

EVOLVING PARENTHOOD

If you are a parent one thing is for sure, your relationship with your child will change. As children outgrow the cuteness factor, they will also outgrow the awe in which they hold you. As they get bigger, so too will their perspective. They will begin to question you and what you stand for, and finally your little angel will realize that you are (in the words of my daughter), “but a mere human.” There are few things in life you can rely upon as surely as this. Unfortunately, many of us have a difficult time with it, challenged as we are by navigating through hormone changes (our child’s and our own), questions of discipline, responsibilities, values, control vs. guidance, and the inevitable ‘letting go’.

Being a coach in the field of stress management and having developed Applied Emotional Mastery over the course of more than a decade, I have had the opportunity of working with hundreds of parents going through this process. Added to my own experience as a mother of 29 years, this has led me to identify five key pointers to help parents with the transition of their children going through individuation into adulthood.

1. **Be the Parent – not a buddy.** Every young person needs his or her ‘boundary-setter’ and guide more than anyone, and you are it!

One client of mine came to me because her 14 year old son was ‘out of control’. He had been coming home late, not keeping his commitments and was increasingly sassy towards his mother. His grades were lower than ever and he had skipped school on several occasions. After she had described the situation, it became evident that she had allowed her son to get away with behavior that in her own mind was unacceptable. She had been inconsistent with her rules, not always enforcing them, and giving in to her son’s nagging - which he would do when he wanted a favour! Having the desire to be a ‘cool mom’ and a friend to her son, she had basically relinquished her role as his guide, allowing him to cross her ‘bottom line’ of what was acceptable to her as his mother. As soon as she understood what she had allowed to happen, she mapped out a plan for change. She began by getting clear about her own values and the values she wanted to impart to her son. She continued by writing down her rules and then going through them with her son, explaining her reason or value behind each rule. In the weeks that followed, she became consistent in sticking to them, ensuring that consequences were carried out when he broke the rules (including being rude and sassy). In short, she held

him responsible for his actions. After his initial protests, her son adjusted and soon they had a much more amiable relationship than they had experienced for years. She was delighted with her regained role as ‘the parent’, and her son – well, when I asked him what he thought, he grinned and replied, “It’s cool to know I have a mom who loves me enough to call me on my s...t!”

2. Listen – Your child is a unique individual who deserves to have his own thoughts and feelings validated, and to be *fully* listened to by his parent every day, for at least 10 or 20 minutes. Set aside time every day to give your child your full and complete attention, without judgment.

A) *Don’t multitask* - Your child will not feel heard if you are making a list, checking e-mails or messages, or chopping vegetables while he speaks.

B) *Stay focused* – Turn off the TV and the computer - and let the answering service pick up the phone calls.

C) *Stay in the moment* – Don’t watch the clock. Forget about your own worries and distractions. Try to remain fully present.

If you do this daily when your child is young, it will carry you through a great deal when he is older!

3. Allow your child to be who (s)he is. – Your child is not here to live up to your expectations. If you sometimes feel frustrated with the differences between you and your child, try to *appreciate* the differences, and look for creative ways to enjoy each other.

A family I worked with in Hawaii loved the ocean. They would spend all day swimming and surfing whenever they could – except for their daughter. She was apprehensive of the ocean at best, and would much rather be reading or painting at home. The more the parents pushed her to enjoy the ocean, the more stubbornly she refused. When they finally decided to appreciate her uniqueness, it helped them change their perspectives. Creative ideas followed and they ended up with a parasol, an easel and a basket full of paints and books accompanying them to the beach. Their daughter did what she loved,

at the beach - painting her family playing in the waves. Eventually, when the pressure was off, she found her own way into the warm waters! Today, she can surf with the best of them!

4. Always acknowledge your child's feelings. – Even if you don't understand the feelings, acknowledge what you see and validate it.

When my daughter was homeschooling as a teenager, she would worry about her learning curve and about not being able to compare herself to others. If I responded by telling her not to worry, we would invariably have an argument about whether she had a right to worry. If, on the other hand, I told her that I could understand her concern, it would lead to her sharing further what she was feeling and thinking. She would then feel validated, and I could more objectively support her to find solutions to her concerns.

5. Don't take it personally – If your child blames you for her problems or is yelling at you, you may feel hurt. Nevertheless, try to stay objective. Acknowledge your emotions *to yourself* and take responsibility for managing your own feelings. Don't add to the tension by projecting your emotions onto the situation. Remind yourself that whatever the problem is, it is not the end of the world and will eventually be solved. Your child may be just doing what nature intends – individuating. That's her job. *Your* job is to create and sustain a safe environment – physically, mentally, and emotionally, - for your child to blossom into his or her own unique self.

When I asked my now adult daughter if *she* had five pointers – from the young person's perspective - to help parents with the transition of their children into adulthood, she looked at me for a moment and said, "One, love, two, love, three, more love, four love, and five, show them your love."

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