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EC77-550 Teens...The Challenging Years

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"TEENS"...

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EXTENSION WORK IN "AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS AND SUBJECTS RELATING THERETO,"
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"Teens" The Challenging Years

(HOW PARENTS AND ADULTS CAN BE HELPFUL)

By Ron Daly
Extension Specialist (Family Life)

The teen years are a challenging time for both young people and their parents. Young people are faced with the task of constructing their own unique identity in a very complex and fast-moving world. They are seeking to answer the questions of "who am I?" and "How do I relate to the world around me?"

They are dealing with many aspects of self in a variety of settings and among differing groups of people. Parents sense the frustration this brings and want to be helpful. But parents face a dilemma: how to help when help is often misunderstood; how to guide when guidance is rejected; how to communicate when there is no one listening.

If parents exercise control they are seen as snoop and domineering. If they let the young people decide for themselves they are accused of being neglecting and uncaring. In other words, they're damned if they do and damned if they don't.

Dr. Haim G. Ginott, in his book, **Between Parent and Teenager**, illustrates the dilemma with the following examples:

Says Arnold, age 16: "I am sick and tired of my father's advice; he always talks about my future. In the meantime, he's ruining my present. I have no confidence in myself. I feel like a failure."

Says Lenard's mother: "I worry about my son. He does not take care of himself. He has always been a sickly child."

Says Lenard, age 16: "My mother likes to play doctor, and she makes me sick. Tired as she may be, if she hears me cough or clean my nose, she turns into a long-distance runner. If I sneeze in the basement, she comes running from the attic.

'God bless you son.'

'What's the matter, have you caught a cold?'

'Let's have a look at you.'

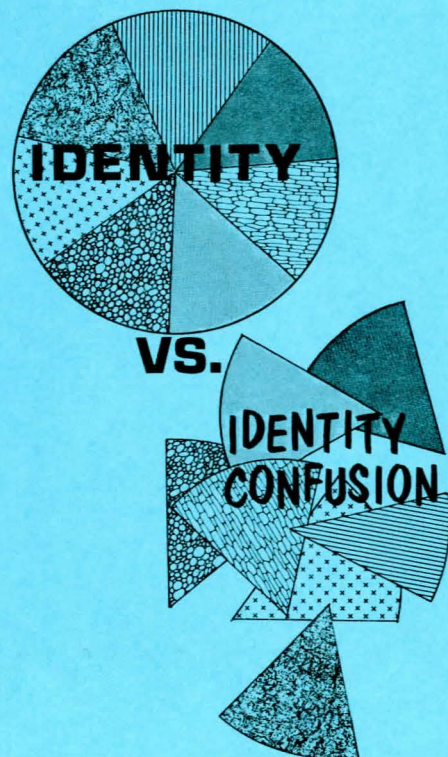
'You don't take care of yourself.' 'You shouldn't stay out so late.'

Mother hovers over me like a helicopter and I'm fed up with her noise and hot air. I think I'm entitled to sneeze without an explanation."

Readiness for adulthood comes about two years later than the adolescent claims and two years before the parent admits. However, all is not hopeless. An understanding of the challenges confronting young people during the teen years and the use of some basic relationship skills can go a long way in helping parents and other adults build bridges, rather than barriers, with young people.

Identity vs Identity Confusion

The major developmental task confronting each teenager is answering the question, "Who am I and how do I relate to the world around me?" Some of the major factors they must deal with include: A. physical development, B. social competence, C. moral conscience, D. intellectual capabilities, E. economics, F. future plans.



Take the area of physical development. This is an awkward age with gangling arms and legs, internal strivings and impulses. Development is often too slow or too fast. "Being out of step," any deviation from the group average is a fear. The late maturing boy suffers most of all. He can easily become the butt of a joke or a scapegoat.

Early maturing boys have assets valued by the peer culture and as a result become more confident. Though teenagers have little to say about the rate of their physical maturation, it definitely affects how they perceive themselves and how they relate to the world.

Sensitivity To Self

Teens are always comparing themselves with the norms. They want to be accepted by their peers. A teen's sense of self is evolving and can be wounded very easily. They are vulnerable to the reactions from others and especially their peers.

The old adage, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names and faces will never hurt me," just isn't true with teenagers. Names and faces are very hurtful and leave their imprint.

