

Getting it together

Teens need friendly advisors, not dictators

"Whatever happened to that nice little girl who never showed disrespect for her parents," asks the dismayed mother. "She became a teenager," answers a chorus of exhausted parents who have grown gray during their kids' adolescence.

We've come to accept it like the inevitable change of the seasons. Being a parent of teenagers is expected to be a challenge at best and a misery at worst.

But why? What happens to nice little 10-year-olds to cause such changes in their personalities?

Little girls who would never challenge their parents suddenly question every rule, every request. Little boys who once took pleasure in making their moms and dads proud now seem to take pleasure only when the folks are shocked.

IT'S LIKE A Jekyll and Hyde act. Almost overnight, nice youngsters become incorrigible teens. Parental mistakes are no longer forgiven. Autocrat-

By

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ic demands are defied openly and secretly. Cooperation is replaced with opposition or sullen compliance. Friendly parent-child relationships grow distant and cold.

Overwhelmed by these frightening changes, parents do the most natural thing: They apply heavier controls. They run to their old friends, the rules and threats that used to work so well. But even these fail.

So they join the millions of parents who have finally thrown up their

hands at this seemingly impossible problem. They sit quietly, trembling at their fantasies of the horrors their adolescents will stumble on. And they wonder where they could have gone wrong.

To some extent, they're right to wonder. A lot of the seeds of their current family breakdown were planted, unknowingly, by parents themselves.

BEING AN ADOLESCENT in this society means being in transition between childhood and adulthood. A teenager feels the conflict of competing forces pulling him in opposite directions. His body is still childlike in many respects, but he feels and sees physical changes that are making him an adult. Society treats him simultaneously as a child and as a grownup. He is expected to make more decisions but he also is supposed to defer to adult authority.

Shedding the more dependent, more subservient roles of childhood is what the adolescent is about. He is learning

to replace the wisdom of his parents with his own inner judgment and decision.

It's all a natural process, but one which can cause a lot of unpleasant fallout in families which aren't prepared for it. For, as the teenager throws away his childish roles and mannerisms, he also throws away his susceptibility to unquestioned parental authority. He no longer accepts arbitrary mandates from his parents just because they are older and "wiser."

Seeing their human fallibility, he withdraws the blind respect he gave them as a child. Now they must earn his respect by being worthy of it. And many parents are really thrown by this. They are being asked to explain and justify their arbitrary dictates and they don't know what to say. So they fall back on "Because I said so" and "Don't talk back to me."

UNWITTINGLY THESE parents are slipping more into the role of unreasonable despots. And in their teen-

agers' eyes, they are becoming less and less worthy of respect.

Basically, the problem is that unquestioned parental authority is inappropriate as a means of influencing teenagers. It not only doesn't work, it causes family wars. It is grounds for rebellion.

Other methods of influence need to replace it. Other methods like taking the time to persuade or two-way discussions in which the teen's point of view is considered too.

Unfortunately, the time to replace old fire extinguishers is not in the middle of a fire. And it's too late to change your method of influence after the parent-teenager wars are under way.

The best time to deal with adolescence is when your child is 4 years old. That's when you should be developing yourself as a persuader rather than a dictator.

If, for example, you take the time to show your child the negative consequences of certain behavior, he'll

begin to look at you as a friendly advisor. If, instead, you only say "Don't do that!" with the voice of parental authority, then you've got good reason to be afraid of what will happen to your nice little boy when he becomes a teenager.

Bob Trenz is a psychologist and marriage counselor in Rochester. Questions for Dr. Trenz should be mailed to PO Box 64, Rochester 48063.

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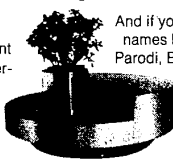
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