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MontGuide

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Navigating Adolescence

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This Montguide discusses the variety of changes that occur during the teen years, how parenting styles affect development and ideas for grandparents with teens in this developmental stage.

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GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN FIND

themselves in an interesting position as they are parenting “off time” meaning that their age group is typically finished with day-to-day parenting. Parenting in this context can be more challenging as their grandchildren navigate adolescence.

The journey through adolescence is a unique part of life. Youth have more outside influences and become more independent as they move through adolescence. Today’s technological advances make for greater outside influences than when the grandparents were teens. There is instant access to more information today than was available two generations ago.

Adolescence is a longer developmental stage than in past generations. More young people attend college and delay marriage. Turning 18 years of age is no longer the marker of independence for many youth. This extension of adolescence has led to three stages – early adolescence, middle adolescence and late adolescence. The changes that occur in youth vary with each stage.

Physical Changes

The teen years bring significant physical changes. During early adolescence, 10-14 years of age, the most noticeable changes begin to take place: such as increases in height and weight, and acne may become a problem for boys and girls. For girls, menstruation tends to begin during this time, along with breast development. Boys experience genital growth, the appearance of facial hair, and changes in voice. The rate of physical changes has not been so dramatic since infancy. During middle adolescence, 15-16 years of age, boys tend to continue their increase in height and weight and girls usually slow down. By late adolescence, 17-21 years of age, girls tend to be fully developed physically. Boys may continue to increase in height, muscle mass and body hair.

Although exciting, these changes can be a confusing time in a teen’s life. There is an increase in moodiness, self-involvement, concerns with appearance, body image and a

new sense of sexuality. Girls tend to mature more quickly than boys. There can be an increase in modesty, more showing off or a combination of both. During this time boys and girls become concerned with being attractive and begin to experiment with hairstyles and clothing.

Cognitive Changes

Researchers today know more about the brain. The areas of the brain which allow adults to quickly assess a risky situation and make judgments are not fully developed until the early to mid-twenties. Teens demand more freedom and independence but are not always equipped to handle situations. Pushing boundaries is a natural part of adolescence and it comes with an increase in risky behaviors. Teens are capable of making responsible decisions – sometimes they just need a little coaching. Even if they are aware of the risks they take, adolescents mentally weigh those risks against perceived benefits. For example, adults are aware of the risks of drinking and driving. They are more likely to prevent an intoxicated friend from driving even if it means the friend becoming angry. A teen in the same situation may see getting into the car as risky, but view the situation as “just this once.” The odds may appear to be in their favor. Teens are easily swayed, and they will often trade off risks for immediate rewards, such as peer approval.

Social Changes

During early and middle childhood children depend on their caregivers to be there to help them. Caregivers have more control over who the child spends time with and activities in which to participate. During adolescence, peer relationships become more important, and teens may want to spend less time with their parents or caregivers. This is a normal and critical aspect of development. Maintaining open communication is important. Encourage your teen to get involved in groups in and out of school. Teens are seeking a sense of achievement and want to be “good” at something. Coaches and mentors can be important resources.

Communication can be strained sometimes, and it is very common for teens to take part in information management, where teens limit the information they share with adults about their lives. Although this can be aggravating, it is a healthy process, and aids in the development of personality, boundary establishment and privacy, and builds strong relationships with friends. Despite your teen's objections, make sure you know who his friends are and where they are going. Try to meet the parents of your teen's friends. Encourage his friends to visit at your home so you'll know what they are doing. This "staying in the know" can be tricky because a large part of what you know about your teen's life comes from what they share with you. Research finds that having supportive and warm relative caregivers is important for determining how much information a teen will disclose. When teens have close supportive relationships they tend to share more details about their friends and activities.

Adolescence is also a time of increased interest in romantic relationships. Talking about love and relationships can be uncomfortable, but it is an important aspect of life, and a part of responsible parenting. Teens can be as uncomfortable as adults in talking about sexuality. In a grandparent-headed household the separation of generations can make discussions more difficult. When the grandparents were adolescents, the topic of sexuality may not have been discussed. Teens are curious about the changes happening in their bodies and emotions therefore it is important to keep lines of communication open. If teens don't learn about responsibility in relationships and sex at home they are likely to turn to their friends or the Internet, where information received may not be reliable.

