

President's Page

Parenting Adolescents

Adolescence is a period of experimenting, experiencing and expanding. What parents should do is, understand your adolescent, safeguard, protect and guide him/her safely through this period. The rebelliousness and dislike for parental intrusion usually would keep parents at bay, thinking that teenagers do not relish the idea of help and guidance from parents. But it may not be so always. Adolescents need help and guidance in decision-making, problem solving, critical thinking, developing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with stress and managing emotions. But parents have to be extra careful while offering a helping hand in solving adolescent problems because it is not easy for teenagers to accept the fact that help is needed.

All adolescents need support and guidance. But some young people whose adolescence is marked by more serious struggles may require help from outside the family and it is usually the parents who would be the first to notice such changes in their adolescents. Beneath frequent violent outbursts or sudden mood swings and related interpersonal problems of your adolescent, there may be a person who is crying out for professional help. If parents find it difficult to handle signs of trouble like those given below, it is better to seek professional help at the earliest.

Danger signals in adolescents

- Large amount of time spent alone, and isolation from family and friends
- Sudden changes in school performance

- Drastic mood swings or changes in behavior
- Changes in your child's peer group or separation from long time friends
- Lack of interest in hobbies or social and recreational activities

Keep in mind that these signs do not always mean that your adolescent is in trouble. Some changes in friendship, for example are normal as young people mature and find new interests. Changes in the family situation, temperamental differences and sudden crises can trigger off problem behaviours which may be complicated by the normative adolescent behaviour of not wanting to share feelings and experiences.

Dealing with teenage problems - the parent's role

The first step for parents in dealing with concerns about their adolescents is to improve or reopen the lines of communication. If problems appear to persist and the child seems reluctant or unable to discuss them, the parent could try talking with him or her in a non-confrontational manner about the changes noticed. Parents could express their concern for the child's well-being and show interest in helping in any way possible. But they should be prepared for defensive reactions and willing to listen and ask questions. They need to be prepared to help their adolescent child talk through problems, rather than immediately try giving solutions.

Parents will be troubled by confrontational nature of some of the adolescent behaviours. It is not an easy job to decide where to draw the limits and where to give in. Hence there is no tailor made solutions to these problems. Each

one of us develops our own strategies in dealing with our adolescents, at times through trial and error, through experience and at times adopting the practices, which our parents had used with us. But we need to remember strategies that would certainly help in the understanding and handling of adolescents.

Parents should try to be good role models

Try and keep the communication alive; especially between mothers and daughters and fathers and sons thereby create a feeling that "I am there for you". Parents should take efforts to understand adolescent development. Learn about the behaviours to expect, the effects of physical changes, and ways to help the teenager to deal with change. Help choose good friends before friendship is established. Provide accurate information on sex and sexuality without creating anxiety in them. Encourage developing good habits, autonomy as well as sharing and instil in them good value system. Give them freedom but with limits. Avoid unhealthy comparisons and cursing adolescents. Be authoritative and not authoritarian. Instil confidence and trust in adolescence. Help to keep body and mind clean and healthy through yoga, social service, NSS and community activities. This not only helps to channelise extra energy but also helps to develop confidence.

Remembering our own adolescence would certainly help

Going back to our adolescence, the mood swings, volatile nature, the fears and hopes we had, would help parents to have a better understanding of their teenagers. Parenting is a learned skill. Training can help even experienced parents by giving them new tools for supporting children through adolescence. Talking to other parents about their own experiences in handling adolescent children can be very helpful. Listen more than talk.

Young people have spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence, they want and need the chance of sharing their feelings and ideas and to begin recasting family beliefs, stories and traditions in light of their changing identity. Teach adolescents about the joys and troubles of life and ways to revel in the good times and cope with the bad. The myths that life is always easy or fair or that one should always be happy can lead to frustration for young people dealing with the realities of life. Use positive reinforcement for positive behaviour whenever possible; it is far more effective than criticism or punishment for negative behaviour. Words that belittle can hurt an adolescent's self-esteem. The most useful tools in raising young people are sensitivity, praise, understanding and communication.

