A Peaceful Adolescence

The teen years don’t have to be a time of family storm and stress. Most kids do just fine and now psychologists are finding out why that is.

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At 17, Amanda Hund is a straight-A student who loves competing in horse shows. The high school junior from Willmar, Minn., belongs to her school’s band, orchestra and choir. She regularly volunteers through her church and recently spent a week working in an orphanage in Jamaica. Usually, however, she’s closer to home, where her family eats dinner together every night. She also has a weekly breakfast date with her father, a doctor, at a local coffee shop. Amanda credits her parents for her relatively easy ride through adolescence. “My parents didn’t shout the small stuff,” she says. “They were always very open. You could ask any question.”

Is the Hund family for real? Didn’t they get the memo that says teens and their parents are supposed to be at odds until . . . well, until forever? Actually, they’re very much for real, and according to scientists who study the transition to adulthood, they represent the average family’s experience more accurately than all those scary TV movies about out-of-control teens. “Research shows that most young people go through adolescence having good relationships with their parents, adopting attitudes and values consistent with their parents’ and end up getting out of the adolescent period and achieving good citizens,” says Richard Lerner, Bergstrom chair of applied developmental science at Tufts University. This shouldn’t be news—but it is, largely because of widespread misunderstanding of what happens during the teen years. It’s a time of transition, just like the first year of parenthood or menopause. And although there are dramatic hormonal and physical changes during this period, catastrophe is certainly not preordained. A lot depends on youngsters’ innate natures combined with the emotional and social support they get from the adults around them. In other words, parents do matter.

The roots of misconceptions about teenagers go back to the way psychologists framed the field of adolescent development a century ago. They were primarily looking for explanations of why things went wrong. Before long, the idea that this phase was a period of storm and stress made its way into the popular consciousness. But in the last 15 years, developmental scientists have begun to re-examine these assumptions. Instead of focusing on kids who battle their way through the teen years, they’re studying the dynamics of success.

At the head of the pack are Lerner and his colleagues, who are in the midst of a major project that many other researchers are following closely. It’s a six-year longitudinal study of exactly what it takes to turn out OK and what adults can do to nurture those behaviors. “Parents and sometimes kids themselves often talk about positive development as the absence of bad,” says Lerner. “What we’re trying to do is present a different vision and a different vocabulary for young people and parents.”

The first conclusions from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, published in the February issue of The Journal of Early Adolescence, show that there are quantifiable personality traits possessed by all adolescents who manage to get to adulthood without major problems. Psychologists have labeled these traits “the 5 Cs”: competence, confidence, connection, character and caring. These characteristics theoretically lead to a sixth C, contribution (similar to civic engagement). The nomenclature grows out of observations in recent years by a number of clinicians, Lerner says, but his study is the first time researchers have measured how these characteristics influence successful growth.

The 5 Cs are interconnected, not isolated traits, Lerner says. For example, competence refers not just to academic ability but also to social and vocational skills. Confidence includes self-esteem as well as the belief that you can make a difference in the world. The value of the study, Lerner says, is that when it is completed next year, researchers will have a way to quantify these characteristics and eventually determine what specific social and educational programs foster them.

During these years, parents should stay involved as they help kids move on.

In the meantime, parents can learn a lot from this rethinking of the teen years. Don’t automatically assume that your kids become alien beings when they leave middle school. They still care what their parents think and they still need love and guidance—although in a different form. Temple University psychology
professor Laurence Steinberg, author of *The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting*, compares raising kids to building a boat that you eventually launch. Parents have to build a strong underpinning so their kids are equipped to face whatever’s ahead. In the teen years, that means staying involved as you slowly let go. “One of the things that’s natural in adolescence is that kids are going to pull away from their parents as they become increasingly interested in peers,” says Steinberg. “It’s important for parents to hang in there, for them not to pull back in response to that.”

Communication is critical. “Stay in touch with your kids and make sure they feel valued and appreciated,” advises Saniya Luthar, professor of clinical and developmental psychology at Columbia University. Even if they roll their eyes when you try to hug them, they still need direct displays of affection, she says. They also need help figuring out goals and limits. Parents should monitor their kids’ activities and get to know their friends. Luthar says parents should still be disciplinarians and set standards such as curfews. Then teens need to know that infractions will be met with consistent consequences.

Adolescents are often critical of their parents but they’re also watching them closely for clues on how to function in the outside world. Daniel Perkins, associate professor of family and youth resiliency at Penn State, says he and his wife take their twins to the local Ronald McDonald House and serve dinner to say thank you for time the family spent there when the children had health problems after birth. “What we’ve done already is set up the notion that we were blessed and need to give back, even if it’s in a small way.” That kind of example sets a standard youngsters remember, even if it seems like they’re not paying attention.

**Teens should build support webs of friends and adults.**

Parents should provide opportunities for kids to explore the world and even find a calling. Teens who have a passion for something are more likely to thrive. “They have a sense of purpose beyond day-to-day teenage life,” says David Marcus, author of *What It Takes to Pull Me Through*. Often, he says, kids who were enthusiastic about something in middle school lose enthusiasm in high school because the competition gets tougher and they’re not as confident. Parents need to step in and help young people find other outlets. The best way to do that is to regularly spend uninterrupted time with teens (no cell phones). Kids also need to feel connected to other adults they trust and to their communities. Teens who get into trouble are “drifting,” he says. “They don’t have a web of people watching out for them.”

At some point during these years, teenagers should also be learning to build their own support networks—a skill that will be even more important when they’re on their own. Connie Flanagan, a professor of youth civic development at Penn State, examines how kids look out for one another. “What we’re interested in is how they help one another avoid harm,” she says. In one of her focus groups, some teenage girls mentioned that they decided none would drink from an open can at a party because they wouldn’t know for sure what they were drinking. “Even though you are experimenting, you’re essentially doing it in a way that you protect one another,” Flanagan says. Kids who don’t make those kinds of connections are more likely to get in trouble because there’s no one their own age or older to stop them from going too far. Like any other stage of life, adolescence can be tough. But teens and families can get through it—as long as they stick together.

With Julie Scelfo