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Intergenerational dialogue or full void? Rules for parenting teenagers

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There is a widespread agreement on the matter that the family unit continues to be the primary and best structure for developing healthy, correct, natural and loving relationships across generations. Consequently, in the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, the interaction within the family structure is particularly important. When young people are growing up, they generally take over the cultural norms and values of their parents and grandparents, and project them onto the outside world. Therefore, the family atmosphere is of particular importance in the socialization process of the young people, affecting the well being of the entire society.

The family is also the place where Human Rights are taught and transmitted.¹ Who wouldn't share that this statement is especially true in families where children, siblings, grandchildren... are born and remain free and equal in dignity and rights, just because they are human beings and they live in a community characterized by love and respect? How could a child not be considered as custodian and holder of fundamental rights since the very moment his or her conception is known by their parents, mother and father? What brother or sister does not see his brothers and sisters as equals, equally loved by their parents?

In particular, in the family, fundamental human values of life, marriage, freedom of religion and education are lived the best friendly possible way, —'user-friendly', we could say in terms of current technology. And in this environment of love, dignity and joy —we refer to ordinary families, not to non-structured ones— human being learns to recognize, enjoy and be able to transmit through his or her own family, the human rights.

However, it is also clear that there is a conviction, also as spread, regarding the sometimes extreme difficulties experienced in the communication between parents and adolescents. Frequently, more than difficult is actually non-existent. I will analyze and suggest possible solutions to this grave problem. Personally, I believe that, first and foremost, it is vital that adults —particularly parents, but also educators, teachers, politicians, police men and women, etc.— have a clear understanding of what adolescence is and what it means. Secondly, we will look at active and passive communication techniques for adolescents.

The initial surprise

Normally, adolescence starts abruptly —at least for the parents. Their previously polite, obedient and well—behaved child suddenly adopts a clearly 'rebellious' attitude. This is the beginning of a long process which will last at least several years, or, in some cases, a whole lifetime: affective immaturity can even give rise to certain legal causes for marriage annulment, or continued professional and/or emotional instability, including problems with drugs, gambling, alcohol, etc.

Some basic concepts:

- Adolescence is a completely normal and necessary period of time, whereas infancy is a period of organization, adolescence is a period of disorganization and adulthood a period of reorganization. We have to be prepared: it's going to happen whether we like it or not! It's even been said, quite graphically, that a teenager who doesn't 'act' like a schizophrenic, that he or she 'is' a schizophrenic.
- Adolescence is a period which is characterized by instability —particularly emotional— and constant conflict, primarily between the teenager and him or herself, but also with the environment that they have been surrounded by until then.

¹ Article 1 of the Universal Declaration Of Human Rights states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".

The conflict may particularly be with the parents, but can also extend to school, religious and political beliefs, etc. Up until this point, the young person has been subject to the influences of parents and educators without questioning them too much. However, as man is a rational and free being, he must adopt the convictions and attitudes which will shape his life in his own way. This is the origin of the apparent 'rebellion' which characterizes this whole period.

- The task faced by the adolescent is not an easy one. They make their loved ones and the people around them suffer, but they also have a very hard time themselves. Furthermore, today's society is even more complex, more changeable, more insecure, more confused, more manipulative... But it's also freer and more informed, it provides more opportunities, and we are more aware of injustices. At this point, it's not even a question of 'generational conflict', but rather 'parallel worlds'. The 'young person's' world, with its corresponding values, vocabulary, nocturnal schedules, fashions, motor-bikes, piercings, etc. And, on the other hand, the 'adult' world with its social conventions, vocabulary, values, songs, music, cars, etc.
- Adolescents don't know what they want; they only know what they think they don't want.
- Lack of sense of reality: Another typical characteristic of the adolescent is the lack of realism. They have no sense of time, for example. They feel that everything they need or want is 'really urgent.' However, they keep putting off dealing with things that they don't feel like doing; for example, they think they've got all the time in the world to study a subject that doesn't interest them, even if the exam is right around the corner.

In short, adolescence is a period of crisis. However, a 'crisis' doesn't necessarily have to be negative. Its definition, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a turning point in the progress of anything; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent".²

The rules of the game

As I said earlier, we need to be prepared: this is something that is going to happen whether we like it or not. The most important thing is to stay calm and also to keep in mind the possibility for this period to last quite longer than we expected or imagined.

We have to establish some ground rules that should be few, but firm. Here, the principle 'non multa, sed multum'³, which also applies to knowledge, is relevant. Basically, it means that it's quality not quantity that counts. Or, in other words, we should try to achieve a lot with only a few rules. Obviously, it's important to avoid arbitrariness. Teenagers are very sensitive to injustice, not to mention incoherence. "Don't shout", says the parent to the teenager, invariably shouting themselves; "Don't be lazy", while the parents themselves are wasting time; "You need to study", as the parents sit around watching television; etc.