Insensitive Toward Others

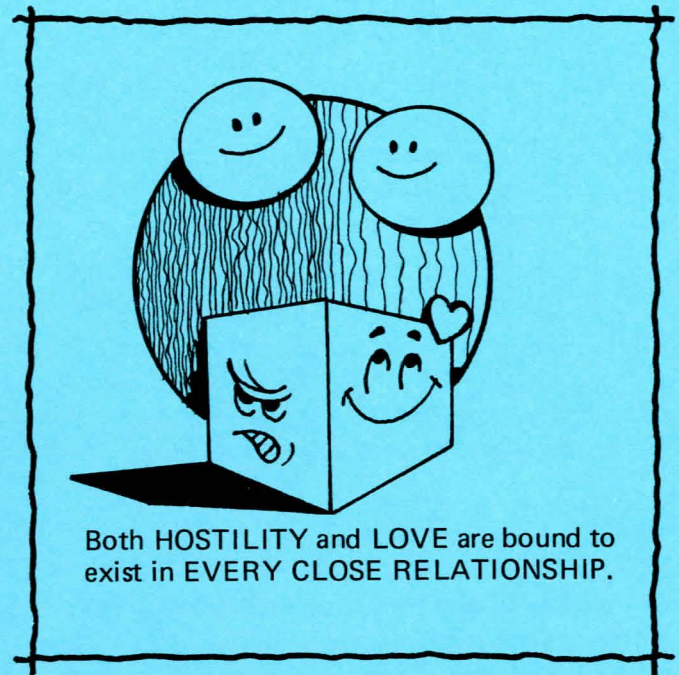
Teens are often wrapped up in their immediate personal concerns and feel their parents are fundamentally ignorant of their situation. To them, parents are living in the past.

It's difficult for teens to tune in to the needs of others. Not because they're bad, but because of the intensity and immediacy of their own needs. They are often too self-involved to be able to tap into the feelings of other people.

A Caution

This does not describe every teenager at all times, but it is descriptive of the experiences of many teens during these years. At times we've all been impressed with the tremendous ability they express in coping with difficult problems and situations.

Our goal is to understand the challenges young people face as they develop during the teen years. And we must realize that much of the behavior that is frustrating to parents and adults is a normal experience for most teenagers.



Both HOSTILITY and LOVE are bound to exist in EVERY CLOSE RELATIONSHIP.

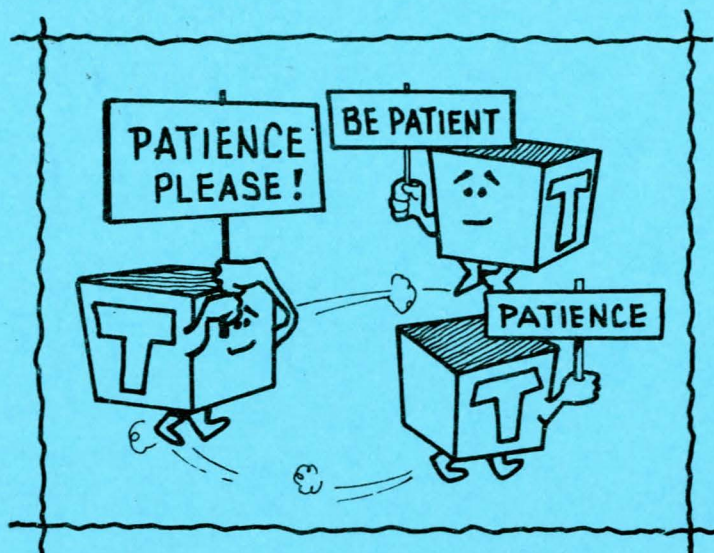
As the teens strive to develop their identities independent of the authority of their parents, *both sides* experience feelings of frustration, outrage, humiliation, resentment and dramatic or even melodramatic despair. When they experience such feelings they should be aware they are normal. These kind of feelings come with the developmental tasks of this age.

For the teens there is uncertainty. "Am I a child or an adult?" Every time they reach for adulthood they are on trial and they are often their most severe judges. The fear of failure is always present.

Parents on the other hand, are unsure where they stand or how they can be most helpful. As indicated earlier they are in a double bind. If they appear too concerned they can easily be considered snoopy or domineering. If they back off too far and let the young people decide for themselves, they can be seen as neglecting or uncaring.

