

LifeSkills: How to deal with your child's transition from pre-teen to adolescence

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Puberty, which marks the transition from childhood to adolescence, is a physically and emotionally demanding stage in human development.

We all know that dealing with a 10-year-old is one thing; dealing with the same child at 14 is something quite different. For their own safety, younger children require discipline or restraints that are neither necessary or appropriate for adolescents. You don't, for example, have to hold you teenager's hand while crossing the street. And you'd be in big trouble if you tried!

However, treating a 14-year-old as if he or she were an adult doesn't make sense either. Here is some information about teenagers' needs and some strategies that helped other parents and families help their offspring manage the transition from childhood to adolescence.

A turbulent time for teenagers

Adolescents have to navigate an emotionally and physically turbulent period of transition. As a parent (and a former adolescent yourself) you will understand the need to be sensitive to this process. It is one that will call for some change or readjustment in your relationship to each other. The traditional areas of possible difficulty and/or conflict include schoolwork, household chores, social life and curfews.

Choose a collaborative decision making process

Imposing your standards, no matter how well intentioned, is not likely to work. They will not buy it.

A process of collaborative decision making with your teenager is the key to navigating these tricky waters. For example, many teenagers hold after-school jobs. While these provide needed spending money, they also cut into time available for study and homework. By initiating a discussion on the implications of a prospective after-school job on your teenagers' other commitments, you improve the chances that your child will end up with a reasonable schedule of work, and the empowering knowledge of having made a good decision.

Ask your teenager for suggestions

Ask your teenager to come up with suggestions when facing a specific issue. For example, "What chores would you like to do in the house?" Then, be prepared to negotiate

and to contract. A contract should clearly state expectations and consequences and could be renegotiated on a regular basis.

This approach has several advantages. In the first place it shows respect for your teenager's judgment and intelligence.

Second, involving them in the search for a solution helps develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility.

You can't make anybody do anything

Adolescents are expert in not going in a direction they feel they are being forced to take. If you try to force them to do something they don't want to do, chances are they will not do it. It is best to admit this openly.

For example, if you say, "I know I can't force you to do this..." and then go on to explain why you think it should be done, you take the tension out of the situation. Some call this stopping the war. Your teenager sees that you respect his or her power to say no, and you will still be in a position to influence your adolescent's behavior in a positive fashion. One way of doing this is by offering guidance.

Offer choices and guidance

Adolescents are very sensitive to attempts to put them in a position of inferiority. Translation: being told what to do. A suggestion is always better than a direct order. This shows you recognize the adolescent not only has the power, but the necessary judgment, to make a good decision.

Your guidance could take the form of an analysis of a specific situation in terms of choices and consequences. For example, "You can take the time to study for your exams and cut back on your social life. On the other hand, if you don't give yourself enough time to prepare for the exams you may well see your marks go down."

Spend time with your teenager

Adolescents need attention. The most valuable way you can give them attention is by spending exclusive time with them on a one-to-one basis. It can be a few minutes in the garage while they are repairing their bike, or going off together to see a movie. Whatever you do, remember that you don't have to talk about weighty issues; just have a good time together. And don't worry if they don't tell you how much they appreciate this time spent together. Just do it.

Expect instability

Adolescents are in transition. Mood swings and frequent changes of attitude, behavior, and opinion, sometimes within days or hours of each other, are all par for the course.

Persist

Each family situation is unique, so you should personalize the strategies you choose. If one approach doesn't work, try another one. Being the parent of a teenager may be complicated by factors specific to each situation. Try the approaches we have suggested and observe the consequences. They may help you and your teenager manage this period of transition from childhood to adolescence.

However, if you have tried these suggestions and would like more ideas, or if you find it difficult to apply the strategies, you might benefit from professional help.