

Introduction

Parenting may well be the most challenging job you ever do. We can each reflect on the moments when our parents or caregivers made good or bad decisions for us, encouraged or hindered our burgeoning sense of self, or gave us some particularly useful or terrible advice. Somewhere deep within us is the gravity of knowing how much our parents affected our lives, and it's with this sense that many of us approach parenthood.

When you add to this intense, age-old feeling of responsibility the complexities of contemporary adolescence – all the new mediums and technologies and the explosion of information available to us – the role of a parent can get really tricky. To top it off, along with the information explosion in the New Media Age come a million conflicting pieces of parenting advice, which serve at times to undermine our confidence and good parental instincts. No wonder it's stressful sometimes!

Here comes my 'however'. In my many years working as a psychologist for families facing a broad range of challenges and in my personal experience as a parent, I have observed that with a little encouragement and some common-sense approaches, raising teens can be a wonderful experience in which joy, fun and success far outweigh stress or difficulty. I hope that this book will assist you in developing greater trust in your parental judgement, becoming more attuned to your teen and their unique needs, and developing a parenting bag of tricks that will help you effectively approach the challenges of raising a healthy, balanced young person.

In fact, this book isn't so much about parenting 'teens' as it is about parenting adolescents. While the classification of a teen is obvious (thirteen to nineteen years of age), that of an adolescent is less clearly defined. Adolescence can be a protracted process due to the onset of

puberty occurring at a younger age with each generation (often before the teen years for girls), combined with the later age at which young people tend to leave home and begin functioning independently. Thus, an adolescent can be a child of eleven, or they can be an adult of twenty-five, living at home with their parents and behaving like a sixteen-year-old. Broadly speaking, an adolescent is a person who is newly dealing with powerful social and physical changes, and who is not fully engaged in the adult world.

Although the adolescent years can be a difficult time for both young people and the adults who care for them, adolescence does not have to be an inherently problematic period. If you've been fed the story that teenagers are nasty by nature and raising them is a hassle, please don't believe the hype. The truth is, problem behaviour, family conflict and psychological difficulties are no more common during adolescence than at any other stage of life. It's true that some adolescents are troubled and some do get into trouble, however, most do not – in fact, nine out of ten teens don't face these problems. Problems such as membership of deviant peer groups, drug dependency, delinquency, irresponsible sexual behaviour, opposition to – and disregard for – authority are not normal adolescent behaviours (Steinberg, 2011). Good kids do not become troubled adolescents without a logical explanation, and good parent-child relationships do not suddenly and mysteriously deteriorate during the adolescent years (Collins et al, 2000).

You have a far greater chance of influencing your child's behaviour and attitudes through adolescence and young adulthood than you will later in their life – this is true regardless of household arrangements (two-parent families, single-parent families, same-sex parents or step-parents). The average adolescent does not always agree with the important adults in their life, but they do generally listen to and care about what those adults think. The majority of adolescents respect their caregivers and deeply long to please them, whether they overtly show it or not. Although they may disagree over matters of taste and style, they typically agree with their parents on the big issues.

Every adolescent is particular – they come with their own personal

history and psychological makeup, likes and dislikes – and as such, no one strategy works for all. On the other hand, teenagers do offer us some universal qualities and sets of needs that we can use as a guide to raising them well. Take, for example, their communication style. If we continue communicating with our teens in more or less the same way as we did when they were little children, they will swiftly punish us for it by shutting us out of their lives. Teens need open, authentic communication that acknowledges their intelligence and maturity; they are keen to press our boundaries in order to discover who they are, and to find out what we as parents will and won't accept from them. This can cause a lot of stress for both parents and teenagers – especially in situations where a parent's expectations aren't clear, or where a parent refuses to approach their teen's challenging communication curiously and openly, with acceptance and love. Adolescents are traversing the rocky terrain between dependence and interdependence (Siegel, 2013), and many who successfully achieve interdependence don't get there easily or gracefully. If you're struggling with the seemingly endless duty of raising a teen who appears to be tripping and stumbling through their adolescence, remember that this is just a phase. It may feel protracted and arduous at times, but with a greater awareness and application of effective parenting strategies, the challenging periods can be shortened and the joy of family life increased.

Parenting adolescents requires not only love and dedication but also the right skills – and for those of us who feel that our parents didn't do an absolutely perfect A++ job with us, some of those skills may have to be learned from books such as this, and from the support of our wider community. If parenting is one of the most challenging jobs around, then surely, we can't be expected to just 'wing it'. The parenting approach you will find in this book emphasises clear communication and a consultative approach.

I have employed the techniques outlined in these pages with thousands of families and seen some truly wonderful results. Consultative parenting is especially well suited to adolescents, as they demand greater independence and thrive on healthy discussion, authentic

connection and clear boundaries. Such an approach regularly requires parents to shift from directing and controlling their child to supporting their young person to take responsibility for their own life.

