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Raising Responsible Youth

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Adolescence is a time of transition during which young people explore and search for independence. They are expanding their intellectual competencies. As their bodies mature physically, they also experience changes in emotions.

Adolescence is the period when the young person is between 13 and 19 or the “teen” years. Each adolescent is unique and will go through the teen years in a different way and at a different pace. What one family may experience may be very different from what another family experiences. Even teens from the same family may experience adolescence differently. Do not compare one teen to another.

As adolescents move toward independence, they try new roles and test limits. As might be expected, the relationship between adolescents and their parents also changes. Friends often become more important. And teens want their privacy.

Although many adolescents will participate in normal risk-taking behaviors of some sort, it is important for parents to remember that most adolescents do not run into major difficulties as they move through the teen years. Conflict between parents and adolescents tends to increase slightly. The so-called “battles” between parents and adolescents are usually over routine matters. However,

as the teen reaches the end of adolescence, there is often less conflict and increased closeness within the family. So what can a parent do to help the teen move safely toward independence and young adulthood?

Love unconditionally. Parents should tell their teens they care. They should not be afraid to hug their teens and say, “I love you.” Parents need to accept teens for who they are, not what the parent wants them to be. Love and acceptance do not mean parents have to approve of everything their adolescents do.

Be proud. Teens want and need approval and want to know their parents are proud of them. Show appreciation for the positive things adolescents do. This is especially important in early and middle adolescence, when youth are uncertain about doing things correctly, especially in social situations. They do not want to look “bad” in front of their peers. Older adolescents have more confidence and are more secure with who they are and their ability to handle situations.

Praise appropriate behaviors. Praise can be effective because teens are more apt to repeat a behavior that pleases a significant person. Be sensitive to the needs of the adolescent, especially

when criticizing them. Don't rant and rave and yell at them. Such emotional outbursts are not a very effective form of discipline and if negative words are used on a regular basis, a teen's self-confidence can suffer.

Be involved. Parents are important in the life of an adolescent. Adolescents need their parents to be involved in their lives. Parents need to be available when adolescents want them. Teens may not come running up to parents and hug them like they used to do, but they still need parents to be there, to be interested, and to provide support. This support and unconditional love are especially important when something has not gone as well as the adolescent had hoped it might. The parent needs to be able to tell the youth that it will be okay.

Talk each day. With today's busy lifestyles, it may seem impossible to find a time to talk when parents and adolescents can give each other their undivided attention. Establish a set time to talk each day. It may not be long—perhaps just five minutes. Try to “create” additional time to talk to each other. Perhaps sharing a ride to an activity will be an opportunity to touch base and find out how things are going. By establishing these talk times, the adolescent becomes comfortable talking to the parent and will feel more comfortable talking about serious issues of concern as they arise.

Be observant. If the parent sees the adolescent is not feeling good about something, acknowledge the teen's feelings. By recognizing what the teen is feeling, the parent opens the door for the teen to share what has happened. Listen to what is being shared. Avoid offering a “pat” solution or quick judgments.

Guide and advise. Adolescents look to parents for guidance and advice. Although they often question the validity of their parents' values and standards, they look to their parents for direction. Adolescents see issues related to personal choice, while parents see them as right or wrong. Parents can help adolescents explore and clarify issues and the consequences of actions through discussion. They can talk about what might happen “if.” It is

important for parents to listen to what their children share and assist them in exploring the pros and cons of issues.

Establish boundaries. Adolescents need and want limits. Limits provide teens with a framework within which they can explore yet remain safe. Limits need to be clear, reasonable, age-appropriate, and change as the youth moves through adolescence. For example, a curfew established when the child was 14 will probably need to be extended when the youth is 17. Parents can involve adolescents in the discussion of what the limits might be. However, it is the parents' responsibility to set and consistently enforce the limits.

Parents may need to say “no.” A parent's reason for saying “no” needs to be logical. It may be hard to say no and the teen may not be very happy with the parent, but in some situations “no” is the right answer. Parents should remain calm and not change their minds.

Recognize limits will be tested. An adolescent will not always follow the rules. Parents need to recognize that rules will be broken and they cannot control what an adolescent does away from home. Adolescents need to accept responsibility for their own behavior.

Build trust. Parents should trust adolescents to do the right things. Teens earn a parent's trust by doing the “right” things. If curfew is at 10:30 p.m., then the teen is home at 10:30 p.m. If there is a reason the teen will be late, the teen needs to call and let the parent know why. This repetition of the teen doing “what they are supposed to do” builds a sense of trust with the parents. However, if the youth does not do what he or she is supposed to do on a regular basis, this sense of trust begins to crumble, and the parent and the teen need to work on building trust again.

Use fair consequences. When a limit is not followed, a consequence follows. The consequences have been predetermined so both the parents and the adolescent know what will happen. Consequences are only effective if the consequence is meaningful to the adolescent.

Model appropriate behavior. Actions speak louder than words. Parents should strive to set a good example in the way that they live. Adolescents can learn appropriate life skills as well as how to solve problems effectively by watching parents and adults.

Monitor behavior. Parents should know where teens are, what they are doing, and who they are with. Monitoring does not mean that parents know where their teens are every minute of every day. It does mean that parents are aware of what is happening in the adolescent's life. Teens should keep parents informed as plans change. A simple call indicating a change in plans may be all that is necessary.

Parenting takes time and effort. As the youth grows and matures into an independent, responsible adult, both parents and adolescents can look

back over the journey through the teen years and appreciate the changes that have occurred.

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Each adolescent is unique and will go through the teen years in a different way and at a different pace.

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