Parenting Coping-Up with Adolescence

Early Adolescence: The Point of No Return (Part I)

"The point of no return." That sounds a little ominous, but actually it's quite appropriate when we speak about the beginning of adolescence. It's not so much that we are moving into difficult territory, but more that the initiation of adolescence marks the beginning stages of the child's journey into adulthood, which once started, cannot really be halted or reversed. In other words, once a child is beset with the physical changes of puberty, childhood as he or she knew it, and as you knew it, is gone. Of course we keep our childhood with us throughout life in many ways, but not in the same way as we have it during our early years. There are certain very distinct developments during adolescence that just won't allow us to turn back to the comfort and security of a child's mind, fantasy life, or state of dependency on parents.

So with that said, it's understandable why adolescence is both very exciting, and very scary - and that goes for teens and parents alike! There are new freedoms, new capacities for thinking, a new appearance, and newfound independence. There are also new responsibilities, a loss of childhood security, and adult-like demands that require teens to be much more accountable for their decisions and behavior. Adolescence is a fairly long developmental period, the onset of which is usually the beginning of puberty at ages 11 to 14, and its completion at approximately age 19 or when the young person enters into adult living. In actuality, adolescence can linger well into one's early adult years, particularly in our culture where there is a growing emphasis on higher education necessitating longer periods of time in college. It is not uncommon these days for young men and women to live at home well into their 20's as they pursue educational goals, or simply because they are not ready to live on their own.

Most adolescent developmental psychologists break adolescence down into three general periods which are early, middle, and late adolescence. Since there is so much information about the developmental tasks of each of these stages, we are going to focus on just early adolescence in this article. We'll start by outlining the general developmental tasks of adolescence, and then give some specifics about what occurs in the first several years as it pertains to puberty, the development of cognition, and the changes in peer group. In "Early Adolescence - Part II" we'll continue our conversation but will focus on the parent-teen relationship during this developmental period. Be sure to read "Mothers and Sons" and "Fathers and Daughters" which offer additional perspectives on the changing parent-child relationship during adolescence.

MAJOR TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE

There are two primary tasks of adolescence. These are the development of an individual identity, and the capacity for intimacy. The formation of an identity in adolescence entails becoming a person in one's own right. From birth, the adolescent has been collecting various aspects of his or her personality. These include identifications with parents, friends, influential teachers or other adults, peer groups, one's social class, historical traditions, ethnic or religious groupings, gender identifications, and so forth. All of these are integrated during adolescence, and become crystallized into a stable character that serves as one's basic identity throughout adult life. Adolescence is the time for trying on all the various possibilities, and synthesizing and refining them into a sort of coherent whole that will serve as a stable ego from which one operates, and that others can know and recognize as who one is.

The capacity for intimacy comes in later adolescence and is marked by the teen's ability to sustain a relationship in which self-fulfillment is balanced with the desire to satisfy another's needs. Such a relationship is characterized by the ability to combine affection, sexuality, and friendship all in one. One can maintain a strong attachment to another without the fear of being absorbed by the other person. Closeness can grow and be fostered even in the face of differences and conflicts. The process of forming an identity and of being able to engage in intimate relationships gets started in early adolescence, although the initial steps are somewhat unwieldy as development during this time is very uneven and quite different among individuals in the same age group. It is a very awkward and choppy phase that can leave parents' heads spinning. The ball gets rolling with the initiation of puberty.

PUBERTY

The two most striking developments during puberty are the changes in physical appearance and increases in sexual drives due to hormonal changes. In the several years prior to puberty, there is a significant change in weight and height for both boys and girls. Girls gain some eleven pounds and grow three to four inches per year, while boys gain thirteen to fourteen pounds and grow four to five inches per year. As puberty sets in, the changes in weight and height are accompanied by the changes in hair growth, the development of breasts in girls and maturation of genitals in both sexes, changes in voice, and so forth. This fast change in appearance and size accompanied by the emergence of adult physical characteristics, especially in regard to sexual development, all serve to create significant fluctuations in the adolescent's self-image. Over just a period of several years, one's body and appearance changes from that of a child to that of an adult. The teen is forced to begin seeing himself/herself in new ways, which necessarily results in new desires and behaviors.

Along with the growth and change in almost all aspects of physical appearance, the adolescent is besieged by hormonal changes and fluctuations that bring on an upsurge of sexual drives that cannot be ignored or repressed. These drives can be daunting and produce a new set of problems for the adolescent requiring weighing out the consequences of actions, and planning for one's future. For girls, the beginning of menarche marks a new capacity for pregnancy and childbirth. This development signifies a rite of passage in a sense into the world of womanhood where one has a choice to have or not to have children. For boys, genital maturation coupled with hormonal changes signals the capacity to initiate and participate in the adult activities of reproduction.

Now, if you think about your own twelve or thirteen year old child and imagine all of these changes and their impact on him or her, you can see that they can be quite overwhelming. Moreover, the early adolescent is highly invested narcissistically which simply means the focus of attention is on oneself - her appearance, how others view her, and how she feels. There is a tremendous amount of comparison that goes on during puberty having to do with who develops at what rate, and who develops the fastest. A girl who seems to grow a foot taller than everyone in her class well before the group catches up with her, may feel extremely self-conscious. On the other hand, a young man who does not grow hair under his arms until much later than his friends may have a significant drop in self-esteem. Young teens spend much of their time thinking about their own appearance, and then comparing themselves to others. Such comparisons can be extremely painful, and it is helpful if parents can be aware of just how important such concerns are to the teen during this time.

