

PARENTS AND TEEN-TYPE KIDS: SOME COMMENTS

For 5 years when I first started my work as a Psychologist, I worked for Family Services in West Vancouver where I focused on dysfunctional families referred through the public school system, police and probation.

I thought of these kids as “BC’s best” and mostly they were hopeful, resilient, and crafty and making the best out of some tough and tense circumstances at home and at school. They were also hard to handle – it was easy for me to talk with them as they got to skip school to “go see the shrink.” I remember one parent who asked if I knew of a monastery in Africa where he could send his 16-year old son. (Didn’t know of one!)

Some of the parents were excellent in loving and guiding their kids and some were clearly working out their own difficulties in marriage and life through their offspring. Some of these kids became the “Identified Problems” of the greater family tension.

Along the way, I worked up some principles for parents living with teens. These days I am having a resurgence of parents seeking help with their kids and I thought this list might make some sense to some. If nothing else, it might help parents remember what they hoped for when they were teens.

So for parents, in random order as it occurs to me...

- ∞ Be careful about criticism of anything. Even when you think you are only making a comment, it may well be experienced as another of a long list of judgments.
- ∞ Focus on your teen’s emotions. Kids “naturally” emotionally reason and this can seem illogical to you as a parent.
- ∞ Think about what depression looks like in a teen. Sometimes it is in withdrawal and sometimes it is in acting out aggressively. When your child is acting hurt and harmed, wonder about how his inner life is going.
- ∞ Say as little as possible and especially about your own experience, unless asked. When kids talk they want to talk and not listen. Don’t believe in “teachable” moments. Let your kid talk.
- ∞ Don’t tell her what to do. Better to ask, “Do you want to suggest with me 3 or 4 ideas from which you can choose?” Thinking is more effective than advising.

- ∞ Don't interrupt the flow; just watch the flow. Most kids come around when they are given the opportunity to speak without interruption. See if this is true.
- ∞ Experiment in thinking in non-absolutes. If you have a 70% good relationship with your kids, then celebrate that. Don't overly prod and provoke the 30% that is not the best.
- ∞ Don't push your power, your age or your wisdom. Just because you own the mortgage on the home does not mean that you have the right to coerce or pummel into submission.
- ∞ In fact, think through your rules. If you are married to someone you can talk to, talk about this. Use as few rules as you can. Build your rules to build the relationship.
- ∞ Believe in hyperbole! Exaggeration and overstatement is a favourite in adolescent communication. You don't need to correct him.
- ∞ You don't have to be your kids' friend. Accept yourself as a parent and learn to be a good one. Parenting is a verb that means change. So...
- ∞ Your child is changing and you should too. What right do you have to ask your child to grow up if you aren't working hard at it?
- ∞ Value what he or she has to say even when you disagree or have a different opinion. Look for your child's good motivation or intention and comment on that. In fact, conclude on that.
- ∞ Speak quietly especially when the tension is rising. Tension goes up, voices go quieter and everybody listens more intently.
- ∞ No ultimatums and no snap decisions. Build a process of conciliation and conversation that extends the relationship.
- ∞ Be careful of quick decisions. Quick conclusions are soon problems.
- ∞ Speaking in short sentences will make you understand how verbose you usually are. Smile at yourself.
- ∞ Admit when you don't know something. This is easier to do than you think. And your kid will appreciate your incompetence and see it as common ground.
- ∞ Be aware that you are both growing up and you haven't been this road before, just as your kids haven't. Cut yourself some slack, give up on perfection and phone me (or someone like me) for an appointment!

Okay I am done for now and you may well think I am hard on parents and, perhaps, hard on you. And you are right. But you are the parents, and you have the maturity, and you have the opportunity to make life better in your family where your kids cannot. It is your family and you get to live in it the best that you can.