

Toughness and Tears: Those In-Between Years!

Has your loving little boy or girl metamorphosed into a temperamental teenager? Good news: by far the majority of children sail through adolescence with few, if any, major storms. The voyage through your child's teenage years is not only survivable, it will likely end up strengthening your relationship.

But do expect some choppy waters.

Riding the waves of adolescence

Can you remember your own journey from childhood and adulthood? If that time of your life is a blur, here's a reminder about what the in-between years can be like:

- Your child is changing physically. Dramatically. He's shooting up several inches (or, worse, he's not growing as fast as his friends) and tripping over his suddenly clown-sized feet. The baby-smooth cheeks—and places he won't mention—are sprouting fuzz. After years of perspiring unoffensively, he now contends with body odor. He has no control over his voice. He may be plagued by acne.
- He has sex on the brain. He worries he's a pervert.
- His emotions are revved and rudderless. He rides the crests, then wallows in the bottoms, with swells of conflicting emotions in between. Once attributed to raging hormones, these breaking waves of emotions are more likely the result of maturing cognitive skills. A growing reflection on events in the world and in his own personal life makes him ultra-sensitive, but he hasn't learned how to channel that sensitivity.

- In a culture that values independence, he's struggling to separate from the family fleet, to "individuate."
- He looks ahead and sees the responsibilities of adulthood looming on the horizon. He's terrified about navigating the vast ocean of life. He may look like a captain, but he's not ready to give up the carefree life of the cabin boy.

With all these changes, it's no wonder your darling little guy is suddenly behaving like a stranger.

- He's moody and self-centered. If he could, he'd spend all his time with friends or in his room.
- He's preoccupied with his appearance. Your water bill is rising proportionally to the time he spends in the shower.
- He argues with you, criticizes you, and professes shocking beliefs.
- He's totally embarrassed by you. He thinks you are hopelessly out of touch.
- He's physically aggressive. He may even try to intimidate you with his newly acquired strength.
- Just when you think you'll never have a friendly conversation with him again, he invades your room at midnight to chatter about his great day or bemoan his cruel life.

How can you steer a sure course?

First, develop a thick skin. Keep your cool. Remember, this too shall pass.

Be available. Communication is more important than ever, but focus on being a sympathetic sounding board. Listen

without judging or lecturing.

Don't overreact to his incessant arguing. He's sharpening his maturing mental capacities, and you're a safe "opponent."

Let him know what your values are about sex, tobacco, drugs, success in school, etc.; but don't preach.

Set consistent but reasonable limits.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Let your young star experiment with haircuts (or hair color!), earrings and clothes. Save your rules for important things: curfews, school attendance, school behavior, and tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.

Encourage him to hang out with his friends at your house. If possible, let them use a comfortable and private space, such as a basement family room. Then stay out of sight.

Give him hugs and tell him you love him, often. (But not in front of his friends!)

Remember, no matter how he acts, your young teen is depending on you. As he learns to steer his own course and handle his own ship, you are his North Star and safe harbor.

Kid troubles?

Call SAP and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.