Parenting Prescription: (1) Some sympathy and assurance that your teen will either catch up with the others soon enough, or that the others will catch up with them (whichever the case may be), can be helpful and soothing. (2) Secondly, tolerance for your teen's heavy focus on concerns about appearance show that you understand what they are feeling. (3) Third, allowing frank discussion about sexuality can relieve teens just by recognizing that these new feelings are normal and that they can be dealt with without necessarily acting on them. Help your teen solidify his/her values, and come up with strategies for coping with sexuality. An important note here is to keep in mind that your young male teen will not want to have such discussions with his mother, but with his father or a male figure. The same goes for the young female who will prefer her mother or other adult female for these conversations.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Early adolescence marks the beginning of a whole new phase in the capacity to think and process information. At about age twelve (give or take), the young teen moves into what Piaget has called the period of formal operations, which continues to be refined and developed throughout adolescence. Very simply, this refers to the ability to think abstractly, or in other words, to think hypothetically. This allows teens to test out different ideas based on logic and rationality - to come up with a hypothesis and think through all the possible consequences before making a decision as to whether it is true or false. This allows for more sophisticated problem-solving and future planning. Of course the young teen overestimates the value of his ideas and solutions to problems, especially in the early phases of adolescence. What is important is that with this new cognitive ability, teens can begin to examine for themselves what they have learned, what values they have internalized, and who they are in relation to their family. The questions become "Who am I?" "Where do I fit in?" "What will I become in the future?" One now has alternatives in working on the task of building an identity. It is fortunate that this development in cognition occurs along with the emotionalism of puberty, because it gives the teen a strong tool to combat impulsivity, intense feelings, and reactions to new social pressures in the peer group.

Parenting Prescription: Use every opportunity to enhance your teen's ability to solve problems logically. This can be done through multiple conversations about everyday decisions and events. You can also discuss social problems, or simply peer relationships. Early adolescents are very concerned with issues of justice and fairness. Help them explore their values, how they view right versus wrong, and how they think others should act in relationships. This will help to strengthen and expand this new cognitive capacity that is most important for adult

living.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The peer group is extremely important to the early adolescent. This is due to the developmental task known as separation-individuation, which requires the young teen to separate from his or her parents (psychically), and then to go about building an individual identity. This process doesn't happen all at once. First there is the process of separation, which is followed later by the process of individuation (building an identity). The peer group is like a way-station between separation and individuation. The early peer group is comprised of smaller groups of friends (two to three), of the same sex primarily. These young teens are very self-involved out of necessity, and tend to pick friends that mirror themselves. These friendships are self-serving, and are apt to change very quickly. Today's best friend is gone a month down the road. These are not the long-lasting friendships of the eighteen or nineteen year old adolescent. Early peer relationships are also marked by a high degree of competition and rivalry. Young adolescents work hard at being better than peers in sports, in school, or whatever the activity of the moment is. They brag, exaggerate their talents and skills, and even can seem cruel in their lack of empathy for others. If you've ever listened to a group of thirteen-year-old girls talking about other girls, you know exactly what I mean. Fortunately, this is a temporary phase.

Parenting Prescription: Listen to the myriad details of these changing peer relationships as your teen talks about them. Insert that new capacity for hypothetical thinking gently into conversations, particularly when it comes to having empathy for others. Your young teen is very narcissistic and self-involved, but he or she also has the capacity to empathize with others if encouraged. It's your job to provide that encouragement, while sympathizing to a degree with the many psychological and emotional wounds your teen sustains to his or her tenuous self. This is a rough period for teens and parents. We will continue this discussion in Part II, and will focus more on the changes in the relationship between parents and their teens during this phase.

Early Adolescence: The Point of No Return (Part II)

In the last article, we offered Part I of this series which included a description of the major changes in development that take place among young adolescents during the years between twelve and fourteen. Specifically, we discussed the onset of puberty with its accompanying changes in sexuality, physical development, and new focus on appearance. Along with puberty, changes in cognitive development revealed a new capacity for thinking about problems hypothetically, allowing young teens to begin to evaluate not only their own values and behavior, but also those of authority figures and peers alike. Finally, we spoke about the importance of the peer group as a vehicle through which teens begin to separate themselves from their families and test out the various possibilities for formulating an identity that will become the basis of one's personality and character as one moves into adulthood.

As promised, we are now ready to take on the task of discussing the major changes in the parent-child relationship as teens begin to move through the uneven waters of adolescence. For this discussion, it will be helpful to understand that the major changes in this relationship begin in early adolescence, but come to somewhat of a peak during middle adolescence as the process of individuation gets into full swing. So as we go through the various aspects of what parents can expect during this period, we'll be including the years between approximately twelve years of age up to and possibly beyond fifteen years of age. Let's start with defining the primary changes in the parent-child relationship, why

these occur, and what role the peer group plays. Then we'll go on to discuss what parents can expect during this period, and what they can do to best facilitate the transition.

PRIMARY CHANGES IN THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The major transition that takes place beginning with early adolescence and becoming more fully developed during middle adolescence, is the movement away from the family as the center of the teen's life towards the peer group as the new locus of the teen's affections and interests. Why is this? Because the process of individuation (forming a full identity) requires that the adolescent deal with two very real problems presented by the onset of puberty. These are the integration of sexuality into the feelings of affection and attachment to others, and the necessity to break away from dependence on the family while at the same time forging a means for operating in the world independently. Said another way, adolescents must necessarily navigate three very important shifts: (1) the shift away from dependence on parents; (2) the shift of affections away from parental figures toward peers and opposite sex partners; and (3) the shift towards a new and more complete identity that surpasses simply being someone's son or daughter. All three of these shifts require a certain degree of separation and differentiation from parents. Moreover, there are particular ways that this process is negotiated, and that surface in changes in the parent-child (or we should say parent-teen) relationship. Let's look at each of them individually.

De-Idealization of Parents

Most parents with middle teens (fourteen to sixteen) are already well acquainted with this process. What is referred to here are the teen's attempts to look for ways to devalue the parent in his/her eyes. Usually this begins with questions on the teen's part about the parent's past activities. Your teen may begin to question you about whether or not you have ever engaged in recreational drug use, or skipped school, cheated, or gotten into trouble in any way that you would now consider cause for alarm if your teen were to do the same thing. They may go so far as to ask aunts and uncles questions hoping to get information that might not be forthcoming from you. The idea here is that they need to begin to see you as a person rather than as an idealized figure that knows all, and can do no wrong. They begin the process by first devaluing you which necessarily requires looking for your faults, blunders, or past secrets. The second part of the process involves a new kind of conversation that has a somewhat equal footing where you share yourself with the teen from a more adult perspective. It's more like swapping stories, or discussing your feelings and ideas about things without so much censoring. This latter part of the process doesn't really get going until late adolescence (seventeen years and up), but may get started around age fifteen or sixteen.

