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A Teenager Looks At His Family



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The material in this pamphlet is a reprint of Chapter 6 of Family Living Series, Volume 1, "About You" by Marjorie C. Cosgrove and Mary I. Josey. We are greatly indebted to the Science Research Associates for permission to reproduce such a large section of one of their publications.

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You and Your Family

That family of yours! Sometimes it seems things *never* go right. Dad sounds off about the walk you forgot to shovel. Mom complains about your playing the radio too loudly. Kid sister Sue snoops in your private diary again. And big brother Jim refuses to lend you his car. It's gotten to be nag, nag, nag, grouch, grievance, grump, every minute you're in the house. Right in the bosom of your own home, too, the very place you would expect peace and relaxation!

Is that how you feel once in a while? Sometimes? Frequently?

Don't let it bother you too much. It happens to most of us. In a national survey conducted among families of high school students, the overwhelming majority reported *frequent friction* in the family circle—but *not real problems*. Also, doesn't the friction stick out in your mind and overshadow the much longer and more frequent periods when everything moves along happily? Still, we want to get rid of as much family friction as possible, lest it develop into serious problems.

What causes friction between parents and teenagers? Part of the answer is that you are growing up—you are half child, half adult. Your parents, if they are like most parents, don't know quite how to take you at this age or quite how to treat you.

Another part of the answer is the difference in generations. You know the old saying, "It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks." Your parents aren't "old dogs," of course. They can and probably want to learn the new ways of doing things. But they do think and feel differently from the way you do. The customs they grew up under are radically different from today's.

Does that partly explain why your mother is so opposed to your wearing lipstick to school? Or why your father thinks it's high time you were earning all your own spending money?

Family problems

Your own inconsistent demands upon your parents cause some of the friction between you and your family. Have you ever tried to describe an ideal set of parents to yourself? Would it go something like this?

"I want parents to let me do whatever I want, BUT sometimes I want them to make me stop."

"I want parents who always understand me, BUT sometimes I don't understand myself."

"I want parents who never discipline or scold me, BUT sometimes I need a good scolding."

"I want parents who consider my health, BUT I think my bedtime should be up to me."

And so on. Be frank with yourself. Aren't these inconsistent? And aren't they the cause of some of the friction in your home?

Suppose we consider your parents' side first. A sweeping, bird's-eye view of what they are up against and of some of the problems you are causing them (or they fear you will cause them) may help you to understand *them* better. That's an important step in smoothing out some of the rough spots.

Parents are human beings

Most mothers and fathers know that their children's desire for independence and their increasing outside interests are a normal part of growing

up. They can gradually untie the apron strings without too much struggle within themselves or with their adolescent children.

But consider these two facts about your parents:

1. Most adults nowadays face real struggles. Worry over the family budget, the future, war, and other adult problems sometimes makes them tense and tired. They aren't always capable of

the calm, considerate attitude they would like to take toward you.

2. All parents are not emotionally mature. Because their own childhoods may have lacked the love and security they needed, they themselves may either cling to their children and baby them or become too demanding or inconsistent.

The chart below, "Understanding your Parents' Attitudes and Your Own," should help you with your problems.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PARENTS' ATTITUDES AND YOUR OWN

We've said before that you can't always tell how a person feels from the way he acts. We all try to cover up our true feelings. You and your parents probably do this, too, even though you want to understand each other.

Better understanding between you and your family could be achieved if you—and they, too—learned to see the under-the-surface reasons for the things you both do. Here's a chart that will help you. It shows **how** some parents act and **why**, and **how** some of you act and **why**.

A Look At Some Parents

How They Act	Why They May Act That Way
Bossy	<p>Uncertainty: Sometimes parents aren't sure of the best thing to do, so they fall back on, "I'm your parent. I know best. Don't argue."</p> <p>Also, some adults receive a great deal of bossing outside their homes—from employers and others. This makes them want to boss someone, too; and unfortunately that someone may turn out to be you.</p>
Domineering about your vocational choice	<p>Disappointment over their own ambitions: If your father, for instance, feels he hasn't made the most of himself, he will be doubly anxious for you to get ahead. He'll want to pick a promising career for you.</p> <p>Also, in some groups and communities, professional people rank high. Your parents may want you to become a part of these groups. So they'll try to convince you to become a doctor, or a teacher, or a lawyer.</p>
Aloof and indifferent	<p>Shyness and inexpressiveness: Some parents who were brought up in the "Children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard" school find it hard to express their love for their own children openly.</p>
"Hush-hush" about sex matters	<p>Embarrassment or inadequacy: In your parents' childhood, sex was probably never discussed openly. It's not easy for parents to overcome the childhood taboos they learned. And sometimes they can't answer your questions because of their own lack of sex education.</p>
Stingy	<p>Insecurity: Parents may be "stingy" because they have real fears of economic insecurity. Or they may seem stingy because they are saving for your future.</p>
Proud in a false way	<p>Earlier poverty: Parents who were always poor when they were young may overemphasize material possessions later in life.</p>
Too protective	<p>Insecurity: Your parents' own fears and anxieties may cause them to try to protect you too much and keep you dependent.</p>

Continued on next page.

