Living With Teens: A Message To Thoughtful Parents - by Don Mihaloew

Contrary to common sense and logic, the most effective way to live with teen-agers is to encourage them out in the direction they must eventually go, that is, away from you. Whereas there are times and places to provide very firm and thorough limits for teens, powering them down for compliance will always bring on resistance. This resistance, when fed with daily tension and run-ins, develop into a life style of rebellion and retaliation. This is a serious state of affairs which brings on much sadness and frustration, all of which is masked behind anger. The word anger comes from a Latin root meaning "to narrow". Truly, when there is a cold distance and a delicate truce between teens and parents, most of the family's focus is simply on how each can get their way. This is a power-struggle and never works, even when you and your teens think it is an effective way of surviving.

There are three truths I want to unfold for you:

1.) Adolescence is not a real problem because it is normal, natural and necessary. It is certainly not a disease. Why would we want to solve or cure something that is not a problem? Without the adolescent transition period, we would simply end up with older children, young people who have not tried their newly emerging cognitive, emotive, spiritual, and social capabilities. Think of adolescence as an apprenticeship for the task of journeyman adult. They have much to learn and master. Fighting with them only delays this normal, natural and necessary development. Nevertheless, the adult community sees, for the most part, teen-agers as a problem. This situation is often more a result of the way teens are handled than in the adolescing process itself. More on this later.

2.) Adolescence begins in bio-chemistry and ends in society. It is, in fact, the pituitary gland that controls growth and development in the human body. Think of this gland as the timer on you many appliances. Once set, the thing moves like clock-work toward a destined end. The issue here is that this "timer" is set to go off at between ten and twelve years of age, not eighteen as law and social custom dictate. No human being can abort this bio-chemical clockwork. I need to ask why anyone would want to knowing that without it, the child stays a child forever. Usually, we want to squelch this adolescing process because teen-agers begin the slow, inexorable movement away from not only our homes, but our influence as well. This fact can greatly cut deeply into our own sense of well-being and personal effectiveness.

3.) The overarching truth to adolescence is that it, like everything in Life, is a developmental process. Everything happens to everything. We humans usually only try to control something that seems out of line or out of control of some other sets of values or norms. Yes, teens are very determined creatures who have but one and only one overall purpose, that of separation from their "ground of being" and an establishment of their own order. I submit to you that no teen-ager wants to be a problem to anyone. Their only focus is upon becoming something their pituitary glad is making them become, i.e. competent free-agents of their own capabilities. When trouble is afoot in families with teens, it is most likely that this basic change in direction of teens is either not understood or is mis-interpreted. If adolescent development is seen as deviant rather than divergent, insubordinate rather than superordinate, then blocks will be put
up by us parents that only make the teen turn from their stipulated task of adult-oriented development and into the process of self-defense. Teens do not have the energy to do these two tasks simultaneously.

They either are free to follow their destined path into contributing adulthood, or, they will turn against the very people they thought would understand their process and support it. Any negative deviation in the path of a teen toward self or other-destruction is rooted in a fundamental frustration of their natural path toward completion and social usefulness. Developmentally speaking, children go from dependence to counter-dependence, to independence to, finally, inter- dependence. Counter-dependence marks adolescence. The easier parents make this transition from childhood dependence to adult inter-dependence, the more constructive anxiety the teens bear and hence, the more investment and seriousness in their own future. In short, we parents need to shift our focus from how to control teens to how to help them control themselves. Constant blocking of their energy results in resistance and gives them a cheap sense of mastery just because they have learned how to thwart all our parental censures. Instead, they need the positive anxiety and gravity of having to face their future alone, together! It is a huge task to grow up and through dependence and into self-sufficiency and personal resourcefulness....alone. They need us and all our experience and expertise to help guide THEIR paths. Try thinking of yourself as mentor, coach, guide, and one who channels rather than as controller, enforcer, investigator, and one who prevails. Try discovering your teens rather than "raising them".

Here are several practical points to bear in mind when living with teens:

1.) Teens have acquired a dual role, one which remains at home as a family member and the new one as one who sees the great beyond on their own as a free-agent adult. Help them "leave" their way rather than make them stay your way.

2.) Teens are enormously self-conscious. Do not make fun of them or humiliate them. They are actually quite fragile and compensate by really outrageous, hard-to-take behaviors that raise our ire. Stay composed else you all decompose into a family process you will all regret.

