

# One of the Most Important Things Our Teens Need From Us – What, Why, and How to Give it To Them.

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As our adolescents navigate their way from childhood to adolescence, they will wobble, fall and rise many times. They've done this before – as tinies when they were

discovering their walking legs. We stayed close, held them up, and let go when we needed to. We knew they wouldn't learn to walk if we didn't let them fall.

Adolescence will work the same way, and the temptation to hold on tight to our teens and control the path that lies ahead of them will be bigger and more fierce than ever – but our response has to be different. As littles, they craved us. They'd seek us out, they'd want us close, and kissing them goodbye in front of their mates didn't bother them a bit.

During adolescence, things start to change. We start to feel their separation from us and sometimes, we might miss them even when they're beside us, and long for the way things used to be. We might wonder whether to hold on tighter or stand back. The answer is, we do both. We hold on to them but we give them the space they need to again, wobble, fall and rise.

They'll need our love and support more than ever, but more on their terms. What they won't need is our control. During adolescence we won't have any anyway. We might have the illusion of control, but our teens are resourceful, creative and brave and if they want something enough they will do it anyway. They don't do this to be deliberately defiant or to make our lives difficult. They do it because they are driven to explore their independence. This means making their own decisions, walking their own path, and learning their own

lessons from their own mistakes.

They can't make the from childhood to adulthood without doing this. The same courage and drive towards independence that will see them forming relationships, driving, getting a job, studying, moving out of home, becoming financially responsible, and changing the world in amazing ways with their passion and insights – can also see them pushing us away, claiming their voice against us, testing their power and boundaries with us, and making decisions that don't end well. We don't get to say when their courage switches on and when it doesn't. Ditto for their independence. We don't get to say when they can claim their voices, own their power, stand firm on their boundaries, and when they can't. We also don't get to say when they fall. We don't get to decide the lessons they learn and how they learn them, as much as we might wish we could.

The temptation to control the path that lies ahead of them will be monumental, and done from a place of love. It's likely that fear will have a heavy hand in there too. When they fall, we'll feel it. Sometimes it will feel like an ache in our chest. Sometimes it will feel like failure, or guilt or fear. Sometimes anger. We might wish we could have stopped them, pushed a little harder, warned a little bigger, stood a little closer. We're parents and we're human and it's what this parenting thing does. It stirs the fears and anxieties in us like nothing

else can. It turns the most passive of us into warriors and fighters and the most fierce of protectors. But it can also give us the strength and the courage to do things we never thought we could – like standing back far enough to let our children fall so they can learn to walk, and eventually fly – but close enough to be in reaching distance when they need us.

## **Why we need to let go of control.**

For their sake and ours, we have to surrender our need for control and put the connection with them above everything. It's the most powerful way to expand our influence. In fact, it's the only way. Our attempts to control that path of theirs will often play out as attempts to control them. The harder we push to control them, the more we risk losing them. When we attempt to control them, we are pushing against thousands of years of evolution and their drive to establish their independence. They can't make the transition from childhood to adulthood without establishing some sort of separation from us.

In doing this, they might push against us. Sometimes this will feel fierce. This is not to push us away, but to loosen themselves from under our wing. Sometimes the closer they are, the harder they might feel they have to push. Sometimes in their experimentation with separation and independence,

our connection with them will suffer, but this isn't what they want. What they want is to feel connected to us, without feeling controlled by us. We can do this by letting go of control, and keeping the point of connection open and ready for whenever they need it.

## **But independence does not mean disconnection.**

Our teens will be driven to find their independence from us, not disconnection from us. Sometimes of course, this is exactly how it will feel, for us and for them. Our adolescents have important work to do. They're letting go of the guard rail they've been holding on to since the beginning of them. They can't find their way through to adulthood unless they do.

Letting go of the guard rail will mean letting go of us – the dependence on us, not the connection. Sometimes though, for them, it will feel as though the only way for them to find that independence is with an almighty swipe of the table, and our connection with them might get caught up in that swipe. This is nothing to fear, and it's a sign that your gorgeous adolescent is working his or her way through adolescence exactly as they need to. At the time though, it might feel awful and confusing. It will likely feel that way for them too. Know that this is just part of the wobbling and

falling that comes before they fly.

