

Making Sense of Today's Teenager

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It has been said that today's adolescents have it easy. They don't know what it was like when their grandparents, or even their Mom and Dad were teenagers. They don't have to walk miles to school, work to help the family financially, create their own entertainment, etc. Today's teenager is said to love luxury, have bad manners, have no respect for elders, don't take school seriously and have contempt for authority. "Times have changed," it has been said, and today's teenagers have changed to reflect the changing times.

Before we take a look at today's teenagers, let's look at the influences acting on the adolescent stage perhaps since the beginning of the human race. These influences were present on our grandparents and parents when they were teenagers. Times have not changed the following observation:

1. Adolescence seems to be a time of seeking status as an individual, an attempt to emancipate the youth from childish submission to parental authority. It is during this time that the teenager is asking in a serious manner, "who am I and how am I different from my parents and perhaps from every other teenager?"
2. Adolescence tends to be a time when group relationships become of major importance. The adolescent is very anxious to attain status with and recognition by his age mates. He tends to desire intensely, to conform to the actions and standards of his peer group. There is much security in conformity.
3. Adolescence is a time of rapid physical development and growth. Teenagers must adjust to changes in body image, primary and secondary sexual development, coordination, increases and decreases in appetite, quick shifts in need for rest and physical activity. Much physical and psychic energy is spent trying to cope with school, with peers, and with parents. School is viewed as a very artificial environment for the teenager. It is physically restrictive and unnatural to their desires for activity. Of course, they must also accept pubertal changes and adjust to psycho-sexual needs within the framework of societal expectations.
4. Adolescence seems to be a time for complex intellectual and cognitive development. Believe it or not, teenagers are capable of mental functions equal to most adults, and better than some adults. They lack experience, however, to go with their new found intellectual capacity. Unfortunately, they often reject the experience offered by adults. Within the development of thought and thinking, many adolescents lack immediate motivation for academics, studying and performing "up to their capacity in school."
5. Finally, adolescence tends to be a time for the re-evaluation of societal values, customs, morality and religious teachings. What parents, teachers, religious authorities have stated as good/bad, moral/immoral and right/wrong, is going to be challenged by our youth. So expect it!

While all generations of adolescents have gone through the above influences on their

development, each generation of teenagers is exposed to unique influences. Let's look at some contemporary influences acting on today's teenager that makes his generation unique from other generations of adolescents.

Today's society is more liberal. We tolerate differences more easily. Abortion, sexual values, divorce and other similar issues are topics of conversation on T.V., in movies, and in the teenager's family. Teenagers also discuss these among themselves. As they are confusing or threatening to adults, they also create anxiety for adolescents. Lower voter age and drinking ages have increased teenage involvement. Today's media and advertising agencies have tremendous impact on the adolescents of today, which may decrease parental influence on their teenagers. Certainly, teenagers are aware of alternate lifestyles that are available to them, those that are different from their parent's lifestyle. Conflict arises when parents and teenagers challenge the lifestyle differences. A power struggle develops, and the parents run the risk of frequently losing in this power struggle.

Today's family is more fluid and less stable. A fifty percent divorce rate in families often further moves the teenager to the peer group for his socialization benefits. The automobile further allows the adolescent to spend more and more time away from the family, as well as the cell phone, away from the mainstream of family activities.

There are personality characteristics that seem to be particularly central to the teenager. First, there is intensity in feelings that adolescents express. For example, if a parent forgets to deliver a message from the youth's close friend, the teenager will often react in an intense, extreme fashion. Yet, when the parent questions the teenager about his "D" grade in math, he may calmly respond with, "It's passing, isn't it. It's no big deal."

Second, teenagers react very poorly to any perceived criticism. They are self-conscious about their physical appearance and their actions. They don't respond well to direct suggestions unless it is perhaps offered by one of their peers: within this same theme, adolescents dislike sarcasm from parents, but seem to be experts in delivering sarcasm.

Third, teenagers present an impression of being very sure of themselves, of having the right way to do something, and yet are very dependent on others. It is amazing how firmly the adolescent can state something that they are unsure about.

Lastly, adolescents seem to frequently believe that they will be happier when they are no longer under the "control" of their parents, that "doing their own thing" will make them happy. Yet, so many adolescents are not really content in "doing their own thing."

A MESSAGE TO PARENTS OF TEENAGERS:

You need to remember, the adolescent is a human being; he is more alike adults than unlike. He will display behaviors characteristics of his age group, but also display behaviors of his humanity, his humanness. Cheer up! They do grow-up eventually.