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Fathering Your Adolescent: Ways to Strengthen Your Relationship

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While there is doubt whether adolescence is as stressful for youth as we once thought, there is considerable evidence that it is a difficult time for parents. In fact, research on life satisfaction showed that the lowest levels of well-being were reported by parents of adolescents, especially fathers.

Coupled with the adolescent's physical, social, and emotional growth are complementary changes for the parent. Parents must adapt to developmental concerns that overlap with those of their adolescents. For example, while teens are just entering a period of rapid physical growth, parents have increasing concerns about their own bodies. Likewise, when teens are beginning to look to the future with anticipation, parents tend to feel that their own possibilities are limited. And while teens have their careers and adulthood roles ahead of them, their parents may have reached an occupational plateau.

Some of the reasons given for the difficulties of parenting an adolescent include loss of control over the adolescent and fear for the adolescent's safety due to increased independence. The primary reasons cited for parental stress include the adolescent's push for freedom, failure to follow parental advice, and deviant behavior. There are many challenges to face as the father of an adolescent, but remember you are important to your child. A 1996 Gallup Poll indicated that more than 90% of the respondents agreed that "fathers make unique contributions to their children's behavior." So, Dads, don't give up!

Fathering an adolescent may feel like you're losing control over your teen's behavior. Trying to counter that loss of control by constraining him/her more may drive the teen away. Instead, focus on controlling your behavior and making adjustments in your fathering skills. As a father, there are many ways you can strengthen your relationship with your adolescent:

1. Understanding: One of most important ways to connect with your adolescent is to understand the teen's world. Adolescence is a time of change and transition, in almost every aspect of life.

Social: Friends play a much more important role in the life of your adolescent than they once did. Adolescents look to their peers for social norms, such as fashion, music, hair styles, and activities. But relax, Dad, they still look to you for values and moral behavior.

Psychological: Adolescents undergo changes as they strive to move from independence to interdependence. They generally push for more independence than parents are willing to give. The goal of this push is to eventually be able to function on their own.

Physical and sexual maturation: Puberty involves several changes, including rapid acceleration in growth, development of sex glands and secondary sex characteristics, and changes in body composition. These changes affect the way adolescents view themselves. Adolescence is one of the fastest periods of

growth in a person's life, second only to infancy. Puberty may be a difficult subject to discuss, especially for fathers and daughters.

Thinking: Adolescents make great leaps in their ability to think. They are better able than children to think about possibilities and abstract ideas, such as hypothetical situations and future goals. In addition, adolescents for the first time are able to ponder on the process of thinking itself. This makes adolescents better arguers than ever before.

2. Support: Parental support is one of the most important contributions you can make to your adolescent's development. The greater the parent's support, the greater the adolescent's social competence (self-esteem, moral behavior, academic achievement). Support can be shown in several ways, such as physical affection, companionship, and sustained contact.

Affection: Don't assume your teenager does not want to be hugged. Ask him or her what is comfortable and continue to express your love, through your words, tone of voice, and body language. Don't assume your kids know how much you love them — tell them!

Companionship: The fun things you used to do with your child may be embarrassing to him/her as a teen (especially if it is in public). But this does not mean your teen doesn't want to spend time with you. Spending one-on-one time with your adolescent can be a wonderful way to stay connected. Do some special activities — go shopping, play a board game, take a walk. Ask your teen what he/she enjoys doing with you, and then set a time to do it together. This can take the whole day or just ten minutes after school. If your teen's active schedule doesn't fit yours, maybe you need to fit into your teens. Your adolescent will appreciate knowing that he or she is important enough for you to spend time with them.

Contact: Your son or daughter needs you to be there for them. Your consistent presence in their lives is an important part of their security. Fathers are important in routine daily living — building patterns, traditions, and memories. But you should also be aware of events that are out of the routine — recitals, big games, tough classes, romances, breakups, fears, hopes, and dreams. It may be challenging to balance work with

fathering roles. If you can't be physically present at your teen's event, give him or her a call before and after just to let your teen know he's/she's on your mind.

3. Communication: While there is usually room for a well-timed lecture, your adolescent needs you to just listen. Quite often, adolescents don't need answers or advice, and they don't need you to think about what you'll say next while they are talking. Adolescents are comforted by knowing you're there to listen. Seek first to understand, whether you're resolving a conflict, offering comfort and counsel, or just talking at the dinner table. Let them know you value their opinion, even if it is different from yours. Attentive listening leads to understanding, a key to the relationship between a father and his child. Listening helps you better understand your role as a father and more importantly, expresses your unconditional love for your child.

Adolescence is a puzzling time for fathers and their teenagers. It might sometimes seem easier to just give up. But don't do it. Right now your teenager needs your love and acceptance more than ever before.

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