We also have to respect their privacy. We must be demanding of adolescents, whilst respecting their privacy at all times. It goes without saying that we should never go through their drawers, or read their diary, etc. Parents need to learn to control their own curiosity.

And also we should respect their freedom. The aim of education is to achieve freedom. Everything we do for our children is covered by one of these three stages: give them life, teach them how to live, and let them live their own life.

It's important to remember that, despite appearances, adolescents do progress and we need to try not to be overly affected by apparent setbacks. The education and progress of the personality develop in a 'spiral' which means that even if the teenager is at the bottom of a loop, they are still progressing.

Finally, we have to be optimists; in fact, parents and educators have to be blind optimists, but we shouldn't forget that, "in this field, good intentions and love itself aren't enough. Parents and educators need to acquire certain knowledge and skills (or 'savoir faire')"⁴.

Other general principles which can help us to get through this stage include:

- Accepting that adolescents are the way they are, with all their good and bad points. All parents, particularly mothers, get carried away imagining their child's future: they imagine a profession, an 'ideal' boyfriend or girlfriend, etc. However, these images of are frequently contradicted by reality; we have to accept this reality and adapt ourselves to it. We have to accept our children the way they are and appreciate them despite any 'defects' they may have. The following errors are very common: wanting our children to achieve more than we did; wanting our children to achieve what we couldn't and wanting our children to be the same as us.
- Respecting their freedom: in this respect, there are two extremes. Excessive permissiveness stems from the concept that children are good by nature, and we should let them follow all their desires, instincts and leanings, and that it is society, with all its rules, that makes them bad. This is exactly what Rousseau said, but by doing so we effectively produce 'good savages.' The other extreme is authoritarianism. Giving orders for the sake of it, without giving reasons or explanations... "Because I'm your father", "because I say so", etc. Permissiveness destroys responsibility; authoritarianism destroys freedom.

² 'The Oxford English Dictionary' (Oxford).

³ "Not many but much", classical latin proverb attributed to Pliny the Younger.

⁴ John Paul II, 'Address to the III International Family Congress' (Rome, 30 October 1978).

- These days, there is another, very negative, factor which exacerbates the innate difficulties of adolescence. This is the 'ideologies', or their remains, which corrupt the sense of freedom.

We don't have time to go into detail on this point right now, so we'll just make a note of it. What are the most common reactions from parents faced with the 'offensives' of their adolescent children? Ginott, quoted by Ana María Navarro⁵, describes them as "first of all, severe; if this fails, they turn friendly; when that doesn't work, they try to reason; and then, feeling ridiculous, they try correction; and, finally, end up going back to threats and punishment." In other words, the cycle is severe - friendly - reasoning - corrective - threatening - punishing - friendly... As you can see, this is a perfect example of a vicious circle, completely frustrating and, above all, totally useless, if not counterproductive.

What we do... and what we should do

Are parents also 'schizophrenic'? We've talked about the 'schizophrenia' of adolescents, but we mustn't forget that parents can also be 'schizophrenic'. We sometimes see parents who are completely authoritarian regarding things like studying (and particularly school results), profession, clothing, the choice of boyfriend or girlfriend, etc., yet are completely permissive or partially ignorant when it comes to reading matter, excursions, travel, study trips abroad, going out at night, alcohol, cannabis, etc.

Are we realists? Parents also have to be realists. When a child isn't as smart, or as hard-working, or as good as the parents hoped or dreamed, it's time to be realistic and adjust the goals that have been set so that the child can achieve them. This is especially important when it comes to matters such as love ("I wish he or she had fallen in love with X or Y") and professional career: University, professional training, etc. This is particularly important in the case of parents who shine professionally. They need to be humble, and learn to love and accept their child just the way they are, above all, never showing their disappointment, humiliating their child, giving up on them or ignoring them.

Overprotection is a very common —and very dangerous— defect. Overprotection, in the short term, avoids problems with the child or adolescent; however, in the medium and, above all, long term, this can create problems that will be very difficult to resolve later on: shyness, withdrawal, complexes, selfishness, inability to relate to people of the opposite sex, or, at the opposite extreme, rebellion, bad manners, verbal and physical violence and even, in some cases, leaving home.

Use your sense of humor: teenagers are extremely sensitive to ridicule and they detect it immediately. For this reason, it's important to see the funny side of the matter in hand, as long as it's the right moment. The following real conversation between mother and daughter illustrates this: "— I want you to accept me for who I am. — So who are you then, darling? If you don't know, how am I supposed to?"

Many parents base their method of child rearing on the adverb 'don't': "don't do this", "don't do that", "don't get earrings", "don't get a piercing", "don't have long hair", "don't be late", etc. On this matter, Miralbell says: "How effective can a child rearing method based on 'don't' and 'no' be for adolescents when their heart is begging them for 'yes'? What a bitter contrast for many teenagers to hear only 'don't' and 'no' at home when in other and often more undesirable places people are stimulating their hopes and dreams, their desire to deliver and their minor vanities!"⁶.