Parenting Prescription: Handling questions about past indiscretions is probably one of the more difficult challenges for parents of teens. If you have a rather checkered past, it is important to realize that it is not wise nor necessary to divulge a great deal of information to your teen at a time when he or she is dealing with the many choices posed by the peer group. For example, if you grew up during the late 60's and early 70's and were involved in substantial substance abuse, you should not feel compelled to outline this history to your teen. Honesty is not the best policy in this case. What you can do is discuss the difficulty in trying to make choices when confronted with such situations, and how you had some of the same difficulties. What you don't want to do is serve up some new information that will send your teen's previously idealized picture of you crashing and disintegrating. That could be very harmful. Let your teen devalue you as he/she needs to, but in small amounts with rather harmless information. Be honest about the difficulties in dealing with adolescent decisions and struggles, but maintain your privacy regarding more extravagant breaks from the norm during your adolescence. These are subjects for adult discussions later on, if at all. Your teen still needs to see you as a steady character against whom he/she can differentiate as the process of identity building goes on. The rule of thumb is that minor disillusionment with parents is healthy and necessary, but major disillusionment can be devastating and destructive.

Beginning to Depend on Others

The shift in dependency from parental figures to others in the environment begins in early adolescence, but really blossoms around ages fourteen to fifteen years. Generally this shift manifests in a number of ways, beginning with a new reliance on the peer group as the primary source of self-esteem, behavior styles and decisions, appearance, and interpersonal relationships. Approximately ½ of the teen's waking hours are spent with peers, about 15% with adults, and the other 35% either alone or with combinations of peers and adults. Further, there is a significant increase in time spent with peers of the opposite sex beginning around fourteen. The same sex groupings of peers during early adolescence gives way to larger peer groupings of both sexes (crowds) during middle adolescence, and then a movement towards opposite sex couples and small groupings in late adolescence. The peer group is the primary vehicle through which the teen establishes independence from the family, and learns how to participate in interpersonal relationships that include the opposite sex, thus replacing the family as the previous source of affections and standards of behavior.

So what parents see during this shift is increasing attempts by the teen to make decisions based on sources of information outside of the family. These sources are peers primarily, but also other adults such as teachers, coaches, friend's parents, etc. In order to facilitate this shift, teens must begin to question the rules, mores, and values offered by the parents and family that they have previously accepted without question. Teens necessarily must loosen the constrictions of these standards so that they may evaluate them and decide whether or not to internalize them as their own. In actuality, adolescents in their late teens who have sufficiently weathered this task tend to maintain the standards of the family for the most part, however, the difference is that they now have a sense of having chosen those standards as their own rather than just blindly following them. This is an extremely important transition as it is the basis of the teen's adult character. The new integrated set of standards will also include input from other sources gathered from the community and culture.

What parents can expect during this shift is the questioning of their authority along with a devaluation of their ideas. For example, if you aspire to a primarily Republican or conservative political stance, your young teen may come home spouting off a more liberal Democratic political agenda obtained from a new source of authority (a friend's dad, or maybe a history teacher at school). Or, you may find that the basketball coach has taken your place as the person who has the best advice for how to maintain fitness, or even how to deal with an interpersonal problem. Your teen will find other figures in the environment to emulate and to measure himself against. These are called ego ideals and are important transitional figures as the teen works on establishing an identity. You, as the parent, are no longer the be all and end all of the child's world, yet you must find a way to maintain some authority while allowing these other influences into your teen's life.

Parenting Prescription: It is important to allow your teen to begin to shift the locus of dependency outward into the environment. This means that you need to recognize who and what the new sources are for dependency, and to encourage those you think are valuable. At the same time, you are not going to be privy to as much as you have been from your teen previously, and you need to allow some distance to occur in the relationship. The difficulty is maintaining the correct balance between loosening the structure and maintaining limits that will promote growth and safety. Three pieces of advice may be helpful here. First, maintain the stance of being a parent as opposed to a friend or peer. You teen needs you in that place. They need limits at times, and they certainly need the advice and understanding of someone who is older and has more life experience. They don't need the hip, girlfriend sort of parent who tries to wiggle into the fringe of the peer group. They will highly resent you if you try to do this. Secondly, it is important not to personalize the devaluation of some of your ideals and values. Remember, your teen is in the process of trying new ones on. They'll eventually get to the right fit, but they must be allowed enough room to see what's there and then make their own choices. Last, allow as much as possible your teen's reliance on other adults when appropriate. For example, don't be the parent sitting in the stands at the basketball game who's yelling coaching strategies to his kid on the court that are contrary to the those of the coach. Sit on the sidelines and observe, allowing your son or daughter to be part of another group that doesn't include you.

Integrating Sexuality and Affection

Up until puberty, sexual drives have remained a latent factor in the child's life. They are there, but they are for the most part repressed so that children can focus more on the development of cognition (learning) that is the focus of the elementary school years. With puberty, sexuality shifts into the forefront of the teen's mind. It can no longer be repressed, and demands expression if only in thought and fantasy. Now at the same time, the child's primary objects of affection have been the parents and this affection was experienced with little conflict as there was no interference by intrusive sexual thoughts and drives. However, as sexual drives come into play, affection toward parental figures becomes somewhat confusing as the young adolescent has difficulty in keep feelings of affection separate from the overriding upsurge of sexual drives. In other words, affection becomes erotically tinged, and the younger adolescent is not able to successfully separate out erotic feelings from more platonic affectional feelings. The result is that teens feel a decided need to put distance between themselves and their parents, particularly parents of the opposite sex. Because they are not yet sophisticated enough to keep the feelings separate, they are moved to diminish their affectional ties to parents. A typical scenario that reflects this problem goes as follows: A young-looking mom gets home after having her hair done. She looks great, feels great, and looks younger than ever. She says to her young teenaged son: "How do I look?" He says, "I don't know!" very irritably, or "You looked better the other way." Mom is crushed, and shows it. He later picks a fight with her and slams out of the house. This brings to mind an occasion when my own teenaged son said to me, "I want you to look like a mom, not a teenaged girl." There you have it!

