

Teenagers:

When was the last time you read something good about teenagers? Most of the stuff we read about adolescents is negative. Studies and commentaries continue to cite and alarming array of statistics about sharply increased rates of drug and alcohol abuse, violent acts, suicides, car accident fatalities and depression among teens. A major 10-year longitudinal study concluded that 48% of American teenagers are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances.

We typically portray teenagers as an aimless and alienated group. In everyday conversations the image portrayed is always negative emphasising the bad attitudes and difficulties caused by teenagers. Research often tries to suggest that if you are a single parent, a pair of overworked parents, or separated parents, it means that you are going to have troubled teenagers and that you should feel bad about yourself along with their teenagers!

We are all affected by these gloom-and-doom reports and commentaries. As a parent and psychologist myself I am as affected by these things as you the reader.

Most of the reports and commentaries about youth and adolescence berate both parents and teenagers for their bad behaviour but they lose steam after that and have very little to say that is convincing about handling the everyday practicalities and psychological obstacles to reconnecting with adolescents who, let's face it, are often so turned off to adults and determined to assert their independence that they are tough to connect with. If you are a single mother working a 3 to 11 p.m. shift, what exactly does 'more connection' with your teenager look like?

The real problem is that no-one today is quite sure how to pull off this harrowing balancing act of being a parent to an adolescent in a world of over-extended family schedules, predatory media, mobile phones, Bebo, fragmented communities, and the ever-present pressure on kids to grow up too fast.

It is no wonder then that a lot of parents are tempted to back-off from what seems like the impossible task of remaining actively engaged with teenagers. For parents who are chronically pressed for time and feel increasingly impotent in the face of the perils that litter their teenagers' lives, backing off from their children is a powerful temptation.

But for every mother or father who has given up, there are many more who, while struggling to stay connected without clear rules or useful models, are enlarging our vision of what it takes to be a parent of a teenager today. For today's parents the task of raising an adolescent requires something of a pathfinding spirit – a willingness to improvise and make leaps of faith in the absence of visible signposts.

A survey of 20,000 families of adolescents showed that 25% of parents never talked with their adolescents about their day's events, were not sure how their teens spent their spare time, and virtually never did anything with their adolescents that was fun.

Research has also shown that the time parents spend for purely sociable chatting with their young teenagers averages 8 minutes per day for mothers and three minutes per day for fathers.

What we do know is that the progress of a struggling teenager has less to do with the application of specific parenting techniques than with the parents' own patient, persistent, clumsy efforts to construct relationships with their son or daughter. We need to remember that for every parent who backs off helplessly from their teenagers, there are two who do not and who persist.

If I could say anything to a parent of a teenager it would be not to give up. No matter how many daily or weekly experiences of failure you have, keep trying to connect. Keep the conversations going! For every fight that you have, make sure you have three positive moments. Make sure that when your teenager grows up into an adult that he/she can say that you never turned your back and always encourage him or her to be of good character.

Remember the art of a gracious apology. Let yourself be disliked. Write a letter to your teen. Hug him or her once a week whether you like it or not. Do something enjoyable together once a month. The virtue you require is Perseverance. The sin you must avoid is Cynicism. When all else fails, remember the golden rule: "Don't take yourselves too seriously". You are doing quite well, despite yourself!