Retaining Relationships with Adolescents

One third of Parent Line’s 10,000+ calls each year are from parents of adolescents. The adolescent years are unquestionably a challenging time for families. The child and family are both experiencing changes.

During this time roles within the family are bound to change. What might have worked for a 10 year old no longer works for a 16 year old. Sometimes parents feel distanced from their child, worried about their child’s behaviour and feel powerless to make an impact or to steer them in a better direction.

It is important for us to remember that adolescents go through a range of developmental stages which hopefully lead them to being competent, contributing, independent, connected young adults.

It can be helpful to view adolescent development as a series of stepping stones towards the ultimate goal of adulthood. At each stepping stone there is a new skill or lesson to master, often for all members of the family. Often adolescents need to revisit a stepping stone many times before they feel a sense of mastery over those tasks.

Some of the most challenging times come during transitional stages (starting high school, going into senior school, leaving high school, starting Uni, TAFE or work. Teachers also often talk about the challenges of working with adolescents in year 9 and 10. So is it all bad news and is there really ever a good stage in parenting adolescents?

The answer is yes: parenting adolescents can bring with it unique joys and rewards. We just have to become better at creating those close times, noticing small moments of connection and appreciating the changing relationship that is occurring.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that your child is growing into a young adult. The desire for independence, the testing out new values and seeking
peer relationships are normal, valuable aspects of growing up. However the way that they are approaching these tasks might have us concerned.

When faced with an issue or conflict with your adolescent child, we suggest that you contemplate a few issues before responding:

What is your child saying that he/she wants?
How is he/she feeling?
What might be going on for them in their world?
What do you think your child needs?
Does he or she have an understanding about that need?
What are your core concerns?
What are you feeling?
What is triggering a strong response in you?
Are these triggers about you, or your own family history?

We often hear from parents who feel that their adolescent child is not engaged with them anymore. The parent feels used and disrespected and often angry that the relationship seems one-sided.

After talking through the feelings and thoughts, the interactions that have occurred, we often discover that the parent has invested a lot of themselves in raising their child. Sometimes this happens at the expense of their own needs, and now as their child separates and becomes independent, the parent feels a sense of loss, grief and powerlessness. They miss the closeness and the relationship, even that sense of being important because they are needed.

It is important to remind ourselves that parenting is about raising children to become independent adults. When children do move away and find their feet in the world, we as parents have achieved our goals.

At the same time, it’s important for us adapt our roles and our lives along with these developments. It is very normal to have intense feelings of grief as children move away from us emotionally and physically. That is something as adults that we can work through. It is important to recognize that and not let it influence the issues our children present us with.

A continued healthy relationship through adolescence into early adult hood is the key to continuing to remain in your child’s life in a positive way.

We provide free, confidential, professional counseling to families across NSW, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you would like to discuss your relationship with your adolescent with a counsellor or discuss any other parenting issue, please call 1300 1300 52 or visit our website www.parentline.org.au