



Myths and realities in adolescence

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Adolescence has long been a synonym for trouble in our society. We know that the road from childhood to adulthood is stormy and it is a major transitional period in life. Adolescents need love and trust many teenagers worry about whether their parents will continue to love them when they are older. They want to make sure whether you still maintain your authority over them. As long as you maintain rigid authority over your adolescent children, you cannot maintain a loving relationship. That is the bottom line.

How can you remain close with you adolescent? Most teenagers would like to spend more time, not less time, you spend with them when they were little. To get to know the teenager you need to spend time with them perhaps individually and talk through. If you show some genuine interest in what is happening in your child's life, he/she is much more likely to open up. When I was talking about parenting with a friend of mine in Perth a few years ago, I asked what sorts of dad are you? His immediate reply was 'my son is a surgeon and I was always a friend of him, not a dad to him!' If you maintain authority and not willing to talk about matters or issues which are more relevant to the changes in adolescence, your child will opt to his peers or significant others to talk about his concerns. If you start talking about 'When are you going to clean the toilets?' or 'How was your day today?' and 'That was good', or 'That is interesting?' and finish the conversation, he will lose interest in establishing any sensible conversation with you. You need to start the conversation with an issue or matter which is very close to teenage attitudes, or feelings. When parents show respect for their teenager's point of view, they are more likely to discuss anything including family rules and regulations. If you suddenly say 'We must talk', the talk is doomed to fail before you start!

The problem that often we hear is the inability of the parents to engage in a productive dis-

cussion with adolescents. Parents play the habitual power game with children with rigid notions of right and wrong. They are very reluctant to say 'sorry' to their children in Sinhalese or English even if it is absolutely necessary. But ironically, parents expect their children to say 'sorry' every time it needs! There is no substitute for a productive conversation which can be used to resolve many problems in adolescence. What is most useful time for conversation? Perhaps meal times are the best together with picnic times, and social outings. What you need to create is an environment where all of you could discuss matters, express feelings and build up confidence both in parents and children. By virtue of nature, we are not very good listeners when it comes to parenting so that we need to develop listening skills before we get on to the problem resolution.

Many sociologists and psychologists believe that as parents, you need to maintain some authority over your children. That was a historical fact and truth throughout the mankind and is still valid in many respects. Parents and adolescents are fundamentally different and parents still need you as a teenager and your teenager wants you as a dad or mum, not as a colleague. It is not appropriate to dump all of your family problems, sexual problems or economic difficulties onto your teenage son or daughter.

Parents and adolescent should also be clear about family rules, particularly rules that relate to physical and emotional safety of the teenager. There are some areas which parents should not compromise with their teenagers. For example, teenage parties where there are no parents, sleep overs, or going out with teenagers without parental knowledge. Good teenagers may not challenge these rules if you draw the lines very carefully.

We come from a very patriarchal society in south Asia where dependency relationship on parents is the norm of entire social fabric. In simple terms, children need to listen to parents, and they need to behave, dress, study and get marry in a way that complies with parent's aspirations. They seem to believe that by complying with parent's guidance and aspirations, children will succeed in every sphere of life. But unfortunately, parents can sometimes become the problem rather than the solution. Some parents expect them to do a list of activities; go to bed early, to get out of bed early each day, to do their homework, not to watch TV too much, to stay home most of the time, to get permission to go out, to inform the parents about new friend/relationships etc. I am not against some of these prepositions, but imagine what will happen to your child if they are deprived of the opportunity to take on responsibilities on their own. In a few years time, they are the ones who sit the exams, plan their future, and take on important decisions in life. May be, you did every thing in good faith but you gave them very little opportunity to take responsibility which is the most important thing in their life.



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