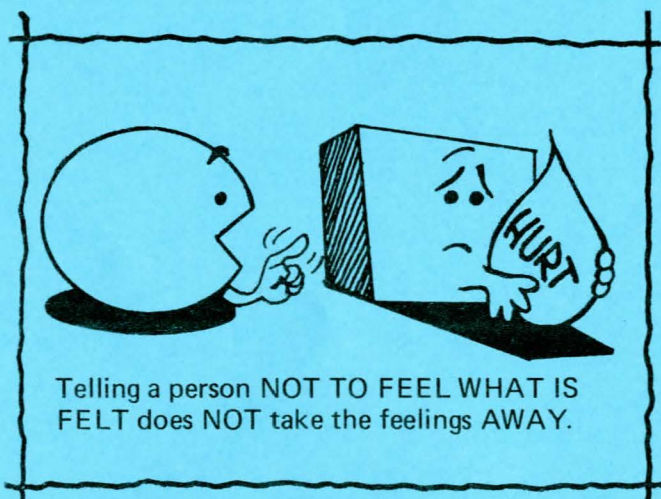
The teen years are *high need* years for young people. Acceptance by their peers is of utmost importance. They make many demands and often give little consideration to parents' needs.

The most helpful attribute an adult can have is patience. The most difficult thing for an adult to do is to be patient.



Counseling Skills

When working or interacting with young people it is important that adults take time to tune in to the young people and hear what they are trying to say. Adults need to hear the essence of their messages and not get side-tracked because of the style or the words they use. Parents need to recognize the uniqueness of each person, and be aware that young people are dealing with issues that affect them in a very personal way.



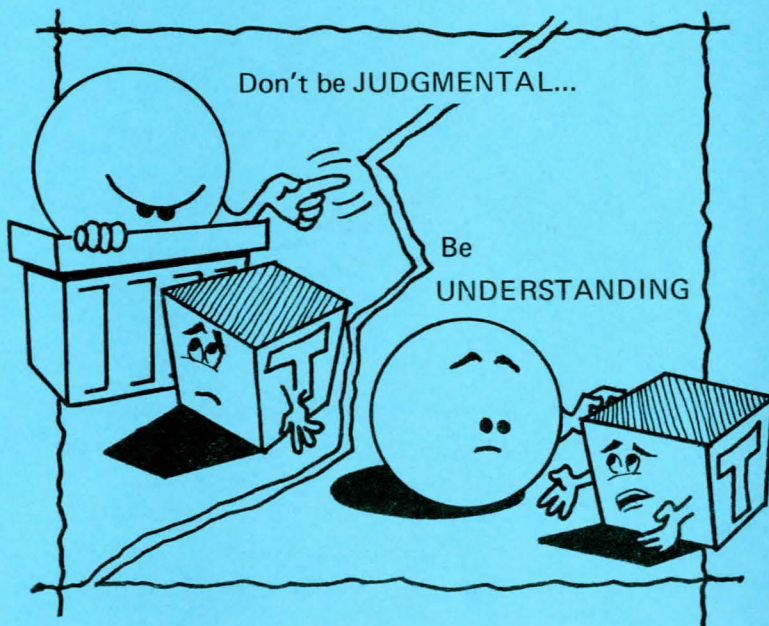
A 4-H member, talking about the challenges he was facing, shared how lonely he was feeling because his best friend had moved away. He commented, "I was really feeling low, I needed to tell some one, to get it out of my system."

Another 4-H member shared how helpful it was when she could go to her parents, with a problem, and they would try to talk it out and help her.

Parents are not always available and sometimes a sensitive adult leader can do wonders for a struggling teenager. A 4-H member speaking to this point said, "There's one person in school who is really helpful, everyone calls her Mom. She jokes around with us and has a very strong youth feeling. She makes you feel at home. If you do something wrong she doesn't put you down. She says, 'Come on now, you know better.' She really lets you know she cares."

People who are effective with young people have developed the characteristics of a good counselor. Their actions communicate to the kids that they care.

Young people do some strange things at times and we often wonder why. If we're not careful it's easy to become the judge, jurors and provider of punishment and fail to recognize the real problem. We need to strive to develop an attitude of understanding and to hold back on being a judge.



Let me share an example of what I mean. I had one of the most obnoxious students I had ever encountered in a class. He did everything he could to control or speak out in the class. He had been elected "Ugly Man" on campus two years in a row.