Parenting Prescription: Again, maintain the parental mode of relating to your teen. Be cognizant of not trying to ingratiate yourself into the peer group, either by trying to be a "cool parent", or picking up the language that is the current fad, or dressing much younger than your years. I'm not suggesting you look like an old-timer well before your years, but be aware of not looking to your teen for validation of your youth,

appearance, or self-esteem. Save these for your spouse, partner, or other adults in your interpersonal circle. Maintain enough physical distance from your teens of the opposite sex to allow for an adequate comfort zone. Remember that touch is sexually charged for the young teen in the throws of puberty, even if they wish it weren't so. Regular boundaries of privacy are also quite important such as knocking and receiving permission before entering your teen's room, avoiding situations of nudity or even of partial nudity in the house, and establishing standards of mutual respect for each other's space in the home.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Keep in mind that although the young adolescent necessarily goes through a process of separating from parents by way of greater involvement with peers, seeking information and advice from other adults, and a process of de-idealization of parental figures, parents still play a primary role during this phase of development. Your ability to be available, to set limits, and to understand and empathize with the struggles of adolescence are key to developmental success. Also keep in mind that most often, adolescents emerge from this stage having retained most of their original family values and ideals, only now they are individually interpreted and internalized as their own.

Your Teen's Room

One of the more common sources of frustration for parents of teens is figuring out an effective way to get them to keep their rooms clean. Sometimes this revolves around simply getting the beds made, putting laundry in the hamper, and getting the large amounts of debris cluttering the room picked up and put away. It's not uncommon for a fifteen year old boy's room to smell more like the inside of locker room, or for a girl's room to be so littered with clothes that you can't find the floor. Other times the struggle revolves around disagreements on what posters should be up on the walls, what colors the room can be painted, or even who's allowed in the room and under what restrictions. In general, the struggle between parents and adolescents over the teen's room seems to take several distinct shapes. These are (1) the issue of keeping the room clean; (2) how the room can be decorated; and (3) issues around privacy. In order for you to come up with rules and strategies that are reasonable for both you and your teen, it is helpful to first gain an understanding of the significance of this hallowed space for adolescents. The question is "How does the teen's room contribute to the basic developmental tasks of adolescence?"

FUNCTIONS OF ROOM

Most of you who grew up in the heyday of the Beachboys will remember a song called In My Room. This song captured well the feeling that an

adolescent has about the sort of private retreat quality that they ascribe to their rooms. It is a place where they can be alone with themselves and ponder those deep and distressing emotional ups and downs that they confront in the world, especially those involving their relationships with parents and peers. It is a place were one can have privacy with feelings and thoughts, as well as a mental space for resolving conflicts, making plans, or just allowing one's mind to drift and daydream about future possibilities. It is the oasis in the desert as well as the hidden attic where solitude is found.

A teen's room has another very special significance that is directly related to the primary developmental task of adolescence, which is building a personal identity. As the child moves into adolescence, the room becomes more and more like an extension of the self in which various expressions of the self appear. It is like a lab where the teen can visually and actively experiment with various identities as well as locate oneself within one's particular culture. You might see a whole wall covered with pictures of models, popular musicians, sports figures, or other icons of the teen world to which your teen may either aspire to be like, or that represent something that is considered desirable. The adolescent boy that is playing basketball may have posters of Kobe Bryant or Michael Jordan plastered all over the walls. Or a teen girl may choose supermodels or movie stars. On a more negative note, however, a teen who is becoming involved in regular marijuana use may have pictures of drug abusing rock stars, or paraphernalia that is associated with drug use. The point is, the choice of decoration, style, and items for display are extensions in some way or another of the identity your teen is formulating, or at least considering, and the culture in which he is negotiating his identity.

One other important function that the teen's room serves is that it supplies the first individual space that the teen can call his own and that has boundaries which separate it from the rest of the house and family. It is a private space in this regard that is both the responsibility of the occupant, and the place where special interactions with others take place. A conversation that occurs in this room is going to have a somewhat different quality than a conversation that occurs in the living room, kitchen, or other part of the house. This is the private space where friends visit and intimate conversations can take place. This privacy, however, comes with the price of responsibility. The upkeep of the space also belongs to the occupant. Moreover, the privacy and ownership of the space implies a mutual trust between the occupant and the landlord (parents). What goes on in the room must meet the requirements of the landlord, and the upkeep and cleanliness must also meet their approval. Let's move on now to our discussion of the three areas of conflict regarding the teen's room that were outlined in the introduction.

ISSUES OF CLEANLINESS

There are two parts to this discussion. The first has to do with how the parents define cleanliness, what the expectations are around cleanliness and neatness, and how this translates into daily cleaning, weekly cleaning, etc. The second part of the discussion is focused more on how to gain your teen's cooperation in meeting the expectations you have outlined. Let's take a look.

Expectations. Generally, parents seem to fall into one of several categories. One group of parents likes their kids' bedrooms to be kept clean and neat on a daily basis. They want the beds made everyday, clothes put away in the hamper, and all extraneous items kept in locations that have been designated for them. This means books on the bookshelf, clothes hung in the closet or folded in the drawers, etc. A second group of parents allow a certain amount of messiness and disorganization to occur over a week's span, and then require a thorough cleaning and picking up of the room once a week (generally on the weekend). Often the teen's room is cleaned in conjunction with an overall weekly house cleaning. A third set of parents are somewhat oblivious to the way the room is kept. Their attitude is that it is their teen's private space and if it gets messy enough so that they can't find things, they'll clean it without prompting.

