

Navigating Your Teen's Independence

One of our long term goals as parents is to help our children reach independence. Parents of young adults are rightly very proud when their adult children want to be independent of them and manage their lives almost completely themselves. The need for teens to test their wings and begin moving out into the wider world and back to the safety of home as they practice their skills of independence, can be very challenging.

It is critical for parents during the teen years to remain their children's emotional and moral compass. Adolescents will begin to experiment with intimate relationships outside of the family and the best success they will have with this relies on the intimate relationships at home being solid. We need to invite our children to rely on us emotionally until they are emotionally ready to depend on themselves. Too often, in our culture, we let teenagers transfer their dependency outside the family, often with disastrous results. Staying connected to your teen while they are learning to individuate can at times be incredibly frustrating, disappointing (in terms of not feeling as needed as when they were younger) and frightening as they venture out to be exposed to other influences.

Here are some tips to help with staying connected to your teen while they reach for independence:

1. Understand that your child's fierce need for independence does not mean she cannot stay connected to you. Give your teen opportunities to practise exercising her own judgement rather than who you want her to be; she'll be able to grow into age-appropriate independence without cutting you off.
2. Listen, keep advice to a minimum and empathise often. Be a sounding board rather than one to prescribe and you will find her coming back to you for more.
3. Be available. Kids don't usually bring things up in a scheduled meeting but rather when they are most worried and this might not always be at a convenient time for you. The most important part of staying available is your state of mind; build in down time for you so that you are emotionally rested and available. Your child will sense your emotional availability. Dropping everything else when your teen wants to talk is very important.
4. Know your child's friends and welcome them.
5. Work towards and achieve five positive interactions for every negative interaction. These include smiles, a pat on the shoulder as well as positive verbal affirmations. Your teen will make a lot of mistakes – the more you comment on them, the more your teen feels that you are criticizing or even blaming them. When possible say nothing.
6. Don't take an escalation of negative emotion from your teen personally. This isn't primarily about you, no matter what they say, it is about them. It is about them not managing their emotions well; their frontal cortex is not fully developed until their mid-twenties and impulse control is still very challenging. Remember connection before correction, for example, 'You must be feeling incredibly upset right now to speak to me this way.' This way you are tuning into your child's emotions (note it was a statement, not a question).
7. Spend some time together every day. Do things that your child enjoys creating pleasurable daily opportunities for connection. Have fun together. Where possible ask your teen to teach you something. It may well be in the area of social media or electronics. She often knows more as a digital native than her digital immigrant parents.

8. Acknowledge separations and reunions. Use words and body language (kiss, hug, pat on the back) to greet your child and say goodbye. Collecting her in the car is often a time to reconnect and talk, so seize the opportunity. Turn off the radio/music and leave space for the opportunity to reconnect.

9. Tune in to your teen's mood – if you are bubbly and she is serious you will be met with silence. Don't be afraid to name the emotion you think your child is feeling (in a statement, not a question) – this is called emotion coaching.

10. Expect that your child will seem more interested in their peers than in you. Let them have their freedom unless you have a reason for keeping them contained. Always ask questions about her plans of course. Pose predicted scenarios to help her consider the risks and to feel reassured that she will make a good decision in the face of a dilemma or tricky situation.

11. Remind your child how special she is as often as you did when she was small. Remember to commend effort and perseverance particularly when she is struggling.

12. There are so many things you can do to build a healthy and trusting relationship with your child and every journey is different. Supporting your child unconditionally no matter the hurdles along the way is paramount.

'When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change.'
(Thich Nhat Hanh)

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