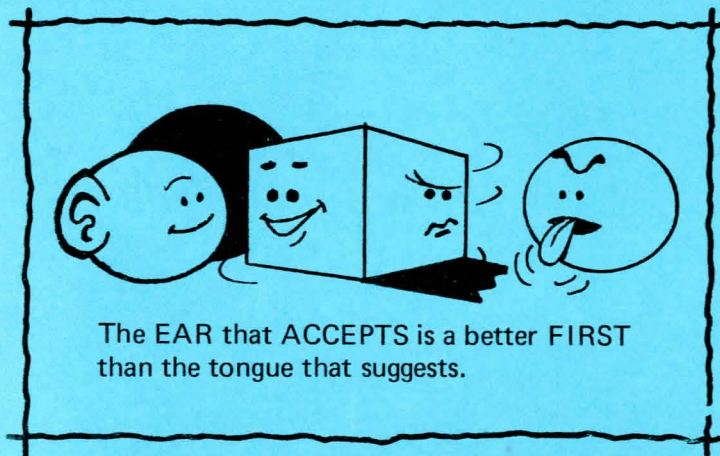
I invited him to my office to work out our differences. As we spent the hour he shared the following. He was reared as the only Orthodox Jew in a school in a small western town. He said, "My dad taught me when I was very young to get people to laugh with me or at me and things wouldn't be so bad." He had learned to play the role of a "joker" at a very early age. I came out of

that session with a new understanding of a person struggling to find his place in a complex society.

Another student shared how much she hated being introduced by her grandmother as "shy little Lucille." For 22 years she was introduced as "shy little Lucille." At age 22, as a junior in college, she was just beginning to break out of the image of "shy little Lucille."

The experiences we have as we are growing up have an accumulative effect. They leave an imprint that can last a long time. Trying to recognize the uniqueness of each person and to realize that their experiences may have been very different than others' is so important.

To be helpful to young people we need to stop our hurried pace and make the effort to understand their world. I think the words of Virginia Satir summarize what adults need to do. She says, "The greatest gift I can give another person is to *see* them, to *hear* them, to *understand* them and to *touch* them."



If we can build bridges of understanding by lending a listening ear, confirming we really care by taking time to gain some understanding, then we're laying the foundation of trust. This trust is essential in all helping relationships.

If we can clearly communicate to young people that we understand the issues and concerns they are confronting, they will be much more willing to listen and learn from what we have to share.

Coaching Skills

As you develop a relationship with young people characterized by understanding and trust,

then coaching skills can be used most effectively. Coaches help young people achieve recognition in activities that have a high status rating in their peer world. They often work on a one-to-one basis to help develop the personal strength of that person. A group of young persons describing what they liked in a club leader said:

They explain how to do it. Then show you how to do it, but they pretty much let you do it on your own, so you can learn. Instead of like some leaders I know who do everything for you and you don't learn anything about it. Others don't give enough direction. I like it when they help you but they still let you do it and learn by yourself.

A leader who is fun to do things with, she isn't harsh on you. She explains things and gives it to you, but she will throw in a few jokes here and there. Or takes you certain places that are fun to go and sort of extra ordinary, they're not part of the book, but something she thinks would help you more in understanding the project. Like field trips.

Just making sure you're doing your things right on your project, making sure you're completing all your requirements. Maybe suggesting little extra things you can do to get more meaning out of what you're doing in 4-H.

It makes a lot of difference if they take the extra time to make sure you are doing everything you can to make the project really worthwhile.

The expectations a coach or any adult has for the young people they work with have a powerful effect. It has been demonstrated in research that the power of expectation alone can influence the behavior of others. The phenomenon has come to be called self-fulfilling prophecy or the Pygmalion effect—the word Pygmalion coming from the play by George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*. The following is Shaw's summary:

...You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a

flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.

Dr. Robert Rosenthal, known for his research on the impact of the self-fulfilling prophecy indicates, "We still don't know exactly how the Pygmalion effect works. But we know that often it does work, and that it has powers that can hinder as well as help the development of others."

The impact of a person's expectations has been demonstrated in a variety of settings. In Rosenthal's study with elementary school children, the teachers were given the names of several children in their rooms described as "intellectual bloomers," children who could be expected to show remarkable gains during the coming year.

In reality the children had been selected randomly and placed in an experimental group or a control group. The real difference was in the mind of the teacher. The supposed "intellectual bloomers" blossomed.