We suggest that you include your teens in an initial planning discussion so that they participate in defining of the expectations. This doesn't mean that you don't have the final decision, it just means that teens who are involved in the planning process are much more likely to live up to their part of the bargain. It is important that the expectations are spelled out in great detail. If you decide on the weekly cleaning, then you will need to be very explicit on how messy the room can be during the weekly interim. Is food allowed in? Can dishes be left around? Can dirty clothes be piled on the floor? Or maybe you would prefer no food is taken in the room and dirty clothes must be kept in the hamper, but general messiness can occur such as leaving items in disarray (school books, video games, etc.). When cleaning is to be done, again you must be very specific. Does it include vacuuming, and does this mean vacuuming only visible space or under furniture also? Does the room have to be dusted? The closets cleaned out? You get the idea. Together with your teen, define the expectations and rules. Be sure that everyone is on the same page and in agreement. This prior agreement is very important as it supplies the basis for reinforcing the agreement down the road.

Our general advice is to steer away from extremes. Not allowing any mess can inhibit some of the more exploratory needs of the adolescent

who is developing an identity. At the same time, allowing total chaos and irresponsibility is never a good practice, and doesn't teach the necessary lessons for living with others or organizing one's life. It makes sense to require at least a weekly cleaning. This teaches a certain respect for one's space, as well as skills in organization, planning, and of course housekeeping. It is also important that respect for personal property is instilled along with a respect for organization that allows one to function successfully on a daily basis. As much as possible, the rules for the teen's room should mirror those of the overall household, although some relaxation may be appropriate at this age. Messy teens very often turn into good adult housekeepers, particularly if this is the atmosphere in which they have grown up.

Reinforcing Expectations. Now that you have an agreement in place regarding the expectations and rules, you need to define logical consequences to be enforced if the agreement is broken. Let's say you and your teen have agreed that they don't have to keep their room in perfect order during the week, but they must put dirty clothes in the hamper on a daily basis and dirty dishes are not allowed to be left in the room under any circumstances. Further, once a week the bed needs to be changed, all items must be put away, the room vacuumed (visible floor only), and everything dusted. You need to spell out a time frame for the cleaning. You might say it must be completed by 3 PM every Saturday. That allows the choice of doing it Friday afternoon or evening, or on Saturday morning. If not done by the appointed time, social plans made for Saturday will be cancelled. Then, give your teen a chance to get it done on Sunday in order to continue with social plans on Sunday, but again, if it is not done, social plans for Sunday will be cancelled. Another logical consequence might be that clothes not placed in the hamper would not be washed and therefore not available when your teen needs them to wear. You might give the total responsibility for washing and drying clothes to your teen, which not only teaches him to be competent in taking care of himself, but gives him an opportunity to learn from his mistakes, i.e., clothes are simply not available when desired. Whenever possible, make the consequence a natural or logical consequence. Further, when you need to enforce it, do it without the "I told you so's." In fact, you can empathize with the painfulness of having to learn and bear consequences of one's own making while yet maintaining the limits you have set. Above all, don't participate in arguments. If the expectations are agreed on ahead of time, along with consequences, then there really is no room for argument. Simply carry them out.

DECORATING THE ROOM

In general, teens love to decorate their rooms. Decorating usually involves the arrangement and selection of furniture, color of the walls, wall coverings such as posters and pictures, and display of favorite items. Some teens are very conservative and prefer a more standard decorating scheme that is very functional and ties in with the rest of the house. At the other extreme is the teen who wants little to no furniture, or very different looking furniture (like sleeping on the floor on an air mattress, blow up furniture, waterbeds, etc.) They may want the walls to have more than the standard posters. I've known teens who paint murals and scenes on their walls that flow into the ceiling area, or they hang numbers of items from the ceiling, have different types of lighting, and so forth. The extent of deviation from regular house decoration schemes is a point of discussion for you and your teen. Our general advice is to allow a good deal of flexibility. Two rules of thumb can be used to help you decide how far from the norm you will allow your teen to stray in choosing decorations. First, the desired decorations should not fall far from your general family values and/or norms for behavior. In other words, putting up posters of related to drug use, symbols that advocate violence toward others, or other provocative expressions of antisocial behavior are most likely going to go against the values you have tried to instill. If your teen seems particularly interested in these types of decorations, discuss what it is that she finds interesting. It is important to know what your teen is thinking, feeling, and how she is trying to locate herself within her peer group and culture. Her choice of decorations often can be very telling and offers an opportunity for frank discussion and problem solving. Second rule of thumb is to set a budget for decorating that includes your part and her part. Assist your teen with this task and participate in helping her come up with ideas that are economical.

ISSUES OF PRIVACY

Privacy is a strong need for teens. They need room to try out the various aspects of their personalities, select traits that help build an identity, and test ways to participate in the culture. One of the ways teens can experiment with privacy in a fairly safe manner is within the space of their own rooms. We suggest that you allow your teen the experience of being alone with himself while being able to maintain boundaries against intrusion by others, including you. The general suggested rules are that teens are allowed to close their doors while alone, or with friends or siblings. You might make one exception to this rule and that is in regard to members of the opposite sex. That is up to you and may depend on your level of trust and frank discussion with your teen regarding sexuality. Secondly, it is important that anyone who wants to enter the teen's room knock first and wait to be invited in before entering. This is a very important one. Many parents knock, but they enter while in the process of knocking which is close to entering with no warning. None of us like that sort of intrusion and we generally react with anger. Give your teens the same courtesy you expect from them. As budding adults, teens need both emotional and physical privacy. If this rule is observed at all times, then there will be no need for locking doors. Locking doors is not suggested as it is important that access be maintained

in case of an emergency.

Now, what do you do if you find that your teen is involved in behaviors in his room you do not approve of such as drinking. This is an issue that needs to be discussed frankly and you may remove privacy privileges temporarily until trust has been reestablished. Privacy is important, but it does imply responsibility. Teens don't tell their parents everything, nor should they. At the same time, a general sense of trust along with limits that protect teens from danger must be facilitated. Your best bet is to spend a lot of time getting to know your teens, discussing their ideas as well as problems, and establishing a strong bond that is based on caring and understanding. This will promote an atmosphere where both closeness and privacy can be maintained at the same time, very much like the teen's room that is nestled in the warmth of the family home.

