



■ Dr Aju Abraham

# Help your teenager through the adolescent transition

**H**ow can you stop your teenager from making a mistake when you know it is a mistake? The straight forward answer to this is that you cannot stop them entirely from making mistakes. The best thing probably you could do, most of the time, is to limit the damage. You will understand this better if you reflect upon your years of adolescent conflicts. To know the reasons behind this difficulty, you should also refer to my last column, where I wrote about the development of brain from childhood through to adult life.

Adolescence is a period when the brain goes through a transition period from an immature state to a mature state. This is the time when teenagers should be exercising their brain with skilful activities such as fine-tuning their football or tennis skills, enhancing their music skills, improving their mathematics skills etc., instead of sitting idle on the couch and watching the television. This is also a developmental phase that is characterised by elevated drive towards exploration of unknown elements in the environment, regardless of their risk potential. It is recognised that adolescence is the healthiest and the most resilient period of a person's lifespan. So this is the phase when teenagers should be exploring their world with an aim to acquire new experiences of the world around them. However, this is also a very vulnerable time with a significant increase in the overall morbidity and mortality rates compared to childhood. This is primarily related to problems with the control of behaviour and emotion leading to an increase in the rates of accidents, suicide, homicide, depression, alcohol & substance use, violence, reckless behaviours, eating disorders, health problems related to risky sexual behaviour etc. This is a phase when

impulsivity interrupts reasoning before involving in a risky behaviour. The emotional arousal that an adolescent is vulnerable of going through makes them more constricted in their thinking & limits them in their number of choices in a particular situation. Quite often, the experiences of novel situations rather than the implications of the experience are the priority for them.



Most people go through a risk evaluation of your likely behaviours before you get caught up in a situation. This involves knowing: What could go wrong in a situation? How likely is it that it would go wrong for you? How bad would it be if it goes wrong? At a very young age, children can only think of the immediate rewards behind a decision. So they make very straight forward decisions where the choices are very easy and results in immediate rewards. Whereas, adults are able to weigh up the pros and cons of a decision and make a decision based on the probability of the pros and the cons which may occur following the decision. In adolescents it is somewhere in between and it depends on their intellectual capacity and maturity of their brain. Whilst they may know the risks involved in their decision, generally they are unlikely to think that it is going to happen to them. Compared to an adult they are more likely to consider that it is not so bad even if the risky outcome occurs to them. This creates a

dilemma of how much freedom you give your teenager.

There is no tailor-made approach to helping your teenager achieve success in manoeuvring through the complicated stages of adolescence. The approach should very much depend on the intellectual capacity and the maturity level of your teenager. There will invariably be mistakes, but it is better to make small mistakes whilst they acquire the knowledge and skills for bigger things in life. If you stop them from exploring their world, due to your fear of mistakes happening, they will never learn to be independent and they will miss most of the opportunities to develop themselves in to a fine young adult.

Some key pointers towards helping your teenager are: A) Encourage healthy discussions in the family. B) Accept that your teenager could make mistakes and stop reacting harshly to those mistakes. (They might already be feeling bad about it and your judgmental approach is not going to make things any better). C) Rather than criticizing your teenager, try and give examples from your life where you might have made similar mistakes and what you learned from it. (By this approach you are more likely to encourage them to be honest with you).

With these approaches, you are more likely to be there to support them early enough, when they start having some trouble in their life. This is a much better position to be in as parents, rather than to be totally surprised and shocked to know that you are one of the last few people to know of their crisis situation. One final reminder is to remember that your teenager is not perfect, just like you were not perfect when you were his/her age.

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