We shouldn't forget that we are educating for freedom. What is the objective of the education we give our children? Frequently —particularly these days— it is the parents who, either consciously or unconsciously, decide the future that they and their children will fight to achieve: the social and economic position, the prestige, the money, and it is all too common that genuine transcendental human values —happiness, responsibility, emotional well-being, generosity, etc.— are forgotten. What we are actually doing is confusing personality —which is an attribute of our 'being'— with money, fame or prestige — which are attributes of what we have or what we do. And our children see this perfectly well.

Some important issues

I'm sure you will all agree that adolescence is a very broad subject matter, so we are going to focus on a few points of particular relevance: "everyone else does it": we all know that this is one of the teenager's favorite arguments; it has different variations: "everyone else has one", "everyone else wears them", "everyone else is allowed to", "you're so old-fashioned", "you're completely out of touch", "but Sally's mum allows her to do it" (always using the friend with the strictest, most old-fashioned parents as an example). What can we do when faced with this 'atomic' argument?

1. The fact that everyone does something can only be a justification for good or neutral behavior, never for bad.
 2. It is very likely that Sally's mother is listening to the exact same argument, but this time it's you who's the parent being used as an example. Watch out for teenage conspiracies — they're masters in this area!
 3. It's important that from an early age children see that their parents don't do "what everyone else does" if those things are immoral or hurtful.
 4. It helps our children a lot if we spend time with other families who don't do "what everyone else does", but instead do the same things as our own family; for example, attend church services, go on healthy excursions, see fun films, etc. In short, instead of complaining about our environment, we need to create our own healthy environments.
- School performance: it's normal for adolescents to experience a decline in their performance at school: they are 'invaded by idleness'; they are experiencing physical and physiological changes; their interests and goals are changing; and they are suffering excessive sentimentalism and fantasization, amongst other things. In other words, they're not just being lazy!

⁵ Ana María Navarro, 'Algunas cuestiones entre los padres y los adolescentes', University of Navarre (Pamplona, 1977).

⁶ Enrique Miralbell, '¿Entiendes a tu hijo adolescente?', Fert (Barcelona, 1982).

Faced with this decline, as parents, we have to help our children increase their motivation and commitment to study, encouraging curiosity and helping our children see that studying will help them to satisfy it. Parents should encourage their children to read from an early age and read along with them to explain what's happening when necessary. Above all, we have to value the effort more than the result.

If a child makes an effort, but gets bad results, the parents will have to help him or her improve their way of working, ensuring an appropriate environment for effective studying and offering them extra classes, if needed. However, it's important not to overwhelm them, and to surround them with the atmosphere of sympathetic kindness that we've been talking about.

In the same way, just because a child gets good results, it doesn't mean we can let our guard down. Some children get very good grades without making an effort and we should try to expand their fields of interest, but without stressing them out by pushing them to the limit. We don't want to run the risk of burnout.

Furthermore, as parents, we have to examine our own motivations —Do we mainly work to make money? Do we value work that makes more money over work that does something useful for others? For we habitually complain about our work: that it's dull, that we have too much, that we're not appreciated, etc.? Our attitudes and motivations have a big influence on our teenagers, who are our most ruthless critics.

In any case, a decline in school performance is normally a temporary situation. The habits and values acquired in the pre-adolescent period are of vital importance and will shine through sooner rather than later.

The study environment at home is very important: be careful to avoid distractions from television, radio, shouting, etc. It's also essential to have close collaboration with our children's teachers and educators, especially as it is becoming increasingly common to find teachers and parents on opposite sides of the fence.

- Our children's friends, another very important area which can be divided into two groups:
 1. Unsuitable friends: first of all, it's important to carefully judge if the friend is suitable or not, always focusing on the child himself, not on his parents. We mustn't get carried away by our own prejudices, or our own self-respect. If we're sure that the friend isn't suitable, it's best not to attack the issue head on; it's more effective to use a circular maneuver. For example, ask your child some careful questions to help them start to question for themselves whether or not their friend is a good person; or, always using this same indirect method, help them start to see the negative side of the friend's behavior.

As an 'atomic bomb', some people suggest inviting the friend to stay for a few days — either over the weekend or in the holidays. They are likely to quickly start to show their true colors and your child will see for themselves —or with the help of their brothers and sisters, particularly if they are also adolescents— what that person is really like.
 2. Suitable friends: In the case of suitable friends, we should encourage our children to invite them over to our house and vice versa, allow them to attend educational, cultural and sporting events together, and make an effort to get to know their parents and become friends with them. However, we should never directly show our interest in encouraging the friendship, as it could lead to the child breaking it off just to avoid doing what his parents want him to do.

The big secret: parental love

Parental love which remains constant through all kinds of situations, big and small, leads to friendship with our children.

Being friends with our children means spending time with them. Some people claim that this should be 'quality-time' because they don't have 'quantity-time'. Whilst they may have a point, I believe that it's enough just to have 'time-time'. And as time flies, each stage in our children's development goes by so quickly that it would be a shame to waste it.

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