Assessing Your Teen's Decision-Making Ability

It is sometimes very difficult to decide how much independence and/or freedom you should allow your teen at any given time. We know that one of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence is to learn how to make good decisions independently of parental guidance, but it is not always easy to assess how well this task has been negotiated. "Behavioral autonomy", as this developmental task is referred to, is a necessary skill for functioning in the adult world. There are four major criteria that parents can use to help them assess whether or not their teen has achieved or is close to achieving behavioral autonomy. You might even try using a 1 to 5 scale to help you see exactly where your teen is, and where improvement is still needed. These criteria are as follows:

Risk assessment - This involves the capacity to look ahead and assess the risks associated with a decision by foreseeing all the possible consequences of an action, as well as alternative choices that could be considered. Two cognitive changes occur during adolescence associated with this skill. One is the ability to hold two viewpoints in the mind at the same time in order to compare them, and the other is to think hypothetically. Mature teens are more likely to objectively assess a situation before taking action. They weigh and compare various options and make an informed and well thought out choice. Less mature teens tend to think emotionally and are more likely to plunge into situations impulsively before assessing all of the consequences that could occur.

Consulting an expert - The teen is able to see the value of consulting an outside expert to assist in making a decision when enough

information is not available to make the right choice. The mature adolescent will seek others beside parental figures, such as talking to a college advisor when choosing a college. Implicit in this practice is the realization and understanding that others have valuable input and skills to offer which can and should be accessed.

Adjusting to new information - Involves the capacity to change one's mind or attitude in light of new information. This development means that one has achieved a certain degree of logic and flexibility, different from the more black-and-white view of younger adolescents who have a higher emotional stake in being right.

Showing discrimination in the acceptance of advice - This one is a more sophisticated skill. It means that one can perceive the biases held by another that influences their advice. It implies the understanding that each of us has a particular perspective that is colored by our backgrounds and motives, which necessarily influence our opinions. The mature adolescent is able to link together these various factors before accepting wholesale someone else's view.

Building a Relationship with Your Teen

A common myth about adolescence is that it is necessarily a very stormy period in one's development. Research has not verified this view for the majority of teens, but rather calls it a period of exploration and experimentation as one moves toward adulthood. Another myth to be dispelled is the belief that adolescents need to be detached from their parents in order to develop their own identities. This particular viewpoint leads parents to the conclusion that teenagers need to be left alone for the most part, and that peers should be the primary group to which they relate. Along with this view is sort of a "hands-off" policy in which parents shy away from conversing with their teens about their lives in an attempt not to pry or invade their privacy, which parents believe to be necessary to the teen's development. This is a dangerous viewpoint because it deprives the teen of the very source of dependency, guidance, and support that is still needed from parents during this period of transition and adjustment. Although the peer group does take a prominent place in the adolescent's world, parents still play an extremely vital and necessary role in helping the teen with the most important areas of growth. So not only can adolescence be successfully navigated without (or with less of) the intense emotional and behavioral turmoil with which it has become associated, but one of the primary factors necessary for this successful transformation into adulthood is the very real involvement of parents. This second point cannot be emphasized enough, particularly in view of more recent biases that peers are the most if not only real influence on adolescent development. Let's turn our attention to how parents can and should be involved.

1. **Talk to Your Teen.** A parent must know what is going on in his or her teen's life, and this knowledge must be acquired continually, or updated regularly. This is accomplished most simply by talking to your teen on a daily basis. If you have not made a habit of this prior to adolescence, it may be a little difficult to begin, but it can be done and should become a regular and automatic practice. I'll tell you what to talk about in a minute, but first let's establish some basic guidelines for when and how to have regular conversation. First, pick a regular time of day most conducive to relaxed conversation for both of you such as dinnertime, early evening, or late afternoon depending on what works into your schedules. Be sure to allow at least fifteen to thirty minutes and more if you can. The more you allow your teen to converse with you under relaxed circumstances, the more time they will want to spend in this activity. Secondly, adopt an open-minded and curious attitude. Your goal here is to find out what your teen is thinking, what they fantasize about, what is going on with their peers and in school, and what might be sources of distress or struggles for them. Third, do not use this time for disciplinary discussions - not ever! If you do, you will see your teen begin to avoid talking to you. Keep the disciplinary or limit-setting discussions separate. You'll note that I didn't say not to have these discussions, but just that they must not pollute your attempts to get to know your teen well and to build a relationship that is open and trusting. Finally, most of the talking should be done by the teen. Your job is to get the conversation rolling and then to let them direct the flow and content of the interchange.
2. **What Do You Talk About?** This part is a little easier. The number one subject is peers. Most teens, given the chance, can

chatter endlessly about what goes on at school in the peer group. If you have the type of teen that is very chatty, you only need to ask a leading question or two and they will eagerly provide a detailed description of what's going on with their friends. If you have a quieter, more introverted or secretive teen, you can start conversations about peers in a broader sense such as what the trends are among peers rather than about individuals. A second good subject is to ask direct questions pertaining to your teen's self-image. Remember that adolescence is a time when our identities are forming, and as such, teens have endless interest in thinking about who they are, who they would like to be like, what their assets and shortcomings are, and so forth. They are hypersensitive to their appearance and to what others think about them. Find out who their role models are, or ask if they like the way they look. Take whatever they offer and expand it. If your daughter says she thinks she's not pretty, then find out specifically how she arrived at that conclusion and what or who she measures herself against. You may uncover many things you didn't previously know, and your daughter will find some relief in having this discussion with you. Third, ask about how your teen is dealing with basic areas of struggle such as peer pressure, drug use, drinking, sexuality, etc. It's very unwise to avoid these subjects, as all teens must deal with them on some level. They need your help with these pressures, which can become daunting depending on the school setting, peer group, and age. The more they can be open with you about their fears, concerns, and struggles, the better they will be able to deal with them. Finally, encourage conversations that deal with ideals or future fantasies. What does your teen think about politics, religion, current events, marriage, career, and becoming a parent? What does he or she think about capital punishment, welfare reform, homelessness, global warming, national security and other social issues? You might find that your teen has very strong views about some of these things. These discussions can give you tremendous insight into what is important to your teen as well as how his or her mind works in terms of higher level thinking.

