

Parenting an Adolescent: 11 Insights That Will Make a Difference

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I'm almost nearing the end of my gig parenting an adolescent. It's been an adventure – a brilliant, trying, beautiful, confusing, crazy adventure – but we've made it. I would love to wave a strong goodbye to the whole adolescent phase but I have a daughter who is about to walk into its wide woolly arms. (I'm warmed up and ready beautiful girl so we'll be fine.)

The job of all adolescents is to establish themselves as their own person – separate to but part of a family, connected to but independent from their parents. It's not easy but there are ways to make sure that your relationship with the flourishing young adult in your midst is close, strong and everything

else you both want it to be. In many ways, it requires us to be completely different to the parents we were when they were younger, but that's the thing about adolescence – it's a time of learning and growth for all of us.

[Teens will use the line between childhood and adulthood as a jumprope and really, it can be no other way. **Click To Tweet**](#)

I've learnt a few things along the way. Some of them were shared by those wiser and further down the track than me. Some of them came from psychology. Some of them were learned through monumental stuff-ups and a desperation for things to change (but isn't that how the best things come to be!) All of them have made the difference.

1. Fighting with them (for them) sometimes means standing still.

As with anything, fighting for what you believe sometimes has less to do with pushing forward and everything to do with standing still – not in acquiescence, but to hold firm. Sometimes it's about letting the arguments and high emotion wash over to somewhere behind you, so that you can see the issues for what they are, free from the noise and clamour that goes with needing to be right.

2. Being heard is more important than being right.

Being right counts for little if you're not being heard. Hearing them – and making sure they feel heard – is critical if you want them to consider your advice. Hear what they think, what they want and why it's important to them. Don't be afraid to change your mind once you've heard everything they have to say. Sometimes of course, you'll stand even more sure that your decision is the right one. When they feel fully heard, it's more likely that they'll be able to trust that whatever decision you're making, you're making it fully informed and with all of their needs considered. And we all need that.

3. Understand that they'll use the line between childhood and adulthood as a jumprope.

They'll use the line between childhood and adulthood as a jumprope for a while and really, it can be no other way. Problems crop up when there's disagreement about which side of the line they should be acting from. They'll want their independence – we'll want some control. We'll want to see them to start taking responsibility – they won't be ready to take it on yet. See – so confusing! Be patient and give them what they need – information, guidance, support – to feel confident enough to do what they need to do.

Sometimes things look easy and obvious to us but from the midst of the adolescent jungle, it might not be that simple.

4. Separate them from their behaviour. It's not a package deal.

They are more than their questionable behaviour. We all are. The behaviour and the person aren't a package deal. Love one. Reject the other. The critical mistake is believing that to reject bad behaviour, we have to reject them too. We don't, and believing this is the best way to push them away.

Separate them from their behaviour ('I don't understand what you're getting out of doing that but I know you've probably got a good reason. What I also know is there's a safer/better/more appropriate way to get what you need. But first you have to figure out what it is that you need.')

5. It's your job to give them freedom. It's their job to prove they can be trusted with it.

It's up to us as parents to support their move towards independence by granting them more and more freedom. It's their job though, to prove to us that they can be trusted with that freedom. The more you can trust them, the more freedom you can give them, so it's in their interest to do

the right thing. There are a few ways they can do this. Ask them to:

- Always be where they say they're going to be. If the plan changes, they have to let you know. If they let you know, be grateful and if it's not going to hurt them, be okay with it.
- Make sure they are always contactable. Leave their phone on and if you call or text they have to respond as soon as they can. In return, agree to only contact them if you need to. Give them space.
- Be honest, even if it could potentially get them into trouble. In return, be understanding and if they've been honest, let the reward for that be a lighter punishment, or perhaps no punishment at all. Knowing they've disappointed you will be enough. One of the most important things for your relationship, and for their safety is that they are honest and open with you. This is less likely to happen if there are harsh consequences when they tell the truth or when they open up. They can often learn the lesson more by talking with you than by anything you can measure out. Discipline is about teaching (as in 'disciple'), not punishing.

6. Understand the need they are trying to meet through their behaviour.

This is a big one. The biggest. Let me explain.

During adolescence, teens can be defiant, test the limits, experiment, engage in risky behaviour, withdraw, show hostility and the list goes on. It might seem like the obvious response is to come down heavy on the behaviour, and many times that's what is deserved, but it's not necessarily what will work.

