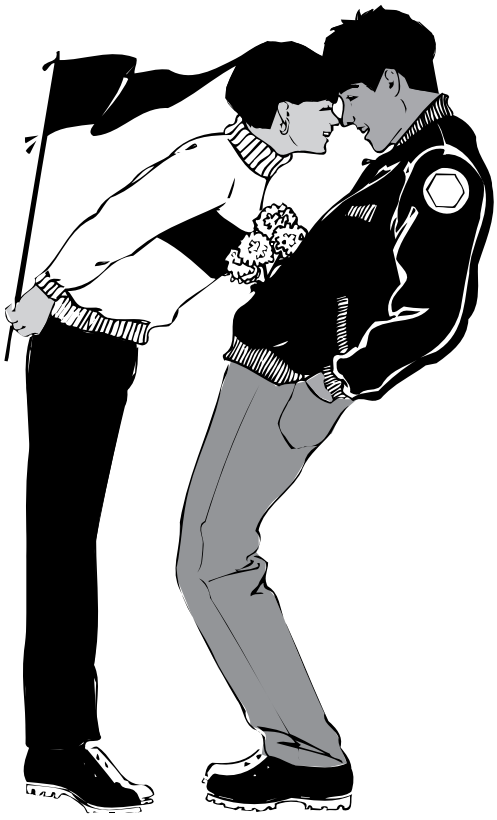
THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
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What to Know About

Teen Independence

A PUBLICATION FOR PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH ADOLESCENTS AND THE PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS

Parents and their teens don't always agree on issues such as dress, following family rules or how teens spend their time. As a result, arguments often occur. In fact, researchers tell us that most families experience an increase in conflict and arguments as their children enter into the teen years. The notion that the teen years will be filled with friction has become so expected in our society that first time parents may find themselves dreading the years ahead rather than celebrating their child's movement toward adulthood.



As children grow, their behavior and attitudes are influenced by a variety of people with whom they have contact. They need to explore their world more independently so they can learn to feel confident in themselves and their abilities. During adolescence, teens begin to assert themselves with their parents and other figures of authority such as teachers, group leaders and even sometimes the law. For example, teens may now ask you *why* they should clean their room instead of just doing it. Or parents may find that their usually polite and obedient daughter or son is now talking back to them.

Often teens demand more responsibility and freedom for personal choices. They may begin to experiment with new ways to dress, or spend more time with friends and less time with family. As their group of friends grows, parents are less likely to know who their friends are, or they may not approve of the friends their child has chosen.

Written by: Kathleen Boyce Rodgers,
Former Assistant Professor, Family Life

--Adolescents are consumed with trying to find out who they are and where they fit in. They are halfway between being a child and becoming an adult. They want to make choices on their own, but at the same time they are not always ready to handle the responsibilities that go along with those choices. Conflicts arise most sharply when teens are 13-15 years old, but generally decline as children get older. As might be expected, younger teens need more help in making decisions than older teens because they are less capable of understanding and foreseeing how their behaviors can affect themselves and others. But young teens also feel they should have more control over decisionmaking than parents are willing to give, and this may explain why conflict is higher during the early teen years. As teens get older, they are better able to weigh and understand the possible consequences of their behaviors and so are better able to make decisions that can affect their life and future.



Research suggests that most arguments are about everyday events or differences in personal choice, not about serious differences in values. Researcher Judith Smetana tells us that:

Teens think parents have the right to expect them to do assigned chores or let them know their whereabouts. Teens also believe parents should set guidelines about moral issues such as lying, cheating or sharing. Parents and teens disagree, however, about who has the right to control personal issues such as dress, choosing friends or choosing activities. In other words, teens look to and want parents to provide guidance on issues of morality and responsibility, but they also want to be able to express themselves as individuals.



For adolescents, the struggle for autonomy (being able to think and act independently) can be quite stressful. Although teens may behave in ways to assert their autonomy from the family, they still depend upon parents for emotional support, stability and guidance. By including teens in appropriate decision making, parents can help their children learn how to make good decisions and become mature and independent adults. Letting go of differences that are not critical leaves more room for talking, and sets a foundation for building a relationship different from when the teen was a child.

What Can Parents and Other Adults Do?

- Focus on the positive accomplishments of teenagers, instead of the things they do wrong.

- Pick battles carefully. Parents may ask themselves, "Is arguing about my teen's clothes or messy room as important as telling them how I feel about the use of alcohol or other drugs?" Less fighting means more time for talking.



- Give teens opportunity to practice decisionmaking. Children who are allowed to make decisions with parental support and direction learn how to make wise choices and judgments about their behavior even when adults are not present.

- Try to remember that a teen may be as unfamiliar with who he/she is becoming as adults are with the child who is becoming a young adult.

- Listen to teenagers' opinions and feelings—even if they differ from yours. Teens sometimes "try out" new ideas with parents. Hearing parents' values and opinions without judgment can help teens make decisions. Calmly tell them your feelings and opinions.

- Monitor the behavior of teens. Monitoring does not mean being intrusive in the lives of teens, but rather, knowing where and what teens are doing. Teens who are monitored by parents and who have a loving parental relationship are more likely to adopt parental values and make healthy life choices.

- Provide opportunities for teens to be independent within a safe environment. For example, teen clubs are a supervised setting where teens can socialize and have fun.

Books for parents:

Steinberg, L. and Levine, A. *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10-20.* New York: Harper - Collins, 1990.

Dinkmeyer, D. and McKay, G. *The Parent's Guide: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting of Teens.* Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, 1982.

Local Resources:

County Agricultural Extension home economist.

See yellow pages under: Social Service Organizations.



References

Silverberg, S.B. and Steinberg, L. (1987). Adolescent autonomy, parent-adolescent conflict and parental well-being. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 16, (3), 293-312.

Small, S.A., Eastman, G., & Cornelius. S. (1988). Adolescent autonomy and parental stress. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 17 (5), 377-391.

Smetana, J.G. (1988). Adolescents' and parents' conceptualizations of parental authority. *Child Development*, 59, 321-335.

Steinberg, L. (1990). Autonomy, conflict and harmony in the family. In Feldman, S.S. and Elliot, G.R. (Eds.) At the threshold: *The Developing Adolescent* (pp. 255-276) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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