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THE TEENAGE YEARS

Are you proud of your daughter, but wish she would tell you more about what is happening in her life? Are you worried about your son, who is spending more and more time in his bedroom? Are you a foster carer who wants to understand the silence of the teenager who has just come to live with you?

The teenage years are a time of concern for parents and carers from all backgrounds. This book aims to address these concerns, and to offer new ideas about how relationships can be managed and improved where necessary. The book has a focus on communication. There is a strong reason for this. Being able to communicate with your teenager is the key to good relationships. If parents and teenagers can talk to each other, it will be easier to manage the ups and downs of family life. Things will be a lot harder if channels of communication close down during this stage. As one father put it to me: "I'd say the golden rule for parents is: conversation, not confrontation!".

One of the main reasons I called this book: *Why Won't My Teenager Talk to Me?* is that this is a question so often asked when parents of teenagers come together in a group. I have run many groups for parents of young people, and I am always surprised at how often adults believe that communication with their teenager has broken down.

Parents experience a sense that the teenager no longer wishes to talk to them. They believe young people would prefer to talk to their friends. They see that the teenager is intent on pushing them away. This may involve putting a PRIVATE sign on the bedroom door, a refusal to engage in any conversation, or a preoccupation with the messages that are coming in on the smart phone.

When I ask teenagers about this topic they say that communication with parents consists of one of two things. Either they are being

interrogated, or they are being nagged about something they have not done yet, such as their homework. Of course this is not a good basis for communication! I will have a lot more to say about all this later in the book, but, for the moment, here are some initial thoughts about communication:

- Your teenager will talk, but not always at the time of your choosing.
- Your teenager will talk, but not about the things that he or she considers to be private.
- Your teenager will talk, but not if there is a sense that the talk might turn into an interrogation.
- Your teenager will talk, but not if there is a feeling that you are busy, distracted, or likely to be interrupted.

What is the reason for all this? There are particular things about the adolescent stage of life that have a direct impact on communication. First, there are times when teenagers feel that they need to be in control. They will talk, but at their own time, and in their own way. This is partly to do with lack of confidence, but also to do with confusing emotions. Both these factors mean that it is not always easy to talk openly just at the point when a parent wants to have a discussion about something.

Second, it is important to recognise that during these years young people do need a degree of privacy to work things out for themselves. They want to be independent individuals, growing and maturing into adults. No one who is trying to be independent will feel like telling their parents everything that is happening to them. Here is one 15-year-old girl's view of the situation:

My Mum often says to me: "Why don't you talk about your problems?" I say: "I do, I just don't talk to you. I talk to my friends." I have talked to my Mum about things, but not at the time they are happening. I tell her about things after they have happened, after I've sorted it out for myself what's happening. I still think she wants me to tell her, but I can't.

This gives a helpful insight into how a girl might think about talking to her mother. She will talk, but in her time, and after she has sorted things out in her own mind.

Here are some further thoughts about communication between parents and teenagers.

- Communication is a two-way process. It involves listening as well as talking. The more you show you are listening, the more likely it is that the teenager will want to talk to you.
- Communication is a skill. It is something you have to learn. Young people sometimes hang back because they feel that adults are better at communication than they are.
- Communication is much more than the words that come out of your mouth. The message you send will be affected by the way you stand, the gestures you make, and the emotion that is conveyed. It's not only what you say, but also how you say it that matters most.
- A lot of communication today takes place on-line. Young people may feel just as comfortable sending a text or messaging than talking face-to-face. Communication can occur in many different media.

Some important themes are already emerging which will run throughout the book. The teenage years represent a stage in the process of growing up. This means that there are particular behaviours, attitudes, and emotions which are a part of the teenage years. These will all change markedly as the young person grows older and moves towards adulthood.

In the book there will also be a strong emphasis on the fact that relationships go two ways. This is illustrated by the fact that talking and listening go hand in hand. However, it goes further than that. It sounds obvious, but the family is like a system. Each person influences the other. How your teenager behaves will have an impact on you; however, you too are playing your part. What you do, and how you behave, has a direct influence on how your teenager behaves. In this book I will be referring often to the importance of understanding the two-way nature of relationships between parent and teenager.

