

Parenting teens

Suman's father has become very anxious these days. He is worried about the change he sees in the boy. Suman used to be a sweet kid, very docile, respectful and would share every bit of information with his parents. Now he has become incommunicative, irritable and argumentative. "If he becomes like this at sixteen, what will the state when he grows up?" asks the father.

Many parents have difficulty to deal with the children in their teens. Parents may think that they are doing the right thing. But it turns out to be harmful for the boy or girl. Some knowledge is required to help your teen to navigate through the difficult years of their life.

This reveals the father's ignorance about what happens to children when they grow up. Parents should know that the children are overwhelmed by a multitude of changes when they enter the stage of adolescence. The transition happening during this period from childhood to adulthood is not very smooth. It is usually classified as a period of turmoil. The adolescents themselves are not able to understand what is happening to them and how they are coming to be. Quite naturally, they become very anxious about themselves, much more than the parents becoming anxious about them.

Underlying these changes is the urge to find their own identity and the need to become independent to lay the foundation of their own life, which has to be distinct and different from the lives of their parents. During childhood they would try to imitate the parents. Then they blindly followed the parent's guidance and held on to the parents' views and values. But now there is an inner compulsion to break away from these to have their own view points, ideas and values. So, they have a need to question, test and rediscover everything for themselves. They need to have their own experience and lessons learned from their experience.

Here come the need to break away from the parental control. But parents try to keep them in their grip because parents think that these are still children who need to be guided, controlled, protected and cared for. This leads to a tussle between parents and the teens. Parents see the adolescent's attempt to be independence as disobedience. At the same time these youngsters love the parents and want to be obedient to them. So, the boys and girls experience a tremendous tension within themselves, between the necessity to obey the parents and need to become independent. This tension is also a cause of suffering for them especially when the parents blame them and shout at them for disobedience. The result is a terrible guilt feeling that haunts them day and night.

An important factor here is the emotional stress caused by the parental affection when there is too much attachment. The children experience a tremendous amount of mental strain when parents are displeased. So, the tension they experience between the desire to be obedient and the need to be independent become much more than in the past when there were many children and parents were not so much attached to the children. The parents too experience enormous amount of anxiety when the boy or girl tries to break away from their grip. This anxiety is twofold. On the one hand there is a fear that the boy or girl may get spoiled. Together with that is an unconscious fear of losing the child as the parents already experience an emotional distance from the child. So the tension between parents and children during adolescence is much more these days than in the past.

It is usually said that parents should become like friends or buddies. That was true in the past when there were many children who received very little attention and parents were figures of authority

and discipline. There was a gap between parents and children and parents used to be very frightful. But now with only one or children, most parents have become like play mates. The children have become much more bold and demanding. At the same time parents are not in a position to say “No” to the children. Most parents are afraid to say anything to the adolescent boy or girl for the fear that they may do something unpleasant. So we see some parents giving the children a free run and they justify it saying that we need to give them freedom. Then they impose checks and controls which the youngster rebel against. In any case, to say that parents should become like children’s friends or buddies is an exaggeration. Friendship and parent- child relationship can not be the same. What is meant is that parents need to create a relationship of understanding so that the youngster can come to them confidently for guidance.

Whatever you may do, it will leave indelible marks in the mind your son or daughter. If you are positive it will be a source positive strength throughout the life of the boy or girl. If you do it wrong it can remain in the mind as a festering wound causing problem for the whole life.

The adolescents need guidance, not in the form of do’s and don’ts, but in the form of dialogue with information on what can happen if..... It is necessary to listen to them first and try to understand their view point before telling them anything. Instead of telling them what to do or not to do, it is better to ask them questions and let them say what they will do or will not do. If there is a cordial relationship, you can confidently believe that they will reveal a good spirit and do what they think is right. That is what we have found during our workshops for young boys and girls. When we ask them to write about their roles and responsibilities, they enlist whatever we would like to tell them. So, they have the positive values in them. There is no need to tell them. There are also occasions when the parents have to be firm with them.

Some amount of conflict between adolescent children and parents is normal. It is part of their growing up. But our behaviour as parents should be such that they can be proud of us. On the other hand if we try to keep them under our control while our own life is far from the ideal we preach, they will be the first ones to blame us. So, our example should be the first guide for the children. If we can set a good example, we can be sure that they will have us as their ‘role model’ and build their lives on our example. Instead, if we keep on criticising that will not have any positive result.

In short, what the adolescents need most is understanding. Parents need to understand their state of mind, the turmoil they go through, their struggle for identity, their concern about how they are faring, the sense of guilt and inadequacy which haunts them. When the parents are able to understand their anguish and aspirations, they are in a better position to guide the adolescents lovingly and positively.

Acceptance is equally important. We need to accept them as persons trying create a unique identity of their own. For this it is necessary to separate the person from actions. They may have many faults defects. They also have many things positive in them. Picking up only the negative and labelling them as, “You are lazy,” “You are irresponsible” etc. does more harm than good. So, we adults need to change our perception, attitude and approach towards our teens if we truly want to guide them. If we can appreciate them, encourage them and motivate them to set boundaries for themselves, giving the necessary room and concessions for their individuality independence, that is the best way to help them to grow up as responsible persons.