SP491-A-Teen Independence

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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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.
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 decision making. 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:


Local Resources:

County Agricultural Extension home economist.

See yellow pages under Social Service Organizations.

References


