

Understanding and Parenting Adolescents

Living with a teenage son or daughter on a daily basis often makes parents feel anxious, angry, uncertain, or inept. Despite the occasional horror story regarding adolescence, the majority of teenagers in America navigate this phase of development quite well. Unfortunately, parents cannot know with certainty the health and strength of their adolescent until several years after they leave this phase. On the one hand, parents may have some control over their child's behavior and may get their youngster to conform to their standards, but the child's personality may not be developing in optimal health.

Conversely, the adolescent who goes against the grain of the family, especially a dysfunctional family, may look ill on the outside, but may be coming into his/her own health on the interior. In short, the process of real growth during the adolescent years (and in adulthood) may not be easily discernible even by child development experts.



PSYCHOLOGICAL TASK OF ADOLESCENCE

The task of becoming one's own person, as opposed to mimicking parental and societal roles, is the major job of adolescence. This process, however, is not simple and in many respects is similar to the mourning-loss-grief phase seen in adults. Episodes of doubt, caution, fear, vulnerability; and susceptibility to bronchial infections, colds, and physical aches and pains are symptoms of the depressive phase of adolescence. Manic phases are reflected in elevated mood, loudness, hyperactivity, excitability, poor judgment, and the desire to get away from home. Vacillation between these phases is necessary to maneuver successfully through the adolescent years. To be manic all the time is to short-circuit the development of a sensitive, caring, responsible, and real inner core. To be depressed all the time is to limit the positive influences and interactions of the real world. Furthermore, most parents, teachers, and counselors have every right to be concerned when a youngster appears chronically depressed and should seriously consider a referral for professional help.

GETTING BETTER--GETTING WORSE

Because adolescence is a time for separating from the direct, day-to-day influence and control of parents, it is also a time when youngsters minimize their dependence upon parents for love, support, care, direction, and security. Adolescence is a phase when relationships with peers and reality slowly replace the relationship with parents. In dysfunctional families, youngsters often are unable to chart a healthy course of separation-individuation because they try to get away from parental influence too early and become excessively peer dependent. Teenagers of dysfunctional families may also be unprepared to separate-individuate because they lack an adequate foundation of the self, or because parental dependence and neglect hold them back. Such youngsters seldom navigate a course of healthy adaptation because they essentially have had an unhealthy upbringing. Regardless of the family's health, the adolescent's pulling away from parental control toward self-direction and peer influence carries with it a delicate balance. This balance consists of getting better or getting worse, both psychologically and behaviorally. Many parents are too emotionally involved with their children or too caught up with their own problems to help the youngsters chart their way. Therefore, a checklist of inner life processes may be helpful in determining whether a child (or parent) is growing or regressing.

CHILD AND PARENT CHECKLIST

A few times each year, parents are encouraged to evaluate their teenager and themselves for indication of healthy or unhealthy functioning. Parents are also encouraged to help their child or themselves work on one characteristic at a time to avoid unrealistic expectations of "instant perfection." It is the direct work on oneself that enables a parent to become more patient and empathic with his or her child. Real growth is extremely difficult and requires a great deal of consciousness, encouragement, and support if one is to achieve higher levels of mental health. If parents are also growing, they will know the difficulty of real growth and tend to be less critical, controlling, demanding, and rejecting, while becoming more sensitive, caring, and loving.

PATTERNS OF FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Familiarity with the stages of family life helps in determining how and why a particular family may be having difficulty accommodating, restructuring, and changing in support of the developing adolescent. When a family is understood as a system, change or difficulty in one part of the family is viewed as affecting all of the family members. The midlife stage of parental development often coincides with the adolescent stage of individual development, typifying how stress in one part of the family can affect the other part.

Parents in the midlife reappraisal stage may focus too much energy on career crisis, loneliness, or anticipation of the empty nest. They may become highly resistant to changes associated with adolescent development, feeling that change suggests failure or fearing the unknowns of their child's pulling away. A primary source of difficulty for these parents is their own inadequate separation from their family of origin, as well as their own unresolved adolescent issues.

Parents in this struggle can become short-sighted and overreact to the periodic oppositional and negative behaviors that are typical of adolescence. If parents become rigid, defensive, and over-controlling, their adolescents are likely to feel imprisoned and stifled, and conflict is inevitable. Some adolescents in these instances may experience a significant diminution in self-development as they compromise themselves in an effort to save their families. They can also get caught in triangulated relationships with their parents when they unconsciously assimilate parental pain, thus stabilizing the family by keeping the parents focused on them instead of their own conflicts. Adolescents in unsupportive families may experience excessive pressure to excel in order to boost their parents' self-esteem.