

COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN THE FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENTS STAGE

Family Therapy Program

With little children, the demands placed on parents are often minute to minute, and in the transition to adolescence comes a new world in which the teen becomes more independent, away for hours at a time with friends and activities. Up until now parents made all arrangements and had virtually exclusive control over what elements of the world made up the fabric of the family reality. In adolescence the boundaries around what is incorporated into the family can shift dramatically. The teen is immersed in a culture all to itself and for better or worse, brings home their interpretation of the larger culture. Gone, it seems at times, is the little child looking up to their parent to provide them with a way to understand the

world, replaced by a much larger person that at times seems to think that they now hold all the answers. Whereas in the world of little children parents have almost unilateral control over the family rules and reality, parents now have to apply more flexibility and understanding in how to manage differences with the child. If parents have had trouble working out their own differences between themselves satisfactorily up until this point, the teen can add a whole new layer of complication in polarizing parents in their views on issues like sexuality, appropriate self-assertion, responsibility, freedom, and a seemingly endless list of issues.

At times teens can seem like little adults when trying to negotiate these kinds of issues, and intellectually they are now able to analyze things with complex thought processes, just like adults. One of the things which can become confused for the parents in this process is that it is easy to assume that your teen has the relationship structure of an adult. When they act in opposition to something you have agreed on or explained, it seems to be a deliberate and purposeful act of defiance. When little children learn the alphabet or learn to read they do so with thousands upon thousands of repetitions. A word they know one day they **can't read the** next, but eventually they absorb it. When teens seem to grasp something one day and not get it the next, it is not necessarily all that different. Parents need to hold their exasperation in check and remember; that your teen needs repetition until they finally learn. They are still learning relationship skills and the responsibility that comes with their newfound freedom. These are big changes for them and for the parents. They are also learning how to negotiate respectfully with an adult who has, up until now, has had total control over defining what is safe, healthy, and morally right. Whether or not they fully understand the consequences to what they do, they are in the process of defining this for themselves, and their attempts to engage parents **in this dialogue isn't always** just with words, but with their actions and demeanor as well. It is important that as the parent, you keep in mind that it is not personal any more than when they **were little and couldn't read, they still need your** help to sort out their confusion, even if they tell **you they don't.**



Another area which undergoes a total renegotiation in this stage is how to manage the balance between emotional connection and separation. In forming couple unit two adults with independent histories have to strike a working balance between space for themselves and being there for each other. In the teen stage of family life, adults who have devoted years of their lives attending to the endless needs of their child now find themselves in a position of having to give

their teen space. Teens often give exaggerated responses to parents when we guess wrong about what they need at any given moment, whether it be a comforting hand or a respectful amount of space. Parents often need to stay calm and focused, and remember that their teen is still trying to learn how to strike this balance. **They don't have your experience in** negotiating space in respectful ways, and are looking to you to show them how.



NEW DIRECTIONS

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