. You should make sure they understand that everyone has bits to do so that they can see the fairness of it, and it might be an idea to change things around a bit every now and again, for example offering them a choice of what they might like to get some practice at this month or next. Try to gently teach them what they want to know, for example they might like to make a meal for their friends, or for Dad's birthday perhaps, or help make sandwiches for your party (and be allowed to stay up a bit late to offer them around the guests). Even adults need to be praised for the positives instead of always criticised, so remember to notice if they do something particularly well or think of something for themselves.

If there are changes of job or working hours, or moves to be made, including your teenagers in discussions helps them to understand your viewpoints and reasoning, a) so that they won't get the wrong end of the stick, and b) so that they won't feel hurt or rejected or angry with one or other or both of you. You can see how there could be a danger they might misunderstand things if they were not included in discussion; for example they might make assumptions that Dad made Mum suddenly go out to work when they were used to having her at home, when really it might have been Mum who wanted to get into doing something. Or they might presume that Dad was sacked when really he decided to give up a job to become self employed, or to have a break for health reasons. It's also obviously important to try to give them an unbiased view of things, not a one-sided account from one parent or the other, as that tends to manipulate their feelings and loyalties unfairly.

Even if there are family difficulties, it is far better to share what is going on. It's unrealistic to try to shield your teenager too much from the realities, whether the issues

are at home or in the big bad world out there. If you shield them too much then they may get some very nasty surprises later, and possibly struggle to cope if it is all too sudden.

Reasoning with someone you have helped to mature is the best way to come to agreements about where they should be allowed to go and what time they will be expected home, and what to do if they are in difficulty, etc. (for example, it's okay to phone home for a lift if they are stuck somewhere). Ask them what they think reasonable rules are – you might be surprised at how responsible they can be if you start out by treating them as if they *are* responsible. Show them the respect you want them to show you, by negotiating firmly but fairly with them, instead of leaving them to drift into a state of confusion and disconnection, or backing them into a position of resentment and alienation. Young people need a strong sense of identity and belonging, so it is ideal that they can still feel comfortable at home. Being brought into family discussions makes them feel valued, and being helpful gives them a sense of responsibility; both help them feel as if they belong.

Your teenagers need enough freedom to discover age appropriate things, like music for example. If you are going to try and prevent them from going to an event they can hear down the road, then don't be surprised if they disobey you and sneak out. Try to be realistic, then it is easier for them not to be tempted to defy you. Far better to sit down and say that you realise that they ought to be allowed more freedom as they grow up, and say that you trust them, and hope that they will always feel able to come to you if they get into any tricky situations. Ask them to let you know if they feel the rules need re-negotiation as they prove themselves, and if they have any questions anytime at all.

Even much younger children can be really good at understanding situations. When my lads were still at junior school I would ask them why they thought it was wrong to do certain things, to check their understanding, especially if something was dangerous. I also sometimes asked them what punishment they thought they deserved for a transgression and they were really harsh on themselves. Even as toddlers standing in the shopping trolley, I would ask them why they thought it was not a good idea for a mother to buy the sweets her child was yelling for – and they knew well enough that if you bought them under those circumstances, then the child would always know in future that if he hollered loudly long enough he would ultimately get what he wanted. So I would reward good behaviour with a treat rather than the other way around, sometimes as we left the shop and sometimes later – they knew I would be fair. We used to have a red plastic cake container that we kept those miniature versions of chocolates in, and also little boxes of raisins (which they loved), and if it had been a good day they were often allowed to pick a 'red tin goodie' after supper. They would help choose the goodies for the 'tin' in the shop, and that of course was a good opportunity to show how it was a good idea to go for the special offers – 3 packets for the price of 2 meant the tin was fuller and there was more choice. They were really good at judging when they needed to go to bed too, so showed good signs of developing self-management skills.

So, I always say that children and young people ought to be given a lot of credit for their understanding and good judgement, and consulted on things whenever possible. Obviously you do not want to stress them by giving them too much inappropriate information too early, but introducing things gradually makes it a lot easier for them to grow up sensibly. You wouldn't want everything to come as a big shock all at once later on would you? Of course, spoiling people of any age can turn them into lazy users or even manipulative control freaks, so you wouldn't want to do everything for them anyway. It doesn't do them any favours in the long run as, apart from not learning anything, they don't have a chance to develop self respect or satisfaction through achievement and inclusion, so they can become sullen, and bored too. It is important to help them develop self esteem in a balanced way, giving them the chance to try things, and win praise, but not so much that they become over inflated either. We want them to gain confidence but not become too self-opinionated.

