Seven things to understand about your teen, according to a veteran teacher and father of five

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Now that I'm home with my teens more because of the lockdowns related to the novel coronavirus, I've been relying on some of these approaches, many of which may be helpful to other parents as well.

Kids can deal with adversity, but naming it helps: In my

experience, teens seem to fear the abstract idea that something has gone wrong more than the concrete difficulties, struggles and work involved in challenging situations. Naming and defining difficulty or adversity, and offering assurance that it will pass, seems to put bounds on it, insulating them from excessive worry.

My students respond well, for example, when I say, "This week of dress rehearsals is going to be ghastly. The show will seem disastrous, school work will pile up, and we'll be exhausted. We'll keep going, fix the problems and then we'll be fine."

That may seem like a trivial example, but this pattern of naming the challenge, acknowledging the difficulty, then calmly assuring them that we'll work through it has been effective in every difficult situation I've shared with teens.

Kids can do almost anything adults can, but often do it differently: While most of us wouldn't endorse a my-way-or-the-highway approach, it's easy to do this as we direct chores, study habits, personal interactions, screen time, etc. I've seen (and had) so many adult/child clashes that boiled down to the adult insisting that a task be done in a particular way and at a particular time. Yet most adults hate that sort of thing in their own lives.

To raise independent kids, treat middle school like a dress

rehearsal for life

I've had success in giving my students or children tasks, but letting them choose how and when to complete them. Often their methods are different from mine, but I've learned to let go of the "how" as long as they get the "what."

If they aren't sure how to start, I advise. Usually, however, they have ideas of their own, many of which are better than what I would have suggested. And their buy-in increases if they help develop the approach. This is also builds competence and autonomy, and it helps prevent conflict.

If they fail, they may be more open to guidance after the fact. It's important, however, to realize that they might be extra sensitive in such a moment. Even a lighthearted "I told you so" may sting their sense of dignity and competence.

Kids cherish autonomy: Kids are often fairly powerless and are usually at the mercy of the adults in their lives. Consequently, they often value even small amounts of autonomy and freedom and often respond in a disproportionately positive way to anything that honors, preserves and enhances those things.

Teens can be sensitive about their personal space, privacy, dignity, clothes, hair and time because these are areas where they may have minimal control. It's easy for adults to

routinely trespass on autonomy without realizing it. A useful way to test this is to ask yourself, "If my boss did this would I resent it?"

Of course, kids aren't adults, and they sometimes need direction. But it can make a huge difference if we treat them as the experts on their lives and give them as much authority as possible. When a teen talks about their life experience, frustrations or feelings, I imagine I'm hearing a world-renowned expert discuss an important topic. I might disagree or take issue with something, but this exercise affects the way I respond, making me less prone to inadvertently minimize or overlook something important.

One concrete way to honor teens' autonomy is to respect their time. When I need to talk about something, I give notice: "I need to talk to you about something. You choose the time and let me know when you're ready." I also try to be focused and concise and not ramble.

Teens ask "why" a lot: It can be frustrating, but it's not a sign of disrespect. Teens truly want to understand the world.

When they understand the reasoning behind something, teens generally buy in. As frustrating as those "why" questions can be, I've learned that if I can't explain something, it may not be a great idea.

Teen emotions are complex: Adolescents are flooded with hormones, encountering new experiences and living in a state of constant change. Their feelings are consequently strong, fluid and novel. Adults often experience contradictory emotions that may not make sense. Teens are the same, but have little life experience or practice managing their emotions. It's no wonder they can be overwhelmed.

We often expect kids to manage these complex emotions in a respectful, consistent way while conforming to adult expectations. I'd suggest reversing that. Adults, who have more emotional stability and life experience, might consider making concessions while teaching kids to manage and work through feelings. There's a fine line between disrespect and being overcome by emotion. But teens need grace and latitude.

I've found it useful to imagine myself as emotional memory foam — conforming and accommodating the emotional contours of my teens. When they are annoyed, tense or stressed, I try to think of myself as a soft place for their feelings to land. I wait to correct, teach and coach them when things have calmed down.

Teens perceive their social networks differently: Connection with peers is critical to teens in a way I think most adults forget. It informs nearly every aspect of their

lives. Consequently, teens may cope with isolation or distance by being plugged into their screens. That may not be healthy or wise and parents may need to intervene, but try to understand what that connection means to a teen and what value they derive from it before minimizing or limiting it.

Relationships outweigh specific problems. In the daily work of parenting, supervising homework, guiding moral development, managing discipline and promoting interpersonal growth, it's easy to find sources of conflict about everything from putting laundry away to practicing violin to not arguing with a sibling.

As my older children have left home and started their own lives and families, I've realized the quality of the relationship we build endures long after any particular problem is past.

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