In the meantime, one of the best things we can do for them is to stand still and keep the connection open so it's there whenever they need it. It takes two people to have a connection, but it only takes one to hold the door open.

Think of it like standing with them on the inside of a stretchy rubber band. Our job is to stand still, no matter how hard or how far they pull away from us – and they will pull.

Sometimes this will come with yelling and tears and ugly fighting words. They might defy us, disagree with us, ignore us and resent us. This isn't who they are, it's what adolescence is. It's the beautiful expanding of them as humans who are separate to us. It might feel awful sometimes, but we don't need to change it and we don't need to control it. We couldn't if we wanted to. In the meantime, they need us to stand still and hold on through the fighting, the pushing, the pulling, the resentment, the defiance. They need us to be bigger than all of it, and ready with the warmth and safety of us.

None of this struggle changes how much they love you and need you. It just changes how much they show it. They might stretch that rubber band with full force, and the distance between the both of you might feel vast and frightening, but if we stand still, without chasing, without running, they will always have somewhere solid and safe to

come back to, and in the times they need it most, they'll know it.

## **We have no control, but we can have something better ...**

The more we try to control our adolescents, the more we squander those precious opportunities to influence them. They are less likely to come to us for advice or guidance if lectures or preaching are on offer. They are also less likely to come to us when things go wrong if they expect shame, judgement or harsh consequences.

Our best opportunities to influence them will come from making it safe for them to come to us when they need to, but won't come from offering advice when we need to, but making it safe for them to come to us when *they* need to. We want them to do this. We can't influence them if we don't know what they need. They will lock us out of the opportunities to listen and guide them if they expect that we will stand over them, more than we stand beside them or behind them. When we let go of control, we open up the way for our influence. We will feel safer for them, more approachable, and more open to them. We will feel more like a place of warmth and wisdom, than one of shame and guilt.

## **How do we open up our influence?**

We can widen our influence by stripping shame, judgement, criticism, and control from our interactions with them. We can make it safe for them to come to us by asking their opinions, being flexible, listening more than we talk, showing them that we trust them to make the right decisions for them and that we have no desire to control them. We can explore their decisions and the consequences of those decisions with them, rather than making their decisions for them.

For us to be more emotionally available to our teens, it will be important to resist the temptation to take their decisions and their behaviour personally. Adolescence is their time of growth and learning, and they have the right to get it wrong as many times as it takes. Of course whenever we can, we want to steer them away from trouble, but even with our very best efforts, we won't always be able to do this.

If we take their behaviour personally, we're more likely to fall into our own shame trap – 'I should have ...' 'I shouldn't have ...' 'I wish I was better at this ...' Stop! Just stop. Shame is a useless, crippling thing to feel and it will only get in the way of our capacity to be there for our teens the way they need us to. Shame makes us defensive. It closes us down. It swipes at our power and our connection with them.

As parents, we are all doing the very best we can. It's important to be open to what we can do differently, but sometimes this won't show itself until things have unravelled.



Adolescence is a big learning adventure for all of us. We'll be better for ourselves and our teens if we can embrace this, and see every sweaty, messy, uphill climb as an opportunity for a better, richer view.

## **So wait ... does this mean no boundaries?**

Absolutely we need our boundaries! Our teens will get things wrong, with or without us. What we want is for them to learn and grow through the mistakes they make. Sometimes there will be consequences for their bad decisions, but it's important that those consequences don't lock us out and slam the door on our influence.

Consequences work best when they come with lessons that make sense. Discipline comes from the word 'disciple', as in, 'to teach'. It was never meant to be about punishment. Our children will always get more from having us explore their decisions with them, including the consequences of those decisions and what they can do differently in the future, than any punishment we can hand out. A consequence might therefore look like sitting with you, delving into the mess, being honest with you about what they've done as they work to make sense of it, and figure out what they can do differently next time.

## **And when they get it wrong?**

Our teens will make mistakes. Sometimes these will be breathtaking. Sometimes it will be despite our very best efforts to steer them away from trouble. The falls will be inevitable. It's how life lessons are learned, but strict rules and attempts to control them won't change this. All it will do is fuel their need to avoid shame and to cover their mistakes with secrets and lies.

