

Living with Teenagers

By: Anthony Martin

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Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

Do you want to maximize the most out of your relationship with your teenager? Well, it starts with understanding their transition from childhood into a young adult. Why is this important? It's important because it will help foster positive communication and create healthy interactions between you and your teenager.

Have you noticed any biological changes in your teenage son or daughter? Do you see changes in their height, weight, or even in their voices? These are the obvious signs of development that parents notice. How about your son or daughter's intellectual and emotional development? Have you noticed how aware and sensitive they have become to certain things?

God created this maturation process, just as He has set in motion the growth of everything else He created. He designed all human beings to mature physically over a period of time.

They also develop emotionally and intellectually. It's a process that we must pay close attention to as parents.

You see them as your little child, your baby—the kid that likes to go outside and play. However, they are changing whether we are prepared for it or not. This is why it is important to transition with your teenager. As they mature emotionally and intellectually, you should also be growing in your understanding as a parent.

What hurts the relationship between some parents and their teenagers is the parents' inability to transition with their teen. They aren't children anymore and have changed significantly. They don't watch the same TV programs, have the same kinds of conversations, play with the same types of toys, or dress the same as they did when they were younger children. They are transitioning into their own unique identity and asking their parents to go with them. They don't want to be characterized based on their childhood stage. They want to be understood and respected according to their maturation.

Intellectual Growth

As stated, your teenage son or daughter is growing intellectually. They process at a different level than they did before. They think about more things; they consider what's being said to them; and they are highly intelligent. They may not always verbalize their thoughts, but rest assured, they do see and comprehend what's going on around them. They pay more attention to details than they did before, and to treat them as little children only weakens their connection with you. They want to be valued, appreciated, and most of all, respected.

One common mistake parents make when interacting with their teenagers is disrespecting them. Parents who refuse to transition with their teenagers have a difficult time communicating respectfully with their sons or daughters. Although they are still growing, are novices at life, and continue to show flashes of immaturity, they still desire to be respected as human beings.

It is important to recognize their intellectual growth by holding conversations with them on various matters. Speak with them intelligently and show that you care about their

opinions. Look to teach and mentor as a parent in addition to the provisions you make for them. Spend time communicating with them and you will discover what they know and don't know. Another mistake parents of teenagers make is allowing them to be alone too much. While they are older and it appears they are more self-sufficient, teenagers still need valuable time with their parents.

Many of them alienate and shut themselves off from their parents when they feel undervalued and not respected. Teenagers can perceive more than we think. They know what's important to you as a parent and where your time is being spent. They know what gets the most of your attention and exactly where their lives rank on your list of priorities. They are very observant of your actions. Oftentimes, their resistance to your authority can be a sign of emotional pain. There may be something they are struggling with emotionally based on previous interactions with you. Don't ignore the underlying causes of their resistance. It's not because they don't respect you. They realize you are the parent, but something beyond their actions is signaling a cause for concern.

Some teenagers resist authority because they are trying to communicate that they don't feel loved, appreciated, or important to their parents. They may not trust you if they notice contradictions between what you say and what you do. They may not feel secure in your leadership or ability to guide them, causing many to defer to the influence of their peers, which normally compounds their problems. They end up sharing the most precious and essential parts of who they are with other teenagers. Why would they open up and pour out their thoughts and feelings to their peers instead of reserving that for their parents? Apparently, they believe their peers take the time to understand and relate to them intellectually; and their comments and opinions are respected and appreciated more by them.

Some teenagers could employ the services of their friends to translate their thoughts and feelings to their parents. Not unlike a foreigner who needs a translator because the language spoken is not clear to the listener, they may be hitting a wall with their parents when trying to explain who they are and what's going on with them, especially if the parent is rigid and

cold because they disapprove of some of their actions. This is why I encourage every parent with teenagers to invest time in them and make that transition with them as they mature. We can't talk to them like little children because it offends them intellectually. Their minds are maturing and they need strong lines of communication if they will open up to you.

Emotional Growth

How does your teenager feel? What is their level of emotional intelligence? Can they discern when something is uncomfortable emotionally? Do they express a range of emotions such as: anger, frustration, hurt, or sadness? Some of their emotions they allow us to see, while others are hidden and reserved for moments when they are alone. Do you have private thoughts and emotions? Do you have moments when you feel overwhelmed and anxious? Well, so does your teenager. They haven't reached a point where they can fully comprehend why they are having an emotion like an adult would. They are entering into a stage of emotional growth where they need an open and welcoming environment to foster these feelings. You don't want your teenage son or daughter

processing and internalizing emotions they can't make sense of. That's a dangerous place for them to be in; therefore, your involvement as a parent is paramount.

They need healthy emotional interaction with you, which means more will be required of you. You will have to exercise godly fruit such as patience, kindness, gentleness, and temperance when interacting with your teenager. They are very fragile and internalize everything at their age. They are magnets for all kinds of words and expressions, and sometimes our words can wound them. Therefore, it is important to let them know we are not perfect and we're still growing as parents and seeking to transition with them.

Things can be said in the heat of the moment by a parent that can really hurt a teenager. This doesn't make us bad parents—it makes us human. We must remember that we are growing in our relationship with the Lord. Nevertheless, we must still be careful to recognize the sensitivity of our teenagers. If you believe you have damaged the confidence your teenager has in you, don't worry; you can repair it. It will take work, however it can be done with the Lord's help.

They may not let you in so easily, especially if they have been wounded by your words or actions in the past. Be encouraged. You can start off by working progressively and consistently in the small things, to gain their confidence and trust. “Teenagers want to be heard and handled as adults, although at times they don’t always show the maturity that matches their desire to be taken seriously.”¹ Remember, trust is not freely given; it is earned, and your teenager is no different than anyone else who will make you earn it.

It’s hard for them to bounce back after feeling verbally abused, mistreated, or disrespected. Sure, they are forgiving and will even connect with us; however, they will remember what happened and seek to stay away from that area to avoid the same consequence. When this happens, it boxes them in emotionally and stymies their emotional freedom with you. This will keep you on the surface with them and out of their personal lives. Their fear of experiencing the same negative emotions causes them to keep you at arm’s length.

¹ Anthony Martin, “From One Father to Another” (August 2018), pg. 143

In spite of this, most teenagers will open back up at some point when they are made to feel secure with you as the parent. When they feel they have become a priority in your life and there is consistency, you will find closeness taking the place of emotional distance.

It is important to spend quality time with your teenager. You may have a lot on your plate, but maybe you will need to dispense with some things and make your teenager a larger part of the plate. They need your time and attention. May the love and wisdom of God abound in your relationship with your teenager.

Sources

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