Possessive	Lack of enough interests in their own lives: Parents who don't take part in community, civic, and school activities become too wrapped up in their children and concentrate all their attention on them.
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A Look At Some Teen-Agers

How They Act	Why They May Act That Way
"Fresh," boisterous, or bragging	Uncertainty: People who aren't sure of themselves often bolster their confidence by acting fresh or boastful. They may try to cover up their feelings of insecurity by being loud and attracting attention.
Indifferent	Anxiety: The "I-don't-care" attitude is common among people who are afraid of ridicule, of making mistakes, of not measuring up.
Too, too perfect	Desire for reassurance: Usually people who strive too hard for perfection need to be reassured that they are doing well. They are afraid to risk a mistake, and by struggling for perfection they boost their confidence in their own worth.
Shy, timid	Inadequacy: If you don't feel you are really the equal of other people, you are likely to withdraw into yourself.

Your parents are often right

Read the following list of what parents normally expect of their teen-age children. You might ask your parents to read it, too, and then together make any additions or corrections that fit your individual family situation.

WHAT PARENTS EXPECT OF YOU

- Respect for their age and experience.
- Assumption of some responsibilities around the house.
- At least a general idea of who your friends are and where you go with them.
- An effort to understand their point of view.
- A real attempt to be part of the family group.
- Loyalty to the family.
- Financial assistance, if needed.
- Full use of educational and other opportunities they give you.
- Evidence of affection.
- Some of your time.
- Obedience—not unconditional—but reasonable.
- Honesty.
- List additional points here: _____

Often behind family friction is the really justified concern parents feel about your welfare.

The following examples may help you gain a better understanding of what your parents face.

1. PEGGY

Peggy tripped home from school happy as a lark. She'd been invited to the fraternity dance. It seemed like her social life was made now. She was to be part of the "best" crowd—bright lights, sweet music, those wonderful boys and girls with their fashionable clothes and exciting parties.

Fraternities and sororities are forbidden at Peggy's school, so the dance was to be held at a roadhouse 10 miles out of town. The roadhouse had a bad reputation.

Peggy told her mother the wonderful news. Mother responded with a flat "no." Peggy's bubble broke. She stomped off to her room. "I am, too, going. I'll show you, you old fogey!" she stormed.

Did Peggy's mother have real cause for worry about Peggy's going to the dance? _____
What possible harm could come from her attending the dance? _____

Did Peggy's mother handle the situation in the best way? _____
Explain: _____

Suggest a reasonable compromise between Peggy and her mother. _____

2. TIM

Tim's father had warned him time and time again about "hanging" his soiled clothes on the bathroom floor. One evening his father came home tired and dirty after an exhausting day at his job. He went to wash up before dinner. There were Tim's football togs spread about.

Tim's father exploded. His yelling could be heard through the house: "Okay, young man. It's floor-scrubbing—not football practice—for you tomorrow afternoon."

Was Tim's father correct in punishing him? _____
If you think his disciplinary method was too harsh, explain some possible underlying reasons for his harshness. _____

A survey among high school students shows that most feel they need discipline from time to time. If you agree, can you suggest disciplinary methods you think work best? _____

3. MARTHA

Martha's mother was a happy-go-lucky person. In spite of a brood of six youngsters, she always found time to love and comfort every one of them. True, her household was somewhat disorganized, and she let her personal appearance go.

When Martha went to high school, she suddenly seemed to turn against her mother, didn't want to be seen with her, invented excuses for never bringing her new friends home, talked

back and argued constantly. Martha's mother was hurt, baffled. She complained, "Martha has no respect for me anymore."

What admirable qualities does Martha's mother possess? _____

Is Martha making a mistake in being ashamed of her? _____

What can Martha do to help her mother meet the teen-age standards of what a mother ought to be? _____

4. EARL

To keep Earl's large family household running smoothly, every member had to pitch in. Earl's assignment was the yard. He was supposed to sweep the walk, shovel snow in the winter, and set the garbage cans out. But Earl seldom remembered to do these chores. When he did a job, he was sullen about it.

He became weary of the constant nagging at home. He preferred being with the gang. He especially resented his father's constant "When I was your age, I was out making my living. . . ."

Is Earl's father correct in thinking Earl should take a share of the family responsibility? _____
Is Earl's father saying that Earl should quit school and "make his own living"? _____ What *does* he mean? _____

You are sometimes right, too

We have seen the problems teen-agers cause their parents. But it isn't always a one-sided affair. Parents, too, sometimes present problems.

Listed here are quotations from parents' actual conversations. Each quotation illustrates a mistake in handling the teen-ager, or a lack of understanding. After each, indicate what change in the attitudes of these parents would be helpful.