We can strengthen our influence by stripping the shame from their mistakes and making it safe for them to come to us, either before or after things go wrong. When we respond to their slips, we need to remember that everything we humans do – even the tangled, unfathomable things we do – are driven by needs. The needs are always valid, even if the behaviour is disastrous. When our teens get it wrong, or when they have a tough decision to make, the key is to speak to the need rather than the behaviour. If we respond to the behaviour without exploring the need behind it, the need will continue to drive their behaviour from the dark. Think of it like being a dark room full of furniture. You're going to bump into things, fall and scrape. When you switch on the light, everything that was in your way will still be there, but you're more able to find a way through. We want to switch on the light for our teens so they don't keep stumbling as they try to meet their important needs.

To uncover the need, first make it safe for them to talk to

you. A way to do this is by validating them – not their behaviour, them. Love them big, and let them know that you even though the behaviour might not make sense to you, you expect they had a good reason for doing it – even if the behaviour wasn't the best idea. This will strip the shame and remove their need to defend their behaviour. They will be more likely to open up to our conversation and influence. Asking 'why' will often lead to, 'I don't know'. Asking 'what' will start to build the picture.

## **An example.**

Say, for example, your teen comes home drunk from a party where there was alcohol instead of parents. We can punish them for drinking, but this runs the risk of us not finding out about the next party that might have alcohol. If they don't want us to know, they can find ways to work around it – they'll sleep over at a friend's house so you won't know they've been drinking; the 'party' will become a 'study sleepover' – they'll find a way, same as we would have when it was our turn at adolescence. The point is, punishing them for drinking wastes the opportunity to influence them towards behaving differently next time.

Rather than asking 'why', which might invite something like, 'because everyone else was', ask 'what' – as in, 'What I know for certain is that you're a great kid. This wasn't a great

decision, but I know you wouldn't have done this unless it felt right at the time. I get that. It's okay. I'm not going to stop you from going to parties if you're open and honest with me. I want to understand what's happened. I expect you do too. What happened in the lead up? What made it feel like a good idea? What do you imagine would have happened if you didn't drink? What stopped it feeling risky? What do you feel about it now? What would you do if this happened again?' Of course you don't want to bombard them with questions, but these are conversation starters. It's also a way to let them see that you can cope with anything they tell you. When you speak about this, you might both learn that the need driving the behaviour was the need to feel a part of the group. The fear might have been exclusion and the longer term consequences of that. That fear is real, and it makes sense. If they can see that we get it, it opens the way for a conversation that will strengthen and empower them so they can be ready for the next time they find themselves in a similar situation.

## **And finally ...**

It's important to remember that influence and conversation isn't a magic fix. They'll still make mistakes. This is all part of adolescence, not 'bad parenting' and definitely not 'bad kids'.

By adolescence, our teens will likely know the way we feel about everything. They will know what we stand for, what we don't, what's okay by us and what isn't. We've given them the information we can about the world. Now is their time to experience that world for themselves. Our very important job as their parents is to give them the space and the support to do this. They need connection, without control. We want this too, because it is through our connection with them that we can have influence.

Ultimately, the amount of influence we have will be up to them, so we will need to do things more their way for a while. But we're asking for that. We're asking them to make their way in the world their way. We're asking them to make grown-up decisions and to start experiencing the world as adults – driving, jobs, studying, responsibility, moving away from home. When the connection with them is there, hopefully, sometimes, they will let us take the precious and privileged place beside them as they edge towards these grown-up decisions, and grown-up experiences. Sometimes our greatest parenting moments will happen in the middle of the mess, but first we want them to offer us a seat at the table.

Learning how to be an adult is one of the hardest things we humans will do, and it will take time. Most of all it will take experience – good ones and not so good ones. We won't

have the control but we can have influence – but only if they let us. The greatest conduit for this will be our connection with them. When we have the connection, they will be more likely to seek out the safety and warmth of us when they need to. This is when we will be more able to nurture the rich, beautiful and wanted expanding of them.