

Don't Talk to Me, My Friends Are Watching!

Parental Involvement in your Teenager's Life

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The words above are all too familiar for many parents of preteens and adolescents. As children approach their teen years, many parents find it difficult to strike a balance between "letting go" and "being there" for their children. The middle and high school years are difficult for young people; filled with growing peer pressure, dramatic physical changes, and an awakening need for more independence. Research shows that parent involvement begins to decline at the onset of the pre-teen and adolescent years; but that doesn't mean children wouldn't still benefit from it.

The Great Shift

The reasons for this decline in parent involvement just as teens are entering middle and high school is two-fold. First, maturing children have a growing need to develop a sense of self and independence that is separate from their families. They begin to weigh choices and consequences, make more decisions on their own, learn from their mistakes, and establish their own set of values to guide their decisions and actions. They begin refusing help from their parents and don't want them along when they're with friends.

Second, parent's roles begin changing, too, in order to allow for their children's self-identity development. While parents continue to offer support and love, they begin stepping back a little in all aspects of their children's lives in order to show their respect for their children's growing independence. Parents must begin to let adolescents make their own choices good and bad and have them take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

Changes in Attitude

The decline in parent involvement in middle and high school years also can be attributed to changes in attitude. Young people make it clear they don't want their parents playing the same large role in their upbringing and schooling that they once did. Many parent-student activities that children find acceptable in elementary school, like registering for classes, attending school events, or walking to and from school, are seen as student-only events by middle and high school students.

In Education Week's 1999 Quality Counts report on the state of U.S. education, 56 percent of 8th graders surveyed consider lack of parent involvement either "not to be a problem" or a "minor one." Many parents tend to think the same way. In *Playing Their Parts*, a 1999 study by the research group Public Agenda, 35 percent of parents with children in secondary grades believed that a child's embarrassment over a parent's involvement was a major reason why parents become less involved in school as children get older. Twenty-five percent of parents think that "kids can handle school on their own and need parents less" in secondary school. As kids grow, it becomes a challenge for some parents to remain involved in their child's lives at home, let alone at school.

As children begin to adjust to their new school environments and meet the challenges of their new courses, parents may have less understanding of the work their kids are doing in school. Parents may feel unable to help with homework and hesitate to discuss curriculum issues with teachers, resulting in their becoming less involved overall.

Reversing the Trend

Research has shown that those middle and high schools that help families adjust to this transition show higher student achievement, higher graduation rates, and have more students admitted to colleges. A 1999 study by U.S. News and World Report, 96 schools identified as educationally outstanding, 80 percent of them had developed strong partnerships with parents.

Many research studies have shown that when parents are involved in their child's education, these students achieve more regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parent's own education level. Last year, the National PTA conducted a telephone survey of 800 parents of public school children from across the country. Ninety-one percent of parents polled felt that it was extremely important for parents to be involved in their children's education regardless of grade level.

Effective Parenting

Though many parents might be surprised to realize it, research shows that they have a strong influence on their teenage children. Many parents want to be involved, but just don't know how. There are many things parents can do to maintain strong involvement in their children's lives as they approach adolescence.

- **Keep lines of communication open.** Parents need to have regular conversations with their teens and supply them with honest and accurate information on the many issues teens face. Start important discussions with your children and teens about smoking, drugs, sex, drinking even if the topics are difficult or embarrassing. Don't wait for teens to come to you.
- **Set fair and consistent rules.** Parents need to set boundaries that help children learn that with their new independence comes responsibility. Parents and adolescents can work together to set appropriate limits. Be sure that young people understand the purpose behind the rules.
- **Support their future.** Even if parents don't feel they can help with homework, parents need to demonstrate that education is important to them and their child's future. It's important to know children's teachers and to create a home environment that supports learning.
- **Be an example.** Parents need to demonstrate appropriate behaviors. Show concern for and be involved in the community and at school. Maintain regularly scheduled family time to share mutual interests, such as attending movies, concerts, sporting events, plays, or museum exhibits.

Friendly School Communities

Although students may not want parents directly involved in their classroom, there are many ways parents can be involved in middle and high schools that lead to positive effects on students. In order to help schools involve parents, in 1997 the National PTA created the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. Here are some successful program ideas school communities have used to create comprehensive parent involvement programs.

- Provide special transition or orientation sessions for parents and students entering middle and high school.
- Establish a family resource center at your school to share information and provide parenting classes and other resources on adolescent development.
- Provide training and instruction for parents on curriculum, teaching methods, and tracking, assessment, and placement procedures and how they affect students.
- Encourage parents to volunteer by adopting and sponsoring academic programs, school clubs, or teams.
- Invite parents and students to serve on site-based management teams to participate in school decision-making.
- Invite teachers, parents, and students to work together to design and monitor different community service experiences.

Everyone Benefits

Increasing parent involvement in middle and high schools benefits everyone parents, teachers, schools, and (whether they want to admit it) the students themselves. Understanding how young people feel about their parents during their middle and high school years is important to developing effective parent involvement programs.

When students have a chance to work with adults as equals on projects, each group gains a better understanding of the other, communications improve, and relationships flourish. While kids will still get embarrassed and will probably continue to say things like, "Don't talk to me, my friends are watching," they will reap the benefits for years to come.