1. "Now, it's no use arguing any further. I said 'no' and that's reason enough"

2. "I'm so glad Mary isn't interested in boys. I don't have to worry about her going out nights. She always does what I say." _____

3. "I never heard of such a thing. A girl of your age wanting to go to a formal. I never went to one until I was in college." _____

4. "You'll be glad some day I made you save your money for useful things instead of wasting it on girls." _____

5. "I don't understand why all the young people go over to your house. My daughter is always raving about you, and she never confides in me about anything." _____

Family harmony means work

Genuine mutual love and respect make it possible for most teen-agers and their parents to get through the difficult adolescent years without permanent harm to family relationships. But to prevent small irritations from developing into major problems takes work on the part of both parents and children.

The chart, "Causes of Friction in My Family," has been prepared as a guide to help your family work out their problems.

If you can't seem to resolve your difficulties by merely talking them over, it may help to adopt some of the following techniques other families find useful:

1. *Family councils.* Family rules of behavior, discipline, and such long-range family plans as vacations are discussed regularly and agreements reached at a time when relations aren't strained.

2. *Family budgets.* Money matters are decided by the family as a whole. Allotted sums are set aside to meet each member's needs as far as possible. Questions of what teen-agers should do with the money they earn are decided on the basis of their own and the family's welfare.

3. *Experts' advice.* A family may need help with problems that are too big for them to deal with alone. Handling major family crises, such as the separation of the parents or constant, serious fighting, requires more training and experience than the family has. Family counseling services, guidance experts, and marriage clinics often offer sound and constructive help. Your minister or school principal can usually suggest where to go for such help.

4. (Add here additional techniques you think might work in your family.) _____

CAUSES OF FRICTION IN MY FAMILY

In the boxes below, check those problems that arise between you and your family. Double check those where the friction may develop into a serious problem. See if you can't go over this list with your parents and work out suitable compromises.

General Conduct

- ☐ Smoking
- ☐ Driving the car
- ☐ Using make-up (for girls only)
- ☐ Manners

My Home Life

- ☐ Helping around the house
- ☐ Taking an interest in my family
- ☐ Taking part in family activities
- ☐ Caring for younger brothers and sisters
- ☐ Showing consideration for other relatives

Dating

- ☐ "Too young"
- ☐ "Too serious"
- ☐ "Wrong girl—or boy"
- ☐ Going steady

Brothers and sisters

Getting along with brothers and sisters is a big problem to teen-agers. If you are like most boys and girls, you have conflicting feelings toward

My Friends

- ☐ "The wrong kind"
- ☐ "Too much time spent with them"
- ☐ Not allowed to bring them home

School

- ☐ Grades
- ☐ Too much time on extracurricular activities
- ☐ The courses I've chosen

Money Matters

- ☐ After-school job
- ☐ Allowance
- ☐ Quitting school for a job
- ☐ Extravagance

My Time

- ☐ Curfew hour for dates
- ☐ "Wasting" my time

your brothers and sisters. You love 'em—and you dislike 'em. Sometimes you don't know which way you feel.

Remember what we told you about friction between yourself and your parents. It's normal and it's only temporary. And a certain amount of quarreling and fighting among the junior members of the family is natural, too. Only occasionally do the difficulties carry over into adult life.

Brother-sister scene

Take the Robinson family as an example of how your conflicting feelings toward your brothers and sisters started.

Christine, the first born, was doted upon, admired—the center of everyone's attention. Then along came Joe a couple of years later. Joe needed lots of physical care: feedings, baths, attention. Christine felt neglected, unloved in comparison with baby brother Joe. So she began to compete with him for presents, attention, love—everything he got.

And so the story goes. As new members enter the family, each child feels shoved aside by the latest addition. But the good times the young Robinsons have together, the love they share in common, their feelings of belonging to one another help to offset the early jealousies and hatreds. Not altogether, of course. Some still remain.

As you grow older, your feelings of jealousy and competition aren't quite as simple as Christine's. Nevertheless, many of your squabbles with your brothers and sisters may have their foundations in those long-ago days.

Another clue to brother-sister friction is close association. You know how it would be even with your best friend, whom you picked out yourself. You get along with him fine. But if you were to live with him day after day, under the same roof, sharing the same parents, don't you think some of his little mannerisms, which you overlook now, might become annoying?

A good way to overcome the problems associated with being together constantly is to set aside private "castles" for each member of the family—a place for each person to retreat to and where no one else is allowed. Even a nook in the basement, as long as its privacy is respected, will do.

HINTS ON GETTING ALONG WITH BROTHERS AND SISTERS

1. Recognize and admit some of your hostile feelings. This is often the first step to overcoming them.
 2. Try to go more than half-way in eliminating and ending squabbles.
 3. Try to take a genuine interest in your brothers and sisters—their interests, hopes, ambitions.
 4. Learn to do things with them. Share common interests. Plan enjoyable family occasions.
 5. Don't expect too much love and attention from them.
 6. Accept the idea of "sharing." You're going to have to share lots of things when you grow up, and it's good practice to learn how now.
 7. Try talking out friction points during calm periods in your family circle.
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