Teach adolescents that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand

Give the child increasing responsibility for his or her personal well-being and that of the family. Provide the child opportunities to help around the house and to become involved in family decision making discussions. In doing so seek the child's input and help him or her to understand the process that can be used to make those decisions. Look for situations that can allow a child to test decision-making skills with the support of caring adults. Supportive adults can help provide the child with an understanding of the impact of those decisions on both the child and others. They also can assist the adolescent in coping with the results of these choices. Helping an adolescent move toward independence is a key thinking. For each youth, the need to assert independence will happen at different times and through different means. Becoming tuned to children's attempts to operate independently will help in supporting those efforts and provide guidance when early attempts at decision-making result

in less than desired outcomes. It is sometimes difficult for parents to give up control out of concern for their child's safety. Adolescents' skills in coping with increasing responsibility will be enhanced by parents' willingness to support them as they make choices and face new challenges. It is also important to offer the child chances to become involved in the community. All young people are searching to find their place in the world. Involving adolescents in developing solutions to community problems can shift their focus from themselves and help them to develop skills and feel involved and empowered.

Spending quality time with adolescents

Adolescence is a time when young people naturally begin to pull away from the family and spend more time at school, with friends, or at a job. Still, time spent with caring parents is key to young people's ability to grow and mature emotionally and socially. Take advantage of times that the adolescent is home, over dinner or watching a cricket match, to continue building your relationship. Attempting to become involved in the child's outside interests can be useful. A sincere attempt at involvement will both show support and help to stay informed about the child's interests. It is of paramount importance for parents to accept that they have feelings too. Parents may feel frustrated, angry, discouraged, or sad during difficult times with their adolescent. Being a good parent doesn't mean being perfect. Show the ability to apologize when a parent feels really let down. Setting an example will help the child understand human frailty and ways of mending relationships strained by stress or disagreement. Seeking support and guidance in dealing with the changes in a child moving through adolescence may also be needed. Learn about the signs of crisis and talk with other parents or professionals. By doing so, the

parent can begin to tell the difference between adolescent behaviour that indicates a youth in crisis and the usual behaviour associated with a life passage.

Most adolescents have problems at some time or other

Acting-out behaviour can be a normal part of becoming an adult. Parents sometimes needlessly feel embarrassed when their child is having trouble. A parent need not assume that the child's behaviour always reflects on the quality of your parenting. Do not always push for drastic or dramatic solutions. Sometimes young people just need time and support to work through their problems. Continue to provide children with positive feedback and opportunities to grow and reflect on what parents would have wanted for their children during better times: health, happiness and movement toward a promising future and offer them chances to strengthen their skills and develop a sense of competence, usefulness and belonging.

It is also important for parents never to attempt to impose their unrealised academic and career dreams on their offspring. This becomes all the more unrealistic and potentially risky when the younger has little interest or aptitude for the parental choices. Perceive the stress that the adolescent must be going through, trying to match the expectations of teachers, parents and other family members and cope with the subtle signals of let down feeling that they show. It is not important that your son / daughter must fulfil your unrealistic script for them, but it is important that you help them fulfil their own dream and ultimately succeed in life. Remember the story of the person walking with God on the beach, who complained to Him "Why is it that you leave my side when ever I need you most?" God said "Son, when ever you were in trouble, I was

carrying you on my shoulder and that is why you see only one pair of foot steps". We need to be with our adolescents, helping them, guiding them, forgiving their mistakes, encouraging them without ever trying to take credit for it and allowing them the opportunities to make mistake while we are still alive.

IAP Teenage Month, August 2004

Once we start feeling happy and contented, we get a tremendous desire to help others and who other than Paediatricians have the best opportunity to help our adolescents and their parents. It is in this context that the IAP Executive Board have unanimously decided to celebrate August, 1st as Teenage Day and whole of August as Teenage Month and have

trained over 1000 Paediatricians in Family Life & Life Skill Education as part of the President's Action Plan-2004. May I take this opportunity to request each one of you paediatricians, district / city branches, state branches and the adolescent paediatrics chapter members to conduct Family Life & Life Skill Education programme in at least one Higher Secondary School in August and in as many as possible in the coming months.

M.K.C. Nair,

*IAP National President 2004,
TC 24/2049, Near Rose House, Thycaud,
Thiruvananthapuram 695 014, Kerala,
India.*

E-mail: nairmkc@rediffmail.com