

Learning to Be a Parent ... **AGAIN?**



An Optimistic and Engaged Approach to Parenting Tweens and Teens

By Brian Spero

WHEN YOU'RE FIRST PREPARING TO HAVE A CHILD, THERE'S A NATURAL TERM OF anticipation and preparation during which you ready yourself as best you can for what lies ahead. You pick up books like *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, *The Baby Book* and just about anything written by Dr. Spock, talk to everyone you know who has had children and hopefully start reading *Boston Parents Paper*. Then you become a parent and find these resources valuable in providing many tips, techniques and truths for helping you through countless situations – and for the rest you just power through, learn on the fly and do your best as you gain your own unique experience and perspective of what it means to raise a family.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR PARENTS OF TWEENS & TEENS

Years pass and you look up to find your child is slowly but surely growing up and starting to look, sound and seem very much like an independent person ... an adult. But still, there's a long way to go through what we sometimes fearfully refer to as "the teen years." You might even feel as though all of a sudden you've reached a point at a certain age where a lot of what you've worked so hard to learn and practice as a parent no longer seems very applicable or effective.

What's happening with kids at this stage? How can we, as parents, continue to adapt to ensure we're there for them as they go through all of the physical, emotional and cognitive changes on their way to adulthood? While they're becoming more and more independent and, let's face it, often obstinate, overconfident, erratic and enigmatic, how can we provide the continued guidance, love and support they don't necessarily demonstrate a desire for, but need just as much as ever? Luckily, we tracked down a few authorities on the subject to share their wisdom on parenting emerging tweens and teens.

What's Going On?

Most parents would agree it could be hard to understand kids as they head into adolescence. But it's not very difficult to recognize what's at the center of many of the challenges kids at this age face. There are the physical changes, increased academic demands, completely new school environments and peer groups and more competitive extracurricular activities. And this is all happening simultaneously!

"They're searching for who they are and trying to refine and solidify their identity," says Mary Reckmeyer, educational psychologist and author of *Strength Based Parenting: Developing Your Children's Inmate Talents* (Gallup Press, 2016). "It's different than when they were young and wanted to go everywhere and do everything with you." Children at this stage are beginning to seek independence and are trying to figure out who their friends are, what they value and what activities they want to be a part of, she explains.

Along with making the transition from family to peers in terms of importance, and of course dealing with puberty, one of the biggest changes of children coming of age, says Kate Roberts, Ph.D., a psychologist and parenting coach on the North Shore, is their abstract thinking ability. "That's really positive in that they're [now able to]

DO try to have discussions about why rules are what they are. A democratic relationship to some degree does make sense.

DON'T make all the choices for them. Allow for independent decision-making in areas it feels appropriate.

DO respect their preference in how they like to spend their time and whom they want to spend it with.

DON'T stop parenting! There needs to be some boundaries and rules. Hold the line when you get into the territory of risky behaviors.

DO choose wisely where you're going to come down hard, and in other areas say, "OK, this is an appropriate place to try out your independence."

– Danuta Bukatko

DO let children discover things for themselves. The best learning is through your own experiences.

DON'T underestimate your kids. If they feel they're ready to take a trip into Boston with their friends or attend a rock concert on their own, hear them out and let them show you how they plan to handle it.

DO continue to have friends over to the house, even when they're older. Try to be the house that the kids want to be at.

DON'T directly manage your children. Try to have a negotiation or discussion to allow them to argue their point and potentially win.

DO recognize you're an important role model. If you want your kids to be fit, you should be fit. If you want your kids to value sleep, you need to value sleep, because they are watching and copying.

– Kate Roberts

DO take the time to know your children and what's important to them, what motivates them and what their talents and interests are. When you know those kinds of things, you can really make the best choices for them and for your family.

DON'T worry too much about advice, and DO a lot of listening. Because when you listen, you'll find places along the way where you're communicating and can share some of your parental words of wisdom.

DO encourage your children to try a lot of different activities and DON'T expect them to be good at all of them. They need to be able to try things and fail. None of us like to do that, but it really does help sort out what we're good at.

DON'T ignore your children's struggles or weaknesses. But you do want to manage them so they don't become roadblocks.