Consultative parents elicit respect from their adolescent by modeling good self-care and empathetic communication skills, and by teaching them to think for themselves. Consultative parents operate from a position of telling their young people what they, the parent, will do, rather than demanding that their adolescent 'do as they're told'. They're aware that telling their teens what to do leads to arguments, whereas telling them what *they*, the parent, will do piques their teen's interest. Such a parenting approach leads to strong relationships and creates lifelong bonds of trust and love. Moreover, anger and frustration are avoided and young people are given the opportunity to develop into responsible young adults, capable of solving their own problems.

When parents expect the best from their adolescent, they often get it. Nonetheless, young people may turn away from their parents and develop differing values, ideas and beliefs. One of the great tests of a consultative parent is the ability to abstain from judgement or criticism of our teen's ideas and beliefs, and to remain respectful and encouraging of their uniqueness when it directly challenges us (for example, mothers who love their freedom to refuse makeup or high heels may well have to support a teen who adores these things). Teens push the envelope. They test limits, ask for more independence than they can handle and they make mistakes. However, this is a normal (and indeed, necessary) part of their journey towards independence, and there are ways of navigating it as a parent that make this time fun and exciting, rather than tedious and scary.

Remember that this period will end; your young person will launch into young adulthood and the next developmental stage will begin. With that end in mind, do you feel a pang of loss, perhaps even the anticipation of *missing* your kooky, rebellious, challenging, sharp-witted, passionate, imaginative, emotional teenager? If so – good! Use that feeling to propel you with positivity, love and enjoyment through the next few years. Your young person yearns to be loved and accepted

by you, and that loving and acceptance is exactly what will help them to traverse adolescence as smoothly as possible.

Consultative parents recognise that their adolescent child still needs them, but in a different way. As such, their relationship changes to more of a partnership where the senior partner (the parent) has more experience, but looks forward to the junior partner (the adolescent) taking over the business of running their own life in due course (Steinberg, 2011). It is not possible to change a child's essential personality or to hold back the profound influence of their environment outside the home (peers, media, technology, school, power struggles etc.). However, we as parents can have an impact on how our teen behaves; from their rebelliousness, to their tantrums, to how studious they are, to the amount of sleep that they get, to how involved they are in the family or to their level of goodwill. If parents can manage their own emotions, behave respectfully, offer appropriate freedom, privacy and choices, maintain intimacy and open, constructive communication, then parenting an adolescent can be a rewarding and joyful experience.

Adolescents who are in stable social situations and who are not plagued with serious mental health complaints thrive with 'good enough' parenting. Good enough parenting of adolescents is about upholding dignity and connection, not about wielding power and control. Parents need to be emotionally accessible, flexible, compassionate, warm, forgiving and forthright with their young people.

One of the most difficult tasks we face as parents is striking the delicate balance between flexibility and limit-setting, discretion and frankness, and accountability and compassion. We're constantly on our toes, seeking out that ever-shifting sweet spot between gentleness and firmness, in which our children can flourish. We need to be willing to stand firm in the face of our teenager's arguments, tantrums and imploring. We need to hold them accountable for their choices in spite of their attempts to blame us, or others, as the cause of their problems. We need to learn how to weather their storms and not take it personally. Remember that your relationship with your adolescent child will change as they develop into their adult self. By welcoming the changing

nature of your relationship and adjusting your parenting style accordingly, you lay the foundation for healthy development and for good family times.

The developmental tasks of cultivating identity and becoming independent are foundational elements of adulthood. This crucial process is stressful for adolescents who on a daily basis must navigate emotional, social and academic challenges. Adolescents are regularly in a state of overwhelm, at times struggling to make sense of the vast array of contending influences that surround them – from their parents, their peers, the internet, the media and widespread accessibility to sexual and violent material, drugs and alcohol. Many young people, especially those who are given too much free rein with internet use, are bombarded with visual information and instant gratification. Parents frequently compete with the magnetic attraction of the online world and the copious forms of stimuli grabbing for their attention.

As parents we have to catch up with the changing terrain of the adolescent landscape and accept the world that our adolescents live in. We need to parent in a way that supports adolescents to think for themselves and that adequately prepares them for life in the real world. Part of this comes from accepting that, although we are responsible for our adolescent, we are no longer in charge of them, nor can we control them. This bag-of-tricks approach is designed to assist parents to reach sound judgements in their parenting, and to raise their adolescent in a positive, loving and assertive manner.

The strategies offered in these pages are designed to engage and inspire young people, rather than condemn or belittle them. They are all aimed at maintaining healthy, connected, enjoyable parent-child relationships. It is through such relationships that young people are empowered to be safe, stay in touch, make their own decisions, cope with their mistakes, and to grow through the natural or logical consequences of their actions. It is my hope that parents will find joy in raising resilient and well-adjusted adolescents who grow into empowered, loving, healthy and successful adults.