

Rx for the Teen Years: A Dose of Confidence for Parents

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Just when you thought you had a handle on child-rearing, along comes adolescence to test your time-proven strategies and rattle your confidence. Your 15 year old daughter's possession of a cell phone gives you peace of mind until you learn she's been text-messaging her friends, girls and boys, well into the wee hours. Your thirteen year old son has always respected house rules about TV and computer use until you realize he's hacked past the parental controls you installed.

Pull the plug and suddenly you become Enemy #1 only now it doesn't blow over as quickly as the time you took away Tommy's toy shovel because he whacked his sister over the head with it. A teen's remoteness or apparent dislike of you can erode your confidence and have you questioning your parenting skills just when you need them to be the sharpest.

It's not uncommon for parents to take a step back as their offspring move from babyhood into early childhood and become more autonomous. This is a natural and necessary part of the process of parenting effectively. However, the trick, according to Dr. Tim Ursiny, a psychologist and executive coach/trainer, is to learn how to transform your parenting style to match the age. That way you can avoid a crisis in confidence when the teen years bear down.

As the author of several books on confidence, including "The Confidence Plan: How to Build A Stronger You", Dr. Ursiny has seen many previously confident parents start to doubt themselves when dealing with their teens. He says the solution lies in the approach. Very young children (under age 8) need to be managed and told specifically what to do, while tweens (age 9 to 13) respond better to mentoring and loosened structure. With teens, however, it's a whole different ball of wax. Teens need to be coached. Unfortunately, many parents never move out of the managing stage and therein lies the problem. "Teens need to know there are rules but a parent must show respect for their opinion and viewpoint," says Dr. Ursiny.

Of course, parents never set out to intentionally alienate their teen and are often surprised by the cool reception they are suddenly treated to. Could this be the same child who at age five unabashedly called out in a crowd that she would love you "forevah and evah?" Where did that loving and devoted moptop go and who is this surly stranger in his or her place? Now is not the time to distance yourself however. "One of the biggest mistakes parents make," says Michele Borba, Ed. D., educational consultant and award-winning author, "is to back away from their teen."

Find A Common Connector

"Your teenage child may seem indifferent to you, but in reality he or she is not. They still need your interest and input, they just don't indicate it in quite the same way as when they were younger," says Dr. Borba. She recommends parents find a commonality with their teenager even if it's just sitting down to watch a TV show together. Perhaps it's going to a sporting event or shopping at the mall. Whatever the case, the time spent together can leave parents feeling more confident they are connecting on some level with their teen.

Dr. Borba also advises finding ways to get into "your kid's zone." Figure out what time of day your child is most receptive to talking and make yourself available. They may not be especially chatty during morning car pool but later in the day they might be less reticent as they rummage through the refrigerator for a snack. Be there to catch up on what's going on in your child's life.

Don't Take It Personally

So often a parent will take it personally when confronted with an example of a teen growing up and away from the family. When your child announces he'd rather go on a school skiing trip with his friends than vacation with you during spring break, you might feel hurt. "It's important not to personalize the issue," says Dr. Ursiny. "Remember, it's not about you, the parent. It's just part of the growing up process."

Stacy DeBroff, parenting expert and founder of the website MomCentral.com concurs on this point. "Sure, it's hard when your kids grow out of the adoring, dependent phase," she says. "The hormones kick in and they can't remember the reasons why like you! They may even start to verbally attack you and/or cite your character flaws." She adds that parents, particularly moms, take it all too personally and start to ask themselves what they did wrong. "Parents have to remember these periods run in phases. Teens and tweens will act a certain way for six months and then they will evolve and that period will be over."

Make New Friends

Perhaps you've noticed it's often easier to talk to your teen's friends. They are more responsive to your questions than your own son or daughter! Make a point of befriending the girls and boys in your teen's circle of friends, counsels Dr. Borba. It's an excellent opportunity to get a peek into their world and in the process, learn something about your child you might not hear about otherwise. An added bonus could be if your child sees his or her friends responding to you, they might begin to evaluate you in a different light. Earning the label of "cool" might be a stretch but they may begin to think perhaps you're not so bad after all!

Teach Life Skills

"Never do for your child what you child can do for himself," advises Dr. Borba. Ask yourself: what is my child really capable of? What is a skill my child can learn this week? Then set about to teach it. Skills like how to do his or her own laundry or cook a simple dinner. Practical tools such as how to balance a checkbook or change the tire on a car. More complex skills might include learning how to deal with stress or practice good study habits. You might even write the goals down in a notebook for your eyes only in much the same way you recorded your child's developmental steps in a baby journal years earlier. These are confidence builders for you, the parent. Note each gain, each accomplishment and you'll begin to feel like you're doing your job as a parent one step at a time.

Develop A Support Network

If there's one thing all the experts agree upon, it's the importance of developing and maintaining a support network as you navigate the challenging waters of parenting a teen. With families so fragmented these days and separated by distance, there often isn't the network of siblings and grandparents in place to help raise a child. "Even if you find just one other person who is really interested in the well-being of your child," says Dr. Borba. "It may be a teacher, coach, or youth group leader. Sound off to them and that will make you more confident as you share the same triumphs, fears and disappointments."

Relationship strategy is a key part of Dr. Ursiny's confidence building plan. He says it's critical to find someone you can talk to about the difficulties of raising a teen, someone who leaves you feeling positive about the experience. "Vent your problems, don't just recycle them," states Dr. Ursiny.

Parents need to shift some focus to their own activities so they're not just invested in their child's present roller coaster of emotions," suggests DeBroff. Whether it's taking a class, working on a hobby or just connecting with friends, all these things will help bolster a parent's sense of self.

Read the Instructions

Parents will do a lot of reading and research when they have babies and toddlers but the practice tends to taper off in the tween and teen years. Some of this can be attributed to the scarcity of titles aimed at the this age compared to the younger childhood years. You may have to search a little harder for books on how to parent older children but it is worth the effort. Scour the internet and bookstores for texts that emphasize parenting teens as a type of coaching and recommend the establishment of collaborative communication methods.

FINALLY, take heart in the results released in April 2007 of the Associated Press MTV seven-month survey of nearly 1,300 young people aged 13 to 24 years old. It was revealed that the majority of teens find the most happiness in their family and listed their parents as their heroes. Seventy-five percent said being with their parents brought them even more joy than being with their friends. What could be more confidence boosting than that?