DO carve out time to listen, watch and appreciate each of your kids in some way every single day. It does and will make a world of difference all throughout the years.

DO be there in whatever shape or form you can. When you hit those rough waters, think about ways you can help shore them up.

– Mary Reckmeyer

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think beyond today.” Roberts recommends parents take the opportunity to try, without being too conspicuous, to get kids to start to look at the big picture and see the consequences of their actions. “Looking at their goals and outcomes of their behaviors can help steer them toward the right choices,” Roberts says.

According to Danuta Bukatko, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and expert in child development at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, no matter how your children are changing, the ground rules for parenting remain the same. That includes providing strong social support, staying engaged and consistently role modeling the desired habits and behaviors. “The research on parenting is pretty clear. High warmth combined with reasonable limit setting and adhering to those limits yields the best outcomes,” she explains.

Keep on Parenting

Sometimes the most difficult time to remain involved as parents is when your kids are trying to push you away. “We have to be reminded no matter how ‘un-lovable’ they might seem, they need our love really more than ever,” says Reckmeyer. “We really have to provide a home base for them, where they’re loved no matter what, because they need to know it’s safe to try and fail and try again.”

What frequently happens as children reach their teens and the lives they lead present more complex challenges, is parents tend to back off. Whether it’s because you perceive them as needing additional responsibility and space (which in many ways they do), want them to like you all the time (good luck) or are afraid of losing your close relationship, Bukatko stresses insisting on some fundamental ground rules for living as a family.

“Many parents feel independence as a child means detachment of the parent,” Bukatko says. “By staying involved, knowing what’s going on in your child’s life, knowing their friends and allowing them to make choices within the general sphere of what the family values are – you can promote independence and responsible decision making but still fundamentally maintain certain parameters.”

Provide Room to Grow

It’s our job as parents to prepare children for an independent life. So while staying engaged and involved is crucial, it’s also important to give them enough leeway to make choices and gain experiences. “If parents are constantly inserting themselves, which of course would be a natural temptation because we always want our children to succeed, then they don’t see how their choices led to the consequences,” says Roberts.

Roberts doesn’t recommend letting your kid fail in something important, like seventh-grade math,

just to prove a point. As the parent, you're there to provide support and make sure they're doing the work they're responsible for. But if it's something that's not monumental, such as neglecting to get their homework done on Saturday and having to miss out on fun times on Sunday when all their friends are hanging out, then it can be healthy to let them see how the choices they make sometimes don't work out in their favor.

"Whether you're 12 or you're 18 and you're headed out to college, you're in for a pretty rude awakening when you haven't been given choice and ownership," echoes Reckmeyer. When you include your children in the decision-making process early on, rather than picking out their clothing for them, choosing what they eat and basically micro-managing every small detail, they not only tend to be much happier, but also far more prepared to handle what the future holds.

It's Always Worth It

For those who feel you're late to the game in preparing your children for increased independence, or perhaps for whatever reason simply haven't been around or as available as you would have liked to have been, there's still time to make a difference and start righting the ship. "You just need to be around your kid," says Roberts. "Start going to events. Start being there at dinner. Without putting a lot of input into it, be present and listen, so eventually you can develop trust."

Reckmeyer agrees kids need to simply know they can access you, that you're listening and there to support them. With today's technology it's easier than ever to remain connected and in-touch even when you're not able to be there physically. And when things really get frustrating or confusing, it might be time to take a step back and remember what you were like at their age. "Stop and think about who you were at 12 years old, what you were doing and what was important to you; and, by the way, how do you feel about yourself now?" Reckmeyer says. "We kind of all go through a variety of things, so sometimes trying to see the world through the eyes of your younger self can be helpful."

Having devoted the past 40 years to the subject of parenting and healthy childhood development, Bukatko's good news for parents is that in the end it almost always works out. "It can be a challenging time, but sometimes you'd be surprised at how lessons you think have not been absorbed, really are," she says. "You don't see the outcomes until a little bit later, but it's worth the investment because the outcomes can be really great." ■

Brian Spero is a frequent writer for *Boston Parents Paper*.



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