Parenting Styles

So what should grandparents raising teens do to help guide their grandchildren through adolescence? Parents and caregivers use various styles in guiding children. The styles used come from one's own upbringing, parenting books, religious views, and the popular media.

Parenting styles involve two important parts – levels of warmth and control. Depending upon the combination of these two parts, different parenting styles are identified. Research finds the first three styles to be least effective in raising children. The fourth style listed – authoritative – is generally best suited for teens.

The Brick Wall Caregiver (Authoritarian)

Authoritarian caregivers are highly controlling and provide very little warmth. They can be described as a "brick wall". These caregivers tend to be highly restrictive, strict disciplinarians, and insist that their adolescent follows all orders simply because, "I say so." They do not often engage in discussions with their teen and there is little room for debate or negotiation regarding family rules. Although setting rules and boundaries is necessary, research finds that this parenting style may actually lead adolescents to become

rebellious and act out in negative ways or they become more dependent. Grandparents often use this method out of fear of what happened with their own children. An example of this style when discussing a teen's curfew would be the grandparent who tells the 17-year-old, "No, you will be home by 9:30 and there will be no discussion about it. I don't care if the movie doesn't get over until 9:30."

The Jellyfish Caregiver (Permissive)

Permissive caregivers are warm, but set few demands and can be described as a "jellyfish." They tend to be overly indulgent and believe the way to show love is by giving in to the demands of their teen. Teens are often responsible for making daily decisions without assistance. Research finds that adolescents who grow up in permissive households believe there are few rules and consequences are rare. These adolescents may have a hard time with self-regulation and often become so self-centered that it interferes with healthy development of peer relations. Using the example above, the permissive grandparent would let the teen establish the curfew.

The Invisible Caregiver (Uninvolved)

Uninvolved caregivers are not typically warm, and place few, if any, demands on their adolescent. They limit the amount of time they spend with their teen, to the point of neglect, making them "invisible." Uninvolved caregivers are indifferent to the needs, experiences, wants, or whereabouts of their teen. This type of caregiver rarely considers their teen's opinion and basically does not want to be bothered. This type of caregiver is overwhelmed by the situation, very self-centered, or has given up trying to maintain boundaries and authority. Research finds that adolescents of uninvolved caregivers often display similar characteristics to adolescents raised in permissive homes. They tend to have impulse control problems. The uninvolved grandparent would most likely not even address the issue of curfew with the teen.

The Backbone Caregiver (Authoritative)

Authoritative caregivers are warm, but strong and have a "backbone." Adolescents are encouraged to be independent as long as they stay within the boundaries set by the caregiver. Authoritative caregivers are willing to engage with and consider their adolescent's point of view while maintaining control and responsibility. This style helps teens learn to make good decisions. Research finds that adolescents who are raised in authoritative households learn how to negotiate and participate in meaningful discussions. They tend to be understanding of other people's opinions and feel that their opinions are respected. These teens are more likely to be socially competent, responsible and self-directed.

As a grandparent, being mindful of one's caregiving style and having sympathy towards the changes the adolescent is experiencing can help navigate the teenage years with fewer problems. There is support for authoritative caregiving as the preferred parenting style. Authoritative caregiving offers

openings for adolescents to become self-directed, while also developing a healthy respect for limits and rules. An authoritative grandparent would address the example of attending a movie in this way – “So you want to go to the movie on a school night. As you know your curfew during the week is 9:30. What time does the movie get over? What movie are you seeing, who are you going with and who is driving?” After a discussion where the grandparent is comfortable with the situation he or she might conclude, “Well, the movie sounds interesting, your homework is done and you have a good plan to get home. This time we will set your curfew at 10. Come straight home after the movie.”

Parenting styles can help grandparents think about how they respond to their grandchildren in a given situation. By knowing the different styles, grandparents can learn how to provide levels of warmth and control in their parenting in ways that will guide their grandchildren.

Ideas for Navigating the Adolescent Years

Dealing with Physical Changes When discussing physical changes, relationships, and sexuality, encourage your adolescent to ask questions. Don't be afraid to talk about your own discomfort. Relate sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one's partner. Be open in sharing your values and concerns. Discuss the real responsibilities and consequences of love, relationships and sex. Everything from buying a girl her first bra, a boy a shaver, heartbreak in relationships, to pregnancy and sex are worthy topics.

