

How To Help Teens Become Adults

By Dan Daniels

Any parent knows that an infant child requires lots of attention. There's the feeding, the changing, the bathing, the feeding, the changing, and, well, the feeding and the changing.

As your child ages, however, she requires less and less of a parent's attention. While a 3-year-old can still make large demands on your time, they are far less than the demands of a 3-month-old.

While a child's demands for time may decrease over time, a good parent keeps the interaction level high, says Suzanne Fitzgerald, an education specialist with the U.S. Dept. of Education. "You sow the seeds for successful teen years during the pre-school and grade school years," Fitzgerald said. "Staying active in your child's life is the single most important thing a parent can do to help that child grow into a mature, responsible young man or woman."

"Your relationship with your child will change, of course, as you go from changing diapers and reading Dr. Seuss books to middle school and beyond, but for many parents, that's when your relationship can really start to blossom," Fitzgerald said. In fact, Fitzgerald said, as a child moves into middle school and beyond, she might even start teaching you a thing or two: how to slug a baseball, what is happening with the city council or county board or why a new book is worth reading.

How do you maintain an affirmative relationship with your child as she moves into the teen years? The Dept. of Education and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) offer these suggestions:

Showing Love. When our children behave badly, we may become angry or upset with them, but these feelings are different from not loving our children. Young adolescents need adults who are there for them. They need people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them and show a genuine interest in them. This is how they learn to care for and love others.

Providing Support. Young adolescents need support as they struggle with problems that may seem unimportant to their parents and families. They need praise when they've done their best. They need encouragement to develop interests and personal characteristics.

Setting Limits. Young adolescents need parents or other adults who consistently provide structure and supervision that is firm and appropriate for age and development. Limits keep all children, including young teens, physically and emotionally safe. Carole Kennedy, president of the NAESP, puts it this way: "They need parents who can say, 'No, you cannot go to the mall all day or to movies with that group of kids.'"

Being a Role Model. Young adolescents need strong role models. Follow the values that you hope your child will develop. Your actions speak louder than words. If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child probably will too. As adolescents explore possibilities of who they may become, they look to their parents, peers, celebrities and others.

Teaching Responsibility. We are not born knowing how to act responsibly. A sense of responsibility is formed over time.

Providing a Range of Experiences. Adolescence is a time for exploring many areas and doing new things. Your child's interests will change, in academics and recreation. He may experiment with different forms of art, learn about different cultures and careers and take part in community or religious activities. Within your means, you can open doors for your child. You can introduce him to new people and to new worlds. In doing so, you may renew in yourself long-ignored interests and talents, which also can set a good example for your child.

Showing Respect. It is tempting to label all young adolescents as difficult and rebellious. But teens vary as much as children in any other age group. Your child needs to be treated with respect, which requires you to recognize and appreciate her differences and to treat her as an individual. Respect also requires you to show compassion by trying to see things from your child's point of view and to consider her needs and feelings. By treating your young adolescent with respect, you help her to take pleasure in good behavior.

There are NO Perfect Parents. I know, I know, this is a huge blow to you and your spouse. However, a bad decision or an "off" day isn't likely to have any lasting impact on your child. What's most important in being an effective parent is what you do over time.