Why this book?

Although communication plays a big role in this book, there are many equally important topics to be covered here. The world of the teenager is changing almost in front of our eyes. The pressures of the education system, new family structures, changing gender identities, and the opportunities and threats associated with the digital world are all posing challenges for both teenagers and their parents today. New research on the brain, mental health, digital romance, nutrition and eating behaviours, sleep, and learning are all having an effect on

our understanding of how young people are growing up today. This book should help parents and carers learn something of what it is like to be a teenager in the twenty-first century. Here you will find both a framework for understanding this particular stage of life, as well as a guide to some new thinking about adolescent development.

This book is for all parents and carers of teenagers. It is for those who are thinking about the arrival of puberty, and wondering about the changes that they will experience in the family in the coming years. It is for those who are struggling with the “attitude” of a 14- or 15-year-old. These boys and girls will be trying to establish their own independence and show their parents that they can manage on their own. It is for those who are worried about the impact of social media, and struggle to know how to react to the constant use of smart phones and other devices.

This book is for parents who are facing divorce or separation. They will be looking for advice about how to support and protect their teenagers from the effects of these changes. It is also for those who have serious worries about their teenagers, whether these are to do with bullying, sex, peer pressure, eating disorders, drugs and alcohol, or teenage pregnancy. Most important of all, this is a book:

- to help you navigate the teenage years,
- to help you become a resilient parent,
- to help you talk, and listen, to your teenager.

Being a parent of a teenager can be tough. One mother I talked to put it like this.

It’s very difficult to learn to be a parent of a teenager. It’s the most under-rated job in the world. It’s easier to be a brain surgeon than to be a really good parent!

Most families who were interviewed as a background to this book mentioned some challenges associated with the teenage years. Some parents were sad at the loss of a close relationship with their son or daughter. Others were angry about the constant arguments and rejection of parental advice. However, it is also important to say that many parents found these years rewarding. They pointed to the energy and the enthusiasm of their teenagers. Although they may have experienced irritation, conflict, and worry too, they were able to find rewards in seeing their children gradually move to a more adult stage of life.

Yet no one finds it easy to be a parent of a teenager. What is the right way to be a parent at this stage? How strict or easy-going should you be? What is the best way to support a teenager who is pushing you away? What do you do if homework is being ignored, or if a young person is up half the night on the phone or internet? What is the best way to communicate with someone who seems not to be listening?

It's frustrating because you want to advise them, but they don't really want to know. And I suppose it's that learning that in some ways they've just got to learn by their own mistakes, but you don't really want them to make mistakes, so you try to protect them from that. But at the same time you've got to let them get on with it.

(Mother of three teenagers)

This mother gets to the heart of every parent's dilemma: when to step in, and when to hold back? You may be clear about the role of a parent in the early years, but how should you manage the teenage years? This is a dilemma I will explore in detail in later chapters.

There are three important elements to this book. These are:

- an original framework for parenting teenagers,
- the voices of parents themselves,
- new insights into topics such as brain development, sleep, social media, gender identity, and other important topics.

An original framework for parenting

In Chapters 3 to 8 of this book I will be outlining an original framework for parenting that will be helpful for those living with teenagers. The ideas behind the framework all stem from highly respected research findings. I call this framework "STAGE".

I have given the framework this name because I want to emphasise the point that the teenage years are a process, a time of change and development. Things will alter gradually over time, and the difficult stage – if it is a difficult stage – will not last forever. There are also particular features of this stage that make it different from any other.

Another reason for calling it "STAGE" is because each of the letters in the word STAGE represents a different aspect of parenting.

S stands for the Significance of parents. Parents of teenagers are the most significant people in the life of the young person. Parents

may think they are not important any more, but their role is absolutely crucial. Parents of teenagers matter just as much as parents of younger children, they just matter in a different way.

