

Teen years are nothing to fear

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Q. We have two kids, 9 and 11, and we're about to enter the teen years.

We've heard so many things about how awful it will be, how badly kids rebel, and how we have to maintain control or lose all control. Some say it's a piece of cake. We don't know what or who to believe. Is any of this true?

A. There are so many myths about the teen years. It's easy to be scared before you even get there. Here are some of the most common:

MYTH: All teens have to rebel, and the teen years will be miserable years for a family.

REALITY: Teens do have to separate from their parents and families. That's good - otherwise kids would be living at home when they are 35.

They do, however, have to earn the privilege of being in charge.

MYTH: Once teens rebel, you have lost them forever.

REALITY: This is the fear of every parent, but it doesn't happen in most cases. As the proverb says, "Raise up a child in the way they should go, and when they are old they will not depart from it."

Two very important factors are implied here: 1) At some point, it is likely they could "depart" from what you have taught, and 2) they will come back to it.

This notion is elaborated on in Miller Newton's book "Adolescence: Surviving the Perilous Journey." Miller calls this notion Withdrawal - Isolation - Re-emergence. His view is that all adolescents withdraw, and some will go so far as to isolate themselves. They will, however, re-emerge at some point. Part of the parents' job then is to maintain the connection so a relationship can exist when they re-emerge.

MYTH: Raising teens is easy if you do it right.

REALITY: If you listen to some so-called parenting experts, raising kids - even teens - is a walk in the park.

According to them, the only reason you are having difficulty is because you are doing it wrong (not like them, in other words). The reality is that parenting is a labor-intensive task. In order to raise kids and teach moral character, you have to go against the prevailing culture.

MYTH: Your teen years were just like those of your teen-ager.

REALITY: Many of the character issues they are dealing with are very much like the ones you faced. But the world, atmosphere and culture in which they are dealing with these issues is incredibly different. Don't make the mistake of thinking it's all the same.

MYTH: If you have not parented as well as you would have liked up until now, it's too late to try anything different.

REALITY: This is one of those seductive little lies that sounds so close to the truth. But it's not. Even if you gave up being in charge of your kids long ago, it's still not too late to parent in a different way.

They won't like it at first, but you don't need their permission, and you never did. You can, over time, get their cooperation.

MYTH: Parents must be in control at all times.

REALITY: Well, yes and no. If you are asking me if parents need to be in charge of the family at all times, then absolutely yes. If you are asking me do parents need to control everything a teen-ager does, then absolutely no.

As we put them in charge of more and more areas, we are giving them enough rope, not to hang themselves, but to grow. If they demonstrate they can be in charge in a certain area, they can have that one.

MYTH: Teen-agers are really just little adults who need their parents hardly at all.

REALITY: Wrong, wrong, wrong. Teens, though trying on for size some of the responsibilities of the adult world, are really children who are still developing. They need us as parents to guide them through and around the traps of adolescence and young adulthood.

I saw a powerful illustration of this notion at a conference several years ago. The presenters placed several open bear traps at various places on the stage. A blind-folded teen-ager was placed on one side of the stage, his dad on the other.

The kid was to walk across the stage to his father, who represented adulthood. He made a move to take a step, and the father yelled, "Stop!" The father then walked over to the son, took off the blindfold and guided his son through the traps into "adulthood." Now that's parenting a teen.

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