Our Young People can become quite distressed and confused about life as they come across so many new things going on. They tend to be quite sensitive about what is happening in the world as they are trying to make sense of life and what it might mean to them, and figure out what they want to do. Things like wars, third world suffering, animal welfare, environmental, ecological, and economic issues, powerful people getting away with things they shouldn't, etc, can all be great cause for concern. It is no good trying to brush these things under the carpet as that will not gain you respect; your young person does need to be able to discuss them properly, form opinions, and consider things they might be able to do to help change things, otherwise they might become depressed, or cynical. They might also be wondering why your generation has allowed these things to happen. If you don't really know how to deal with these issues, then at least help find them places and people they can turn to for information and advice. Lots of organisations offer online information as well as actions that can be taken, such as the chance to sign petitions or get involved in fundraising.

Teenagers also ideally need events to mark and celebrate their transitions into adulthood, things that offer real meaning, that touch the deep person inside, so plan birthdays etc carefully I have workshops to help with this transition, and information will be in one of my forthcoming books, but in the meantime I will aim to write more articles about it. Young people might like to do some things that are a bit different or special to help them on their journey - like rock climbing, martial arts, canoeing, etc – something to help them focus on a mind-body-spirit level, to integrate all these aspects of themselves into a balanced being.

Sometimes you might want to have a meeting with you, your partner, and one teenager at a time, for discussion or debate. Ask them to suggest topics to bring to the table, and you can do the same, so you sort of have an agreed agenda. You should make an effort not to sidetrack too much so that you can focus on what you agreed, and don't get into areas you haven't prepared for, or get caught up in emotional slanging. Everyone should be prepared to consider everyone else's feelings and viewpoints, and try to understand why

they think and feel that way. Don't try to coerce people to agree with you, or try to lay down any laws. Everyone should be allowed to question or challenge, as long as it is done politely – who knows what you might learn from your teenager's insight.

If you are coming to these sort of ideas late, when your teenager has already become frustrated and bewildered, and there may be behavioural issues at home or at school or both, then you could try explaining to them that you did not know what to do before but that you want to try now. You could ask them to help you to know how to help them. It would probably make things worse if you said "You need to do this.... Or that.... Or else....." Surely it would be better to say "What do you think we could do to help?" Even if they reject you now (due to their pent up frustration or other emotions) don't give up, just say that you will be there for them if they want to approach you when they are ready. You can then suggest "Let's sit down and discuss what we can (realistically) do to make things work out better for everyone". Another suggestion could be, "We would like you to help us understand how you feel and what you think about things so that we can try to help....." " There might also be a good time to point out that parents just don't always know that much about being parents, no one gets training, it's just something you try to learn how to do as you go along. This can often defuse blame and anger in both directions, as they suddenly realise that you can't actually be expected to know everything, and by the way, neither can they. So hopefully we end up with both parties now being willing to try again, because after all you do still care about each other or you wouldn't be having the conversation.

I don't think it ever hurts for young people to know if we are struggling a bit with things, it means that they will recognise that it isn't an 'us and them' situation, we are all in this life together, and it would be really great if we could be a team. Of course, you don't want to overdo it and fall to pieces in front of them, just be natural. A lot of the time I think that people are too afraid to open up and share their feelings because they don't think that others can understand or empathise, so it makes them feel vulnerable to ridicule; but actually it makes us all more human.

If there are things that parents find too difficult to handle themselves, then there is nothing wrong with turning to outside help. It is far better than letting things slide. You may find that a grandparent or uncle might be the right one to help, or it might be the parents of one of your young person's friends that they feel more at ease with, or maybe even a professional mentor, or perhaps someone via school or college might have the relevant experience. It is that much easier for someone who is a bit detached from the situation to bring a clearer perspective to things, so don't feel jealous or inadequate, just be grateful that your young person is getting some help. Too often in today's society, families have been separated by having to move for a job, or other reasons, so it is sometimes not so easy to access extended family support, which puts all sorts of extra pressure on parents anyway. Just try to make any outside help seem as normal as possible rather than stigmatise it. Whether it is official or unofficial it is still essentially just a friendly ear, with perhaps some practical advice.

Hopefully you won't have much problem, especially if you are already open to ideas such as those expressed here. Even if there are issues now, try not to panic too much about the future, because things can always be improved with a little effort. In the end, family love usually wins through, and things get better sooner or later. Stuff can be forgiven or put into perspective, especially once your young people have children of their own and they find out for themselves what it's like to be a parent!

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