3. **Be a Parent.** What is meant here is that you must maintain your role as a parent in your relationship with your teen as opposed to taking on the role of a peer. You can be a confidante and friend, but within the confines of being a parent. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is actually a difficult one to carry out. There is some confusion involved in trying to be the person who sets limits, and also the one who listens with an open mind much as a friend would. The truth of the matter is that you are always a parent and to some degree this will color your relationship with your teen - but that's not a bad thing. It is what your teen needs from you: someone who can listen and understand, but also someone who has life experience and knowledge to provide guidance that can't come from peers. A parent must also offer a safety net even when that means setting limits that seem confining, because it is these very limits that keep the teen from getting too far out on a limb where they could come to harm. Will your teen tell you everything? Absolutely not, but they will expose enough of who they are and what's going on that you can establish a relationship built on trust and responsibility, and more importantly, on a positive interpersonal connection that is maintained even in the event of conflict.
4. **Know Your Teen's Friends**. It is true that in adolescence the peer group has a tremendous impact on the development and daily functioning of teenagers. This is inevitable and normal. Therefore, it is important for parents to know as much as possible about what kinds of influences are being exerted on their teen by the peer group. The best way to gather this knowledge, outside of direct conversations as spelled out above, is to know who your teen's friends are and what they are like. An easy way to do this is make room in your home for your teen to have friends over. You can structure this so that rules are maintained and you are comfortable with the activities that go on, but at the same time the teens can interact and enjoy themselves in your presence. Generally there are several good friends that you see most often. You may get to know them very well, in fact, especially if they spend a good amount of time in your home. You might want to include them in on some of the conversations you have with your teen as was suggested in the first section. Most teens welcome attention from adults who show real interest in them and who are willing to listen to what they have to say without trying so hard to impose their own views first. You can extend your knowledge also by moving out of the house into the sphere of school activities or extra-curricular activities. If you have a teen that plays a sport, attend the games and get to know all the players. You'll learn a great deal about your teen and his or her friends this way as well as show your support for and interest in your teen's accomplishments.

Here's a final bit of advice on working with teens. You must be willing to see your teen as close to the way that he or she actually is as opposed to the way you would like him/her to be. This can be quite difficult, because parents are highly subject to feelings of guilt if they perceive that their children have problematic behaviors or characteristics. Parents also have a tendency to want to see their children as "chips off the old block." Understand that your teen has his or her own individual temperament, characteristics, tendencies, ideas and beliefs, views, and so on. Some are like yours, some are not. Know what these are and you will be in a position to have a greater as well as positive influence on your teen. Moreover, you will build and preserve a relationship that lasts well into adulthood.

Teens and Future Orientation

A common conversation between parents and teens has to do with future aspirations and desires, most of which are usually focused around the teen's desire to move rather quickly and easily into the adult world, often without a realistic view of what that would mean or what it would entail. For example, the teen who is unhappy with some of his parents' restrictions and rules might say something along the lines of "When I'm 18, I'm moving out and getting my own apartment and then I'll come in at night whenever I want. Not only that, but I can do whatever I want when I want and you won't be able to tell me what to do." A less rebellious example is the teen girl who is overheard telling her friends about how things will be when she arrives at college next month. The conversation goes something like "It's going to be great! I'll have new malls to shop in, and I'll buy some new furniture for my apartment. Oh, I'll need my cell phone and a newer car too, because I want to be able to drive out of town when I want too." In both of these situations the teen has a desire to live in a fashion that is decidedly adult, yet they haven't really thought through what it would take to make these things happen.

In the first example, it is likely that this youngster doesn't have any idea as to what it takes to rent an apartment, pay the security deposit and first and last month's rent, and then pay the other associated bills such as utilities, phone, cable, etc. If his parents tried to reason with him about this, he would probably say something along the lines of "I'll get a roommate and a job. It'll be cake!" The second example is even more unrealistic. Using a common phrase, we could say that this young lady "thinks money grows on trees!" Most likely she is used to having things when she wants them and has had little experience in dealing with budgeting, understanding the link between work and spending, and planning for future needs.

In each of these situations the teen has a fantasy about living in the adult world, yet there is a wide gulf between the fantasy and the realistic steps necessary to make the fantasy a reality. This is a common problem for teens, and one that exasperates parents a great deal. What's good is that the fantasy signifies the teen's desire to move forward and place himself in an adult world where he will be independent, make his own decisions, and take care of himself. This is a natural adolescent desire and one that parents need to encourage. The problem is that teens often haven't learned to link responsibility, investigation, planning, and realistic thinking to the fantasy. In other words, there is little or no appreciation of the process necessary to move from one point to the other.

The parent's job then is to facilitate a learning process that will help the adolescent associate future goals with the necessary steps to bring them to fruition while encouraging the desire for independence. To do this successfully, it is necessary to help the teen fully investigate future desires and goals, facilitate the process of working toward the goals, use hypothetical thinking to examine and evaluate progress, and encourage responsibility and accountability both currently and in the future. Let's go through each of these in more detail.

PROMOTE INVESTIGATION

When teens voice their desire to pursue something that sounds rather fantastic, parents often fall into the habit of lecturing them as to the non-feasibility of their fantasy. Using the example above, the parents of the young man who wants to move out on his own may lapse into a lengthy discussion of how much money it would take to get an apartment, what kind of job would be needed to pay all the expenses involved, and how unlikely it is that the teen could handle these responsibilities. Even worse the parents might move into a more negative conversation about how irresponsible their son already is, how he can't even keep his room clean or remember his chores, or take the right books to school, and so on. Of course the young man who is on the receiving end of such a discourse would react by either getting quite angry and voicing his anger, leaving the room in the middle of the discussion, or simply tuning his parents out while they work themselves into a full-scale assault.

