

Parenting Teenagers: When to Be There and When to Stay Away

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

When our children first come into the world, we can't get enough of them! We want to hold them, cuddle and cradle them, keep them safe from the evil of the outside world. They're perfect – and we want to keep them that way.

Of course, this “perfect period” only really lasts a few days . . . maybe a couple of weeks, tops. (Then, they start developing verbal and motor skills, prompting many parents to wonder what it was about these “miracles” that charmed them so not that long ago. ☺)

As your kids move through toddler hood into adolescence, one constant remains – they regard your presence as a sign of caring and connectedness. I like to call this phenomenon “the power of *being there*.”

I realize this may sound overly simple, but don't underestimate the positive message you are giving your kids by watching all those baseball or soccer games, driving them across country on a long family vacation, or the hundreds of other ways you are present in their lives (homework, church, etc).

Now, a funny thing happens to children once they reach the teenage years – they don't seem to want their parents around all that much. Sure, they *need* to have your presence in their lives. They just don't want to be *reminded* of that fact.

This comes as anywhere from a mild surprise to a major shock to parents who are watching their fun-loving 12-year-old become a sullen, more serious 13-year-old seemingly overnight. So, if I may, let me point out a few helpful ways you can still be a part of your teenager's life without pushing him or her away in the process.

1. **Remember that just because a teenager doesn't say, “I love you” as much as they used to doesn't mean they don't love their parents anymore.** They just don't want to say it at school “in front of the guys” . . . or to shout it out the car window as their bus pulls away for church camp.
2. **Keep in mind that, one-day, when your kids are grown up with families of their own, you will be good friends with them.** Until then, Mom and Dad – resist the temptation to want to be “one of the guys” (or “girls”) with your teenager. Their peers are their number one influence right now – and you definitely need to know who these “friends” are. But *you* can't be one of them . . . so *don't*.
3. **Don't forget that your job as a parent is a calling – so treat your kids like the gifts from God that they are.** This one will help you through on the long, lonely days when it seems like your teenager really doesn't care about you anymore. The

fact is, he or she quite possibly *will* feel that way at times – but they’ll get over it. Remember what it was like to be 13? 14? 17? Keep that in mind and give your child a healthy amount of “space” when appropriate.

4. **The power of “being there” means you always will – even when it might seem impossible.** Max Lucado tells a story about a powerful bond between a father and son that was severely tested as the result of a devastating earthquake in the former Soviet Armenia in 1989. In all of four minutes, an entire nation was flattened leaving 38,000 people dead. Moments after the deadly tremor ceased, a father raced to an elementary school to save his son. When he arrived, he saw that the building had been leveled. Looking at the mass of rubble, he remembered a promise that he had made to his child – *“No matter what happens, I’ll always be there for you.”* For 38 wrenching hours, he pulled boulder after boulder away in search of his son until finally, he heard his voice. *“Arman! Arman!”* he called. A voice answered – *“Dad – it’s me!”* Then the boy added these priceless words – *“I told the other kids not to worry. I told them, if you were alive, you’d save me and when you saved me, they’d be saved, too. Because you promised, ‘No matter what, I’ll always be there for you!’”*

Young children who grow up believing and knowing that their parents will always be there for them can face anything – whether it is a horrific natural disaster or the agonizing years known as adolescence. Being there for your kids when they’re young gives them the sense that you’ll still “be there” for them when they’re older . . . in their hearts, at least – not hugging them goodbye in front of the movie theater.

(Excerpted from [The 10 Building Blocks for a Happy Family](#) by Jim Burns, Ph.D. [Click here](#) for more information on how your family can benefit from this useful publication.)

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