

What Teens Want From Parents

As I reflect on my years as a parent of a teenager, I realize that my son was my master teacher. The “blessings” I received from being a primary person in his crucial developmental years helped me to learn about myself and evolve into a more patient, flexible and genuine person.

The teen years are a period of physical, intellectual, mental and moral growth. These years can be chaotic and emotional and often will change the dynamics of the family system. Although teens can be challenging, they are also energetic, thoughtful and enlightening.

When does adolescence officially begin? Although the developmental psychologists say between the ages of 13 and 18, everybody is different. One distinction between puberty and adolescence is sexual development of breasts, menstrual periods, pubic hair and facial hair. These physical changes can occur between 8 and 14 years of age. Adolescence occurs when children start separating from parents and want to become more independent while at the same time want to identify and be accepted by their peers.

The primary goal of adolescence is to achieve independence. Teens will often begin pulling away from their parents, particularly the parent whom they were most attached. Teens who previously had been willing to conform and comply with their parent's wishes may begin asserting themselves to create some empowerment. They want to feel they have some control in their life. Often, teens will begin to question and argue with parents, voicing their different opinions. They will be more interested in “hanging out” with their friends and less interested in “family time.”

Teens need to create an identity that defines their uniqueness. For example, they will start “trying on” different styles of thinking and behaving for the purpose of integrating who they think they are and who they want to become. This process is a recycling of the “early identity” development stage beginning around three years of age.

A common complaint parents of teens have is that their teen will stop talking to them. Too often a parent's conversation with their teen focuses on criticism such as chores need to be done, hair needs to be different, schedules need to be kept and other topics teens consider fault finding.

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Based on the research and literature written on adolescence, as well as listening to what Wichita teens want from their parents, the following is a brief summation.

Respect: Almost more than anything, teens want respect for their status as maturing young adults. To feel like their parent is treating them like a child is demeaning and often will result in power struggles.

Listen: The willingness to listen to your teen without forcing communication. Parents need to be available and approachable when their teen is ready to talk. One of the biggest mistakes I made as a parent was asking my teenager too many questions when he was not ready to talk. It is important not to get discouraged when your teen wants time and privacy to process their thoughts and feelings.

Trust: Let your teen know you believe in them and are willing to let them make decisions. Express that you understand they will have tough decisions to make and you believe in their ability to make good choices.

Validate: Giving your teen positive feedback by identifying your teen's positive characteristics will increase their self-esteem and confidence. Parents can use every opportunity, even in conflicts, to communicate positive reinforcement.

Acceptance: Let your teen know that even though you may disagree with their behavior, you will unconditionally love them.

Humility: Parents need to admit when they are wrong. Teens want to hear from parents that they do not have all the answers and can make mistakes.

Humanity: Teens want to know what their parents were like as a teenager. My son enjoyed hearing my mother talk about the challenges with me when I was a teenager. This allowed my son to recognize my human frailties.

Based on the importance of teens developing independence and individuality, it is helpful for the parent to ask questions, such as:

- "Am I a Controlling Parent?"
- "Do I listen to my teen?"
- "Do I allow my teen's opinion and tastes to differ from my own?"

As your teen continues to grow through the adolescent years, you will begin to notice that your teen is becoming more responsible, communicative and mature. I now look at my 23 year old adult son and I am continually impressed and amazed at who he is. He has incorporated values and morals from his Dad and myself in a way that I can only

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