T stands for Two-way communication. As I have noted, communication between parents and teenagers is a two-way process. Parents may think they are the ones who need to do the talking, but listening is just as important. Young people have as much influence as adults in determining how each communicates with the other. Both adults and young people play their part. Recognising and taking account of this two-way process will help to achieve improved communication.

A stands for Authority. One of the most difficult aspects of parenting is to know how to exercise parental authority. What boundaries and structures are needed for teenagers? Should punishment be used, and if so, what punishments make sense? How is it possible to retain parental authority, while letting go at the same time? I will be suggesting what is called “authoritative parenting” as the most appropriate way to exercise authority.

G stands for Generation gap. I include this idea because each generation of teenagers has a different set of challenges and pressures to deal with. It is easy for parents to assume that what was right for them will also be right for their children. However, things are very different today compared with 40 years ago. As a result, young people of this generation have to make different choices from those made by their parents.

E stands for Emotion. Emotion plays an important part in affecting relationships between parents and teenagers. Whether it is anxiety, anger, sadness, regret, envy, or guilt, all these feelings influence how parents manage the situation with teenagers. Being aware of your feelings, and finding ways of dealing with them, are important steps on the way to having better relationships in the family.

This is a very brief introduction to the ideas behind “STAGE”. All the ideas contained within the framework can lead to more effective parenting, and to better relationships between you and your teenager. The first half of this book will be devoted to outlining the framework. This is an original way of thinking about parenting during the teenage years.

The voices of parents

Before writing this book, I arranged for interviews to be carried out with parents of teenagers in many different circumstances. Both

mothers and fathers were included, as well as step-parents and foster carers. Parents from different ethnic backgrounds talked to us, as did those having serious problems with their teenage sons and daughters. The voices of these parents have been used as much as possible throughout the book. I will also include the views of some teenagers. A group of young people were asked their thoughts on parents, on friends, and on what it is like to be a teenager today. Where appropriate I will add in their voices too.

Why is this important? There are three good reasons for including the views of parents and teenagers in this book. The first will be obvious already. Even the few quotes used so far pinpoint experiences that make us all feel: "I know just what she means!" Parents' voices will help readers to engage with this book, and bring what happens in real families to the page.

Second, some parents who attend parenting groups report that they feel alone and isolated. They believe that their teenager is the worst ever, that no parent can be going through such a bad time. And when they hear other parents talk in the group they are surprised, and re-assured, to find that other families are just the same. They learn that they are not alone, and that the problems they are facing are the same as those faced by many other parents. Being able to read about the experiences of other parents in this book should help in much the same way.

Third, it is useful to learn how other parents have managed. They will have practical suggestions to make, and be able to reflect on their experiences. I will make use of these experiences, and draw on them to explore what it is like living with teenagers. The intention of this book is to help you navigate the teenage years. The experiences of real families will be a valuable part of this process.

New research

Over the last 10 years or so some important and useful information from research on teenagers has become available. I want to make sure that this research forms part of the book. This new knowledge about teenagers can help us understand them better. Even more important, we can make use of this information to develop practical ideas about how to manage family life with a teenager.

Throughout the book I will mention what I consider to be important new knowledge about adolescence. At this point I will mention just three examples to give you a sense of what I mean. The first example has to do with the adolescent brain. The development

of scanning techniques has made it possible to learn what happens in the brain at different stages of life. One of the most striking results stemming from the use of these new techniques is the conclusion that there is rapid and fundamental change in the brain during the teenage years. This has major implications for understanding behaviour, and has helped us make sense of some of the more puzzling features of adolescence.

A second example has to do with sleep. It has been quite an eye-opener to discover that the hormones that control sleep patterns are not the same in adolescence as they are in children or adults. If young people liked to stay up late at night, or resisted getting up in the morning, parents tended to put this down to teenagers just being difficult. Now we have learnt that there is a biological reason why teenage sleep patterns are different from those of other age groups.