So how might you handle this same situation differently? Here's what I would suggest. Even though you know your teen would not be able to handle the responsibilities associated with moving out on his own yet, you can encourage adult thinking by helping him investigate what it would take to make the fantasy a reality. Start by helping him make a list of the steps needed to embark on a full-scale investigation. Perhaps he can get online and look up apartment hunters in town and get a listing of current offerings and rental feels. Have him call some apartment complexes and ask about leases, security deposits, first and last month's rents, etc. Then help him find out about utilities, cable and telephone fees. Assist him in constructing a budget for moving in expenses and another budget for estimated ongoing monthly expenses. Help him brainstorm all the possible expenses involved such as food, laundry, car payments, insurance, car repairs, gas, health insurance, school expenses (if he's considering college), entertainment, and so forth. Then help him investigate wages for various types of jobs for which he has the qualifications. Compare the expenses to the estimated income and let him draw his own conclusions.

By using this method as opposed to the lecture route you are accomplishing two goals at the same time. First, you are making the points you would have made in your lecture, only this way they will be heard because your son will have the experience of learning the information first hand. Secondly, you are encouraging his desire for independence while also giving him the tools to think about the steps involved in making his adult fantasy an adult reality that includes responsibility and hard work. By assisting him in his investigation you are telling him that you understand his desire for independence and encourage it, however, you want him to be able to link his desires with thoughtful action that is reality-based.

EVALUATE AND FACILITATE

The next step is to evaluate the desire against the necessary steps and decide if adjustments are necessary. Using the same scenario, the young man may find that the jobs available to him at his current level of education are unappealing, pay too little, or fall below his assessment of his capabilities and future career aspirations. He may also realize that there is a lot more work involved in being self-supporting than he had previously surmised. The evaluation of the information obtained during the investigation is part of the process and should set the stage for further conversation between the parent and teen to either modify the original goal, change the goal altogether, or begin working on the goal now. For example, the young man may decide that what he really wants is to go to college and putting up with the current level of rules and restrictions is not really that difficult for several more years as he works toward making the grades necessary to get into the school of his choice. Or, he may decide that he would like to do further investigation into career choices and career training. Maybe he has a vocational interest that he would like to pursue now. Or he may decide that he wants to continue pursuing the goal to move out when he's 18 and he would like to work and save money now toward that end. Your role is to help him thoroughly evaluate his findings through discussion and further investigation if needed, and then help him lay out the steps to the new or adjusted goal. If he decides he wants to get a job now, then you are back in the investigation phase which is to begin looking for job opportunities, figuring out how many hours of work per week is feasible while in school, assessing transportation and gas needs, and so on. If college is the goal, then you would help your son begin investigating admission requirements, college expenses, and so forth. The same would apply to career planning and vocational school.

USE HYPOTHETICAL THINKING

In the course of the investigation and evaluation, you can assist your teen in making use of hypothetical thinking as a way of examining and comparing different possibilities. As the young man above works diligently toward making his original desire to move out come to fruition, you can prod him to expand his investigation into larger areas of adult concern and future planning. For example, you could suggest that although he might be able to make ends meet by getting a roommate and working two jobs, he might also want to consider the long-term prospects of going to work full-time at the age of 18 instead of going to school and working part-time so he can train himself for work that will net more income eventually. What happens if he can't find a roommate or the roommate moves out unexpectedly? How will he feel in five years if he's still having to work 60 hours a week for minimum income and has no time for other activities? In other words, help him expand his vision to the

wider future, not just the single initial goal of gaining some independence.

This is a tricky area because it is easy to fall back into the lecturing mode. It's important to facilitate hypothetical thinking with questions rather than with a lot of statements. Let the teen think about and ponder the questions. He'll ask for your input as he needs it. Even if he doesn't seem to be interested in these questions, you have planted a seed and he will revisit them, especially as he becomes better acquainted with the work associated with reaching his goals.

ENCOURAGE RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Encouraging responsibility and accountability is a parenting practice that should be employed throughout a child's life. In terms of exploring the future, strong habits of responsible behavior and accountability for one's actions will increase the adolescent's capacity to realistically assess future desires against the steps necessary to make them a reality. Children who have not had a lot of practice in problem-solving, decision making, and dealing with the consequences of their actions will have more difficulty linking fantasized goals with realistic action. In view of this, there are several key parenting ideas to keep in mind as children are moving through late preschool and middle childhood years. These are as follows:

- Don't be a permissive parent. Let children experience the consequences of their actions when possible. Establish rules and consequences that are reasonable and be consistent in enforcing them.
- Avoid overindulgence. Buying everything a child wants is deadly when it comes to understanding the link between hard work and fulfilling desires. They learn to engage in magical thinking, not to mention that they become accustomed to feeling entitled to having more than they earn. This was the problem with the young woman going to college described above.
- Educate children and teens about managing money. Encourage savings accounts, talk about budgets for necessities and wants, and create or take advantage of opportunities where children can earn money based on work. At the same time, be careful not to set up situations for children to fail with money. If a teen is expected to make a car payment, pay the car insurance, and buy his or her clothes, then basically they are expected to work on an adult schedule while also going to high school. The process of earning money should begin slowly and increase over time, always keeping in mind that you want your child to succeed and attend to educational goals first.
- Begin teaching problem-solving skills and cooperation during early childhood. Discuss and negotiate solutions.
- Initiate future planning and anticipation during middle childhood by teaching the skills of investigation, thinking ahead, delaying immediate gratification to reach a future goal, exploring possibilities and anticipating problems. This process can apply to simple things such as signing up for a soccer team.

THINKING AHEAD

As you work with your teen on future goals and desires, keep in mind that the consideration of adult roles and activities is a natural and necessary development during middle to late adolescence. Usually beginning around the ages of 15 or 16 and extending into the early 20's, the transition to adulthood is a primary preoccupation. Parents need to take an active role in facilitating thinking about the future and making plans that will give their teen the greatest opportunity for success. As you work with your teen, keep in mind that he or she is an individual with their own special talents and capabilities, not to mention desires and aspirations. Help your teen explore what lies ahead with an open mind. We all have dreams for our children and with very good intentions, but it is important to serve as a guide and facilitator rather than director while investigating future possibilities. You will find that if you take this approach, your teen will be more receptive to your suggestions and ideas. Moreover, they are more likely to appreciate your wealth of experience and make use of it. Happy exploring!

The End