

# Self-Esteem & You

## II. THE ADULT'S ROLE IN AIDING ADOLESCENT SELF-ESTEEM

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Growing up has never been easy, but perhaps because of today's potent lures of sex, drugs, alcohol and even criminal activity, it may never have been harder. Certainly, not all teens abuse drugs or alcohol or participate in sexual or criminal activity. But a large number do, if only to experiment, and all teens are exposed to these lures.

Under such conditions, it has probably never been harder to be a parent, either. While there is no sure-fire method of raising productive, happy adults, there are certain approaches that have proved better than others. We'll be discussing those here, along with some of the feelings and situations you and your teen may be experiencing.

### The Adolescent Experience

Although you may sometimes feel like tearing out your hair in trying to understand your teen, it's important to remember that the experience may well be even harder for the young person.

Growing into a mature human being can rarely be likened to the delicate unfolding of a flower. There are choices to be made and both pain and joy to be experienced.

Author E.T. Jones describes the teenage experience in a way that may give us some insight into and patience with the often awesome challenge facing young people:

*"The adolescent enters the threshold of personhood seeking an image he does not know in a world he rarely understands with a body that he is just discovering. He has a mixed desire to*

*be an individual who wants to assert himself while at the same time fearing to lose the little security and reassurance that only family can offer."*



Not all teens experience the changes of adolescence in the same way, however. While some may find it a period of stress and turmoil, others may see it as merely another stage in life. Several recent studies have gathered evidence that most teens are well-adjusted and that there is not excessive chaos in teens' lives. These studies have

shown that human development, including adolescence, is a steady, continuous and gradual process, and that adolescence is not a time of radical change.

In fact, our expectations of youthful rebelliousness may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, according to author A. Bandura:

*"If a society labels its adolescents as 'teenagers,' and expects them to be rebellious, unpredictable, sloppy, and wild in their behavior, and if this picture is repeatedly reinforced by the mass media, such cultural expectations may serve to instigate and maintain certain role behaviors, in turn, then reinforce the originally false belief."*



Therefore, in view of conflicting theories, it is important to remember that we will be discussing only general concepts here. Since your teen is an individual, the concepts should be considered accordingly.

### Your Adjustment to Adolescence

Although it's obvious that your teen is going through some major changes, it may be less obvious that your role as a parent is also changing.

After 12 or 13 years of providing sometimes intensive and constant care for your child, it

may be difficult for you to let go. Giving your teen the independence necessary for growing up isn't always easy. Letting him or her have the freedom to make choices means that sometimes those choices will be wrong and will hurt.

Also, just when you may feel that the demands of parenthood are greatest, your teen may be least likely to appreciate your efforts. After all, your service and sacrifice has been a given condition since your teen was born, as Willard Gaylin pointed out in the December 1978 issue of Psychology Today magazine.

While parents may resent their teen's attitude, Gaylin suggested they look more closely into their desire for gratitude from their children. It may be that some parents fear that as their children grow up, they (the parents) will no longer be needed or loved.

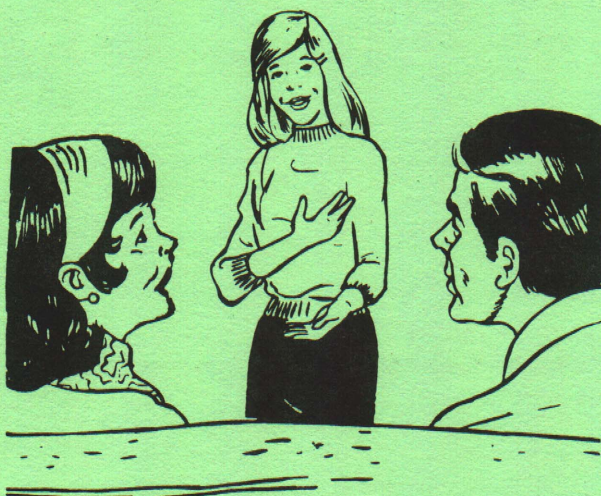
### What, When and Why?

Adolescence is the transition from childhood to adulthood. Although the exact timing of this change is different for each person, it may begin around 12 or 13 and continue into the late teens or early 20s.

It is a time when people have to find out who they are and how they fit into the world. Young people are experimenting with life and the behaviors which result may often displease and puzzle adults. They are necessary, however, since they allow teens to test their abilities and limits.

Erik Erikson, human development specialist, says teens must find

their identities and make commitments to occupations and personal beliefs. He says adolescents must undergo an "identity crisis ... a necessary turning point, a critical movement, when development must move one way or the other ..."



If this identity crisis is not eventually resolved, teens may suffer self-doubt, insecurity and a failure to find themselves. They may make what Erikson calls "devoted attempts" to become just what their parents and teachers don't want them to be.

That is why teens need responsive individuals to model themselves after. Without acceptance and understanding from an adult they admire, teens may feel they are in a constant battle with a disapproving society.

Although an adult model is crucial, teens also need relationships with their friends for learning different roles. Friends their own age are a very important part of teens' lives. By forming cliques and stereotyping themselves and their ideals, Erikson says teens may be trying to ease the discomforts of finding out who they are.

## The Challenge

With all the choices facing teens today -- concerning sex, drugs, alcohol, etc. -- it's obvious that they, and we, need to learn all we can about the choices. Without adequate knowledge, teens have only limited insight into a world with many choices. The unhappy results of this limited insight are that:

★ One in ten teenage girls will get pregnant this year.

★ Youthful vandalism is on the rise, according to FBI reports.

★ Teens recently polled by Gallup Youth Survey cited alcohol and drug abuse as the most serious problem facing them.

While teens may experiment with undesirable behaviors, there is a point at which such behaviors may signal a serious problem.

Some warning signs for parents were listed by Dr. Stanford Friedman, child psychiatrist, in a recent issue of Parents' Magazine:

● Did the behavior (vandalism, cutting classes, hostility, etc.) precede adolescence? The problem is likely to be more serious if it started before adolescence, Friedman maintains.

● Is the behavior chronic? Does it happen only once in a while, or regularly?

● Is the behavior violent? According to Friedman, "Any violent behavior is a sign of problems."

Should such "warning signs" as these occur, parents should seek help from their school, church or other youth counselors in the community.

## What Can I Do?

Since no one has, nor are they likely to, come up with "Ten Easy Steps for Raising Teens," all we have to go on are the techniques that seem to work better than others.

Dr. Jim Larson, in a booklet called "Adolescence: The Search for Identity," makes these suggestions for parents of teens:

1. RECOGNIZE THAT MUCH OF WHAT HAPPENS IN ADOLESCENCE, EVEN WITH YOUR PARTICULAR ADOLES-

CENT, IS NOT ABNORMAL.

2. ACCEPT THE YOUNG PERSON, EVEN IF SOME OF THE BEHAVIORS ARE DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT.

3. ENCOURAGE THE USE OF THE HOME AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

4. PROVIDE DISCUSSION AND SUPPORT GROUPS FOR ADOLESCENTS, THEIR PARENTS, AND FOR MULTI-AGE GROUPS.

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