

What Do Teenagers Want? Potted Plant Parents

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Many parents feel that their adolescents hardly need them anymore. Teenagers often come and go on their own schedules, sometimes rebuff our friendly questions about their days, and can give the impression that interacting with the family is an imposition that comes at the cost of connecting, digitally or otherwise, with friends.

So here's a complaint one might not expect to hear from teenagers: They wish their parents were around more often.

I spend part of my time as a consultant to schools, where I see teenagers as

they go about their regular days. On several occasions over the years students have explained to me that their parents are rarely home. Sometimes, they tell me why — a single mother works long hours, the parents have saturated social lives, a sibling is in crisis — and sometimes they don't.

Regardless of the surrounding circumstances, the teenagers who say they are longing for more time with their folks invariably seem self-sufficient and independent. Knowing this, I often suspect that the same adolescent who laments her parents' absence might only faintly acknowledge their presence when they are in fact home.

[A new study](#) from Australia confirms the importance of a parent's physical presence on adolescent health. Researchers from the University of Western Australia studied 3,000 middle- and high school students, including 618 adolescents with one parent who lived away from home for long stretches because of work, like a job on an offshore oil rig or a distant construction site. The researchers wanted to know how the extended absences of these “fly-in, fly-out” parents might affect the emotional and behavioral health of their children.

Overall, most adolescents felt their parents were present in their lives regardless of their work hours. However, a slightly higher percentage of teenagers who experienced the long work absence of a parent had emotional or behavioral problems compared with those whose parents worked more traditional hours.

This [echoes research](#) finding high rates of emotional distress in teenagers who routinely returned to an empty house after school or whose parents were rarely at dinner.

Notably, [research also shows](#) that Australian “fly-in, fly-out” parents often stay connected during their long absences by regularly checking in by social media, texts and FaceTime — letting their kids know that even though they were away, they were still watching.

And findings also suggest that parents don't have to be home all the time to be present in their children's lives, but it helped to be home at certain times. [A classic study](#) connected the total time at least one parent was home before and after school, at dinner and at bedtime to improved psychological health in adolescents. Importantly, the studies of parental presence indicate that sheer proximity confers a benefit over and above feelings of closeness or connectedness between parent and child.

In other words, it's great if you and your adolescent get along well with each other, but even if you don't, your uneasy presence is better for your teenager than your physical absence.

That there's value in simply being around should come as a source of comfort for parents raising adolescents. With younger children, we have plenty of opportunities to put our parenting muscles to work. We can read stories together, make up knock-knock jokes, build towers, or go to the museum. Our youngsters still like to join us for a trip to a grocery store and they usually come to us first with their questions or problems.

But with teenagers, it's not always easy to know how to connect. By their nature, adolescents aren't always on board with our plans for making the most of family time and they aren't always in the mood to chat. Happily, the quality parenting of a teenager may sometimes take the form of blending into the background like a potted plant.

Many parents of adolescents instinctively know this to be true and find ways to be present without advancing an agenda. One friend of mine quietly folds laundry each evening in the den where her teenagers watch TV. They enjoy one another's company without any pressure to make conversation.

Another routinely accepts his daughter's invitation to work or read nearby while she sits and does her homework. Of course, sharing the same space sets the stage for the possibility of actively interacting, and we have plenty of research attesting to the [benefit of talking](#) with or [advising our teenagers](#).

We don't really know why our mere company would have such value for teenagers, but decades of [research on parent-child attachment](#) suggests an explanation. Ideally, children use their parents as a safe and dependable base from which to explore the world and exert their autonomy. Indeed, studies tell us that [securely attached toddlers](#) quietly track their parents' movements from room to room, even while carrying on with their own activities.

While [normally developing teenagers](#) seek new levels of emotional and physical distance from their parents perhaps they, like toddlers, feel most at ease when their folks balance active engagement with detached availability.

The giving season is at hand and the holidays hold the promise of families having more time to spend together. Our hopes for joyful engagement with our teenagers shouldn't keep us from embracing the benefits of simply playing the role of a potted plant. In the swirl that can come at this time of year, we might offer our teenagers a gift we know they can use: Our quiet and steady presence.