

One of the most difficult things to come to terms with as the parent of an adolescent is realising that you cannot force your teenager to be well behaved or even to make good choices. Part of the art of effective parenting of teenagers is not just about setting limits for your child, but more importantly learning your own limits as a parent.

During the time when an adolescent is going through many changes, so too is the parent. Typically parents are going through mid-life when children are going through adolescence and the life-stage issues of both parent and adolescent can be sulphuric acid for each other. When your teen is exploring their own freedom, power, sexuality, and assertiveness you, as an adult, may be coming to terms with how much of that has faded in your own life. The mid-life crisis of the parent may be exacerbated by watching, with denied envy, the abundant potential of their teenager's life. Some parents respond to this with excessive strictness and control, while others respond by being too flexible and permissive.

Mid-life parents, because of their own need for belonging, will often feel rejected and abandoned by their teenagers. They will feel hurt and let down and their self-esteem as a parent may feel battered or rejected. The cocktail of an overly sensitive teenager and a sensitive mid-life parent can be intense. It is therefore so important not to let yourself feel abandoned by your child! It is so important to see the big picture and that their overt rejection of you is only half the story because they are unable to acknowledge or understand the deeper loyalty that they feel toward you.

In fact the more intense the rejection of the parent the more likely they are struggling with confusion regarding their loyalty toward that same parent. Deep down many defiant adolescents secretly appreciate and love their parent's resistance to them. They need it. So don't be put off by their natural defiance. Being the parent of a teenager involves a kind of Zen practice — being able to breathe deeply, to trust that you've taught him or her well, and being able to practice letting go of your own insecurity, righteousness, or envy.

You have influence but only limited control over your children. During your child's early life, you are the manager. As the parent of an adolescent, it may be time to shift your role, from manager to a kind of consultant. As a consultant, your job is a lot more hands off. You could back off on the "shoulds" and find softer more pliable and conversational language. Instead of confronting your child with the time they have to be home at, ask them when they think they should be home and to ask them to articulate their reasons and to persuade you rather than to defy you. Then work out a fair compromise.

If you try to "manage" or control your adolescent, he or she will go out of their way to defy you in order to show you that they can and must make their *own* decisions. If you say, "Siobhan is too wild; you shouldn't hang out with her," it is unlikely your daughter will say "Oh, yeah. Thanks for the head's up. I'll avoid her from now on!"

As a consultant (rather than a manager), your job would involve more trust and "back up" and less direct decision-making. For example, if you envisage yourself as a 'consultant' you will be more inclined to make yourself available to him or her and less likely to assume righteous dictatorial positions. You will find yourself wanting to

spend time with your child because it will be less fraught with having to manage and be in control and more influenced by wanting to have an influence than wanting to have control. If you can see yourself as a consultant you could see yourself more as an ally than a stranger or adversary. This does not mean that you do not continue to provide the love, limits, structure, consequences, and all that other good positive parenting “stuff.”

The sullen adolescent is a common beast. So is the busy one - out the door at dawn, back to fall into bed late at night. The time of just hanging out as a family and letting conversations develop naturally are often gone. At the same time, communication is more important than ever. Here are a few ideas for maintaining (or gaining) communication flow:

- Listen, and know that you don't and won't have the answers to some of the things that are bugging your adolescent. This is a time of formulating new ideas and ideals, and your child may be paying more attention to the world than he ever has. Nobody has all the answers to the world's ills and injustices, but it's important to think about them, and to help your child develop critical thinking skills by talking and expressing opinions and feelings.
- Your moody adolescent is “processing” therefore you often need to stand back and just let him or her flow. Don't assume that if you want to talk, just because the timing is good for you, it's good for him or her. If you want to talk try making an appointment!
- Focus on treating your child with compassion, trying to understand the situation, and allowing (and encouraging) your child to use her resourcefulness to deal with difficult situations. Just yelling or condemning behaviour will just cut you off from him or her.
- Expect a certain level of lying, even if it's just lies by omission. Your child is building her private world, and protecting her friends. A lot of lying, or elaborate lies, signify either a relationship where your child doesn't feel safe in telling the truth, or a very high level of insecurity. Look at your expectations—are you expecting too much? Are your limits too tight?

At the end of the day, your measuring rod should be whether you are still able to have a good conversation with your adolescent child. If you keep that as your goal, to keep the channels of communication open and flowing, even during times of conflict, then by the time they reach young adulthood you will have a good relationship with them.