In another situation, the group was made up of boys and girls ages 7 to 14, who were learning to swim at summer camp. Half the instructors were led to think they were dealing with a "high potential" group. Sure enough, their students became better swimmers by the end of their two-week camping period than the other group.

The Pygmalion effect works with our own children. The expectations we hold for them can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We need to encourage them to set high standards and then be there to give them support when the going gets rough.

Listen to what some young people said as they responded to the questions, "If you had a chance to give 4-H leaders one suggestion on what they could do to make them the best 4-H leader in the country, what would you tell the leader?"

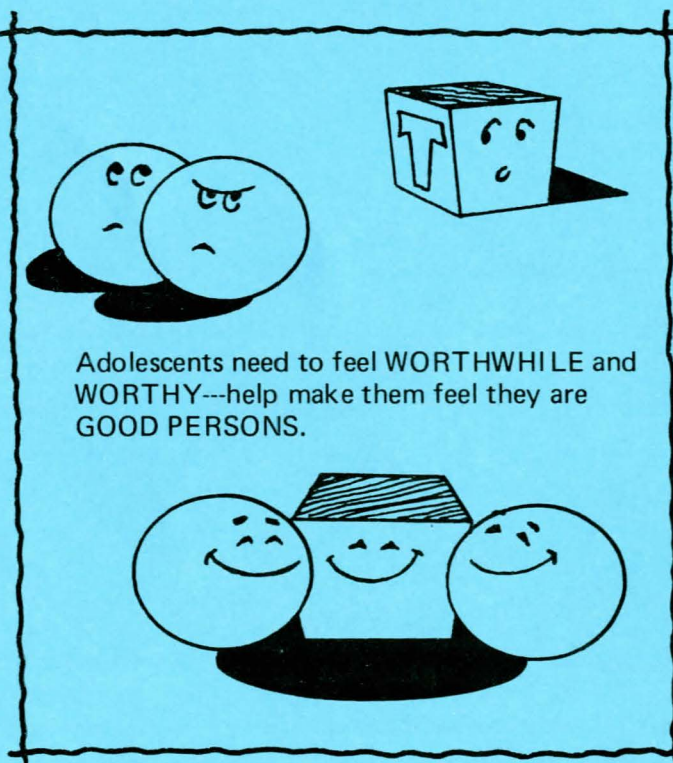
Encouragement, I guess it would have to be. I know there are years when the ribbons are really bad and I really wanted to quit 4-H, but they'd always come up and say, "Listen, you learn something from it and the ribbons don't mean that much; it's what you got out of it." They'd always come for the demonstrations. They'd come and back me. Some of them even followed me to Lincoln, and it just made me feel good to know they were behind me.

I'd tell them to really want to be a leader. To want to do their best. To realize they can really do something to help kids put forth their best effort, so they will be able to do something really good they can appreciate the rest of their lives.

Keeping in mind, what they've all said about ability, I think that a 4-H leader should emphasize oneness with each of the kids in their club; that each one should be treated as an individual and talked to about the projects; to not just hurry up the meeting. A personal word of encouragement or just talking to each of their members, not just the whole group, is real important.

Just to take that word "leader" and do what it says. Lead each one through and treat them as individuals and make sure they get the attention that each one needs. Because each person wants to know if they are doing OK, and they want to know that you like what they are doing and be praised once in awhile.

As a parent or a leader working with youth you should never under-estimate the power your expectations can have in the lives of young people. They may well become self-fulfilling prophecies.



Summary

The teen years really are challenging years for young people and parents alike. If we are not careful, an over-abundance of conflict can emerge.

Young people need to develop a sense of self-respect, of personal appreciation, and of self worth. The counseling skills we mentioned and your care and concern can go a long way in bringing about these kinds of feeling.

Young people also need a balance of self-discipline and responsibility—learning the rewards that come from paying the price to attain their desired goal. Your challenge, encouragement and coaching may be the key to helping them achieve their desired goals.

Parents and adults who work with young people, who take the time to really listen, who make the effort to appreciate the uniqueness of each person, and help and encourage him or her to achieve their best, can really make a difference.

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- Ginott, H. G., **Between Parent and Teenager**. New York: MacMillan, 1969.
- Rosenthal, R., The Pygmalion Effect Lives. **Psychology Today**, Sept. 1973.