3.) The teens mind is not on the EWEB bill. Don't think that telling them once is enough and that the next time you see every light on that they must either be insubordinate or cerebrally impaired. No, simply remind them. Remind, remind, remind, for their minds are not on the EWEB but actually something far more grandiose....though you rarely see evidence of this grand plan.

4.) Get as solution focused as you can in the shortest amount of time. Let them not feel your personal ire. Yet, let them not escape from the reality of their actions. Teach them cause and effect, not divide and conquer. Use their ineptitude to fire up the frontal lobes of their brains so as to learn from their mistakes. Remember: if something is worth doing, it is worth messing up a few times until they get it right.
5.) The best way to take a teen seriously is NOT to take them seriously. By this I mean that they must be taken seriously but for a purpose you know more about than they. Remember, their job is to leave. Don’t embroil them in endless fighting that leaves you both exhausted. When they address or respond to you in a surly, dis-respectful way, know that something is happening inside them that they are not even clear on. Enquire about what is happening rather than taking their quite unconscious maneuverings as what they really want. Without this insight, you are essentially handing over the reigns of power in the home to them. You will never really win a battle with a teen, for they do not know what is at stake and they will fight and sacrifice their entire being just not to look impotent. Teens do not want power over parents. They was self-empowerment. Help them make the inevitable mistakes all teens make. Remember that good judgement comes from experience and experience comes from....bad judgement!

6.) Provide as many choices as possible, but always ask for their complete-as-possible plans. The more choices, the more constructive anxiety and the quicker they learn the ways of the world. hear their voice, consider they choice, and then help them see potential plus and minus consequences.

7.) Be on their side. Imagine standing beside them looking out together rather than standing in front of them defying their immature ideas. Arrange for them to suffer as much as they can bear so that they can see that they live in a real world of natural and logical order. Only then can they become creative. Reverse this and you have a very undisciplined, entitled youth on your hands that can cause much damage in the family and the world.

8.) We owe them food, shelter, clothing and the like. They owe us confidence. Be very cautious about providing too much latitude to teens before they can come close to handling it else we lose confidence in them. It is important that we believe in our teens. Have them consider that for that to happen, they have to demonstrate self-control and personal resourcefulness. It never goes smoothly. There are always anomalies and distortions and flat-out troubles and mistakes. But we parents must be the first to stand tall and get back on track. If we wait for them to be perfect, they won’t....and that leaves us impotent.

9.) Teens are actually in a conflicted state of both mourning the loss of comfortable childhood on the one hand, and, the excitement over their pituitary-driven quest for opportunity. Help them grow by understanding just how hard it is to balance these two totally opposite forces. In the musical Fiddler on the Roof, one daughter sings mournfully about this dilemma as she faces marriage to a man that will take her far from her family. She sings,"oh what a melancholy choice is mine, wanting home, wanting him". The teen’s brain is not fully formed until age twenty-one. Until then, they are playing with only a partial deck. Much is required of teens today. Evolutionary, can the teen's brain handle all that is wanted from them? I doubt it. Help them curb themselves so that they can grow into themselves later.
10.) Parents! Get into talking with other parents about what it is that teens set off deep inside your mind and hear. Yes, teens can do very daring and dangerous things almost without thought. And for them, appropriate limits and rules need to be employed. But do not be fooled into thinking that adolescence is only about teen-agers. No, it is all about us, too. Carl Gustav Jung once said that the greatest burden a child can ever bear is the unlived portions of their parents' lives. This is a chance for us also to grow up and through whatever is blocking us.

11.) Alfred Adler offers us this sound insightful picture, that the roots of rebellion are planted in the soil of simply wanting to be equal. Remember, do not take seriously a teen's ragged behavior. behind that is the need to be seen as important and that they belong in a cherished part of the parents' hearts. When acknowledged for their own inherent "goodness" (which, by the way, does not usually reside in the area of behavior!), teens will not have to fight for their value. It is a given. Acknowledged people do not feel entitled, do not fight, flight or submit, but function within the guidelines of their pituitary legacy, i.e. toward personal-completion and self-actualization.

In short, remember the words of the poet Kahlil Gibran in his book The Prophet, that "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you.....You may house their bodies but not their souls.....You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth....For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.....For even as the Creator loves the arrow that flies, so is there love for the bow that is stable." Parents. Take care of yourselves so that you can be a stability for your teens in a time of great change. And treat them now such that in some future time of reconnection they may have the courage to forgive us all our mistakes. At that time, even we adults are free.