



## Understanding your adolescent better

It's 9 pm on a weekday. Fourteen-year old Callie has been on the phone for an hour, despite pleas and threats by her parents to make her finish up. It seems to them that she is only concerned about herself and her friends – she doesn't make an effort to be part of the family or contribute to home life these days. She constantly demands personal freedom which her parents believe is beyond her maturity to manage. In fact, she reminds them of the two-year old Callie – oppositional, egocentric and determined to put pressure on the limits of her parents' tolerance. Her mother complains that her "wonderful little girl" has been replaced by "a monster" and fears for Callie's safety with the dangers of alcohol, drugs and sexual activity that lie in wait for inexperienced teenagers.

If we could hear some of Callie's thoughts, they might sound like this, "When did it all change? Everything is different now. Mom used to be so much fun – we used to do stuff together. My parents make me feel like I'm always doing something wrong because I want to go out with my friends and do stuff with them. Some of my friends seem so together but I feel like I don't have a plan for my life and I feel bored a lot of the time. It's only when I've had a few drinks that I feel like I'm really sociable. I also worry about what other people are thinking or saying about me and whether I'll get good enough marks at school to make everyone happy. Sometimes I just want to lock myself in my room – at least I don't have to try so hard when I'm by myself. But then I start thinking about my life and it seems like most of it sucks. Sometimes I feel confused about how I feel – I can be really excited one minute and feel really down the next."

Being an adolescent is hard work. Parenting an adolescent is hard work. What can help is understanding some of the normal developmental challenges that face adolescents and their parents. For example, the biological changes associated with puberty have a powerful impact on self esteem and self-concept. Self-consciousness is increased and feeling out of step with peers can increase anxiety about being acceptable or attractive. Sexual feelings can be bewildering and early sexual experimentation can be scary. As important as the physiological changes are, the psychological challenges facing adolescents may be greater. The move away from the family to a peer group as the primary source of personal connections is normal and necessary as a preparation for adulthood. This raises conflict as the adolescent has to leave behind the security of childhood within a family and approach the unknown territory of life outside the family.

The beginnings of a sense of identity emerge in early adolescence, and the young person must struggle with questions about who they are, what they stand for, what their priorities are, who are the most important people in their lives, and how much power do they have to control the direction of their future. As they search themselves for answers, they seem egocentric and less aware of other people's needs. They may also become very concerned that other people are constantly observing and judging them. However, at the same time, their cognitive development begins to allow them to take others' perspectives and so they may seem empathic and selfish by turns.

Another major challenge of adolescence is the development of moral and spiritual values. The formation of a conscience that is driven by human rights rather than parental approval

may mean the rejection of some parental and societal values in favor of values that have more relevance for the teenager's world. However, as adolescence progresses and the young person's world changes, values may fall more in line with those of society. For example, the third-former who was determined to wear the school uniform in unconventional ways may become a seventh-form leader in the school system who believes that the standard school uniform signifies some sense of school pride and identity to the world.

As adolescents face challenges, so do their parents. This is a time of great change for the family as parents have to adapt to a very different kind of person in their midst. This is someone they cannot control to the extent they could in earlier times; someone who isn't keen to join in the usual family activities; someone who is constantly pushing the boundaries of their freedom and safety; and someone who is always experimenting with new things. There may be a sense of loss of the old, easier times and the younger, more compliant child with closer ties to parents and the family. This may be similar to the difficulties parents face when their toddlers enter the strong explorative phase of the "terrible twos" – seemingly oppositional and constantly pushing the boundaries of physical and psychological abilities. Added to this are the stresses of emotional rejection and isolation from an independent adolescent, increasing criticism from challenging teenagers, and the recognition of their own aging processes.

Parental and societal expectations of adolescents are often in conflict with the exploration and experimentation that is part of the teenager's move to independence. Sometimes, parents expect teenagers to behave like adults – moving from the freedom of childhood straight into the responsibility of adulthood. This isn't possible, and therefore, isn't fair. Adult responsibilities need to be introduced in measured ways that take into account age and abilities, competing demands on time, and still leave space for some remaining aspects of childhood. However, it's not easy to find the balance between allowing personal freedom while maintaining safety at a time when young people are pushing for independence.

Important ingredients for parenting practices during adolescence include using a more negotiative stance than before. So, a deal may be struck in which the young person can reassure parents about his or her safety by providing names, addresses and telephone numbers of peers and parties, being reliable in terms of curfew times, and staying in touch by cellphone when away from home. In return, parents may allow more freedom in terms of later curfew, and the people and places the teenager may visit. Privacy is vital, and questioning about comings and goings may elicit monosyllables or anger. However, the need for a secure base and safe haven is still crucial, and adolescents have to know that their parents will support them – come what may. Support means letting teenagers know that you are interested in their lives (without being intrusive) and finding what they think valuable; being encouraging and sympathetic when things are difficult; cheering when endeavours are successful; providing necessary resources like a place to study, the means to stay in touch with peers, and opportunities to develop skills and talents; not being critical of unusual choices in clothing, hairstyle and other aspects of personal expression like music and movies (while having clear expectations of hygiene and the appropriateness of these expressions in certain situations); sharing activities like watching movies or playing games or going shopping; maintaining humour as often as possible! To balance this support is the need for parents to be firm, clear and consistent about limits and boundaries – staying in touch with other parents helps to maintain this stance. Providing a personal example of reliability and moderation, and modelling positive



relationships and problem-solving are also important ingredients in helping adolescents develop successfully.

In Callie's case, a contract could be drawn up which stipulates the respective contributions that Callie and her parents will make to a more harmonious homelife. Given that no-one gets everything they want, the question is asked of both and her parents "what am I prepared to contribute to this contract?" Good education about substance use and sexual activity provide Callie with information on which to make good choices. Providing an atmosphere of open discussion (or making available some other forum for Callie to discuss her fears and discuss her options) will encourage her to problem-solve the dilemmas facing her. Criticially, Callie's parents need to maintain a positive emotional stance towards her while providing a negotiated structure that will allow her to explore her world and yet keep her safe.

Parents can monitor their adolescents' development by being mindful of four core areas of functioning – physical, social, academic and emotional. If there is a significant decline in any of these areas over time, and best attempts to improve things are not successful, professional help is warranted. A general practitioner can guide parents in the choice of service that might be best suited to their, and their adolescent's, needs.