Recent research has also highlighted that sleep plays an important role in learning and memory. The brain remains active during sleep, and much of what has happened during the day is processed and consolidated at night. This finding has emphasised just how important good sleep is for young people. They are at a period in their lives when learning is a key activity. Exam performance matters today more than it ever has, and so getting enough sleep can really make all the difference.

The last example I will choose here has to do with the way teenagers manage communication between themselves and their parents. Fascinating research on what is called “information management” has shown how teenagers make decisions about what to share with parents and what to hold back. This research helps to underline the fact that communication is a two-way process. If we are looking for ways of improving communication between parents and teenagers, then the results of research on “information management” will be of great help.

Negative attitudes to teenagers

A striking thing about teenagers is that they are often seen in a very negative light. Many adults expect teenagers to cause problems. They are perceived as trouble, and naturally this has an influence on how adults and young people relate to each other. One mother expressed it like this:

It seems to me that people make a whole host of assumptions about teenagers. When I tell people I have teenage children they assume I must have problems.

Another mother explained how her husband had feared the worst.

My husband, he kept talking about “Oooh! We’ll see what happens when she turns into a teenager”. He was always going: “Oh God, what’s going to happen?”. And he was almost coming from a place of anticipating the worst, and almost creating an illusion of a bad situation, you know. And she actually said to him: “I really hate it when I hear you talking to other grown-ups about teenagers, and it’s almost like you’re expecting me to become bad!”.

Attitudes such as this interfere with good relationships. They also interfere with communication. If you start by believing that a teenager is going to cause a problem, it is more difficult to have a sensible conversation. Thinking about our attitudes to teenagers is the first step on the road to easier and better communication.

Conclusion: why talking matters

It is probably an obvious thing to say, but talking matters because effective parenting is not possible without it. If communication is difficult you will not be able to find out what matters to your teenager. You will not be able to discover what your teenager thinks is important or what your teenager is worried about. You will not be able to say that he or she is special for you, that you care about what is happening, that you love your teenager. Perhaps most important of all, you will not be able to find out what your teenager needs at his or her particular age and stage.

Many parents find talking to teenagers difficult. Because adults want to know what is happening, they tend to ask questions. “How did you get on at school today?”, “What happened at your friend’s house?”, “How was the party last night?” To a teenager this may seem like interrogation, and no one likes being interrogated.

I have already pointed out that listening is as important as talking. However, it is not always clear how to listen. You cannot just say: “OK, here I am. I am listening now. What do you want to say?”. That is obviously ridiculous. So how is it best to talk and listen?

I will have a lot more to say about this later, but for the present here are five things to think about as you read through the book.

- **Timing.** Choose your time. You will know when a young person feels like talking, and when they don’t. In a car, or late at night

are often good times to talk. Be guided by the teenager. Hold back when it does not feel right, and be patient. Rest assured that there will be times when your teenager will want to talk.

- Useful hooks. It is sometimes possible to use hooks like news items, events that are occurring in soap operas, or films or TV programmes to start a discussion. Talking about things that are happening to other people outside the home may be easier than talking about more personal things.
- Share. Be willing to talk about yourself. People often find it easier to talk if the other person discloses a little about themselves. Rather than asking the other person a direct question about themselves, you could try talking a little about what is happening to you. This will enable the other person to open up, and share something with you.
- Act. Sometimes actions can help to make communication easier. Offering to make a young person a snack or a cup of tea may be a better way to start a conversation than asking a direct question.
- Listen. Communication goes two ways. Talking and listening go hand in hand. The more you show you are listening, the more the other person will talk.

You will find more ideas about communication and further suggestions for ways to talk to your teenager in Chapter 5, and in the final chapter of the book. Before I get to these ideas I will spend some time outlining the physical and emotional changes that young people experience. In the next chapter I will discuss the changing brain.

The more adults understand what happens in the brain at this time, the easier it will be to manage relationships. Having a good sense of what underpins the growing up process is an essential part of effective parenting.