What we, as parents, need to understand is that people only do what works. You, me, everyone on the planet – everything we do is to meet a need on some level.

That doesn't mean it always works well – many times it doesn't.

Dealing with the behaviour without understanding the need the behaviour is feeding (albeit badly perhaps) leaves a gaping hole in the form of an unmet need that will continue to press for fulfilment.

Perhaps your teen is spending too much time on the computer and not enough on schoolwork. Perhaps you've caught them experimenting with drugs or alcohol. Perhaps they arc up every time you disagree with them. All of this behaviour is less than ideal, but it's all meeting a need.

The behaviour might be dysfunctional but the need never is.

Some common needs and the way they might be met are:

- the need to escape from the world for a while (they might try to meet this need by spending too much time online, in their room, avoiding homework and responsibility);
- the need for approval (this can lead to being seduced by a crowd who gives them somewhere to belong, makes them feel important, helps establish an identity or independence from the family);
- the need to feel independent from you (arguing, hostility, defiance).

These are all valid needs, even if they are calling on outstandingly messy ways to meet them.

When your teen is behaving badly, look at the need it's meeting. Teens don't go out of their way to upset you though it can feel like that sometimes. They're not stupid and they know it's not in their interest to alienate you. Sometimes though, the need they are trying to meet will feel bigger than their need for approval from you. That's why they're doing what they're doing, even if they know that it will get them into a red hot mess with you.

Let them know that while you don't approve of their behaviour, or that their behaviour has disappointed you, you suspect they have a really good reason for doing what they've done. If you have some ideas, throw them out there, but also make it clear that they don't have to agree with your assessment of the problem. Make way for them to figure it out for themselves, but the most important thing is to make it safe for them to come to you along the way.

7. Don't ask why. Ask what.

You want to know what they're getting from doing the crazy stuff they're doing. Asking 'why' can lead to a fruitless 'I don't know,' – because they probably don't even know themselves. If, on the other hand, you ask them what happens to them or for them when they do what they do, you're on track to getting answers. What happens to them – physically, emotionally. What do they think about? What do they stop thinking about? Try and flesh this out. This is where you'll find your answer.

8. Remove the shame.

The potential for teens to feel shame during adolescence is enormous. They're trying to figure out who they are in the world and where they fit in. They'll explore and they'll experiment. Some of it will work beautifully and they will love what they see, and some of it, well, not so much.

One of the reasons we behave in socially acceptable ways is to avoid shame so a little bit helps to keep us all on track. If you need to redirect their behaviour, try as much as you can to do it without shaming them. Whatever you do, don't do it in public. Let them know they're doing okay, that we're proud of them, that we think they're awesome – and why. At least then they'll know that when the world is feeling like a tough place to be, home will be their safety net.

9. **Validate the need. Reject the Behaviour.**

Validate their need – because under even the most bewildering, infuriating behaviour is a need that deserves to be met. ‘I get that the world is asking a lot of you right now and it’s probably really tempting to want to hide away from it. I really get that. But spending hours in your room on the internet isn’t the way to do it. Let’s talk about ways you can get what you need in ways that will work better for you.’

10. **Find a different way to meet the need.**

They might need your help with this and it might take a while and a few discussions to sort this out. You’re trying to replace a behaviour that isn’t working, not the need that it’s meeting. Be patient. The answer is there but they might need time and some help from you to flesh it out.

11. **Decide the values you want to teach**

This is sometimes even more important than the behaviours you want to teach. For me, the important values are respect, honesty, openness, kindness and integrity. Get the values right, and the right behaviour will eventually follow. Part of our job as parents is to make sure we make it safe and easy for them to learn the lessons they need to learn. They won’t learn respect from you if you yell and direct more than you listen.

They won’t be honest with you if it always gets them into trouble. They won’t be kind and compassionate if they always feel judged. They won’t be open to being wrong sometimes if you never acknowledge when you are. Let them know when they’re getting it right because whether they let you know it or not, your approval means a lot to them.

As you continue to navigate your teen through adolescence, know that whatever you’re experiencing, you’re not alone. Your relationship with your teen won’t be the same when you both come out of it as it was when you both went into it, but that’s the thing about adolescence – they’ll learn from

you, you'll learn from them, and at the end of it all, two different people will emerge. By understanding the changes and by being a strong, nurturing, loving presence, your teen will thrive and the adult that emerges will be an amazing one.

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