Talking About Risk Taking Rather than focusing on risks, help adolescents see consequences in different ways. Risks will not seem as appealing if teens perceive greater benefits from a safer alternative. Provide fun and safe alternatives that are still intriguing for teens so they can have fun with friends. Some ideas include meeting a group of friends at the mall, going to the movies, renting a movie and inviting friends for a sleep-over, or going on a hike. Risk taking and decisions made during the teen years may affect their future. Talk to your teen about the consequences of taking risks. Explain how it could impact attending college or getting a scholarship. Have expectations for them and guide them towards their future goals.

Getting to Know Your Teenager's Friends Teens spend more time away from parents and with their friends during these years. Although sometimes difficult, monitor and supervise your teen's activities. Get to know their friends and their friends' parents or caregivers. Strike up a conversation with another family when you attend a school function like a parent-teacher conference or sports game. The more you know your teen's friends the better able you will be to talk to your teen about their activities and interests. Find times such as riding in the car or at the supper table to ask questions about friends. For example you might ask, “What do your friends like to do?” “What music do you and your friends like to listen to?” It is healthy to talk with your teen about

your mistakes, however try to avoid overstating “When I was your age...” Let them know that you can identify with being a teen even though it was two generations ago.

Being Involved in Your Teen's School In high school it is still important to track your teens' progress in school. Grades are one indication of how your teen is doing in other parts of her life, and talking to teachers can help you see how your teen presents herself outside of your home. Many schools have online programs to monitor student's assignments, grades and school notices. If you do not have access to the Internet, talk to the school to find another way for you to receive the information.

Encourage your teen to participate in extracurricular activities at school or join other appropriate clubs and organizations such as 4-H. Attend events to support your teen when they are participating in activities. Some teens do not have an interest in extracurricular activities. If this is the case, ask the school what activities or clubs they sponsor. Check with local places of worship, the Extension office, or other parents to find activities in the area.

Teaching Teens Decision Making Adolescence is a time of increased decision making. Teens feel more empowered when they make their own decisions, and it helps develop responsibility. Start small. Allow teens to have input into family rules such as curfew or household chores. Taking a role in decision making lets teens start to have control over their lives and learn the reasoning behind rules, however, as the caregiver you have the final say. Brain development ends between the ages of 22-25 years and until that time, youth need more guidance in decision making.

Familiarize Yourself with Teen Interests The advances in technology have the most technologically savvy individuals trying to keep up. Become familiar with texting lingo, Facebook, cellphones, and video games. Find out the current television shows and movies that teens are watching and what music is popular. In this way you will be able to talk to your teen about what they are hearing and seeing. Knowing texting lingo will help if you and your teen use texting and you will be able to identify what she is texting to friends. Knowing the current movies and video games will open an opportunity to talk about the content and your values. Set limits on what younger teens are viewing in movies and video games. When placing limits, explain that there are rules in your home that may be different from rules in the homes of their friends.

Promoting Good Communication It might sound simple, but having straightforward conversations with your teen goes a long way. Because of the age difference, relating to a teen may be daunting, but teens desperately want to be viewed as mature, and grown up. Engaging conversation is one way to achieve good communication. Promote open and close caregiver-adolescent relationships by showing your teen you respect their opinion, even if you don't always

agree. Communicating with and engaging in efforts to be connected to your teen will likely increase the amount of information your teen will share with you. Avoid asking lots of questions. Sometimes the way to start a conversation is to be available but let your teen start. For example, you might be making dinner and your teen comes in the room. Greet him, but let him start the conversation.

Helping Teens Find Their Identity The teenage years are a time of exploration and discovery. Allowing teens to “try on” different identities is a part of growing up, figuring out what their passions are, and how they fit into the world. Teens will often become obsessed with a new idea or activity, like snowboarding. A month later they might want to play the guitar, and could care less about snowboarding. Changing interests is common during early and middle adolescence and part of healthy development.

You might also notice them switching peer groups in school as they try to find their place socially. The changes in groups will likely go along with the changes in interests and are part of their identity development. They can also be a cause for disappointment if the teen is not accepted by a particular peer group. Support your teen during this time by encouraging, listening, and empathizing.

Take Care of Yourself Parenting is a big job that requires a great deal of energy – even in the teen years. Grandparents raising grandchildren often comment how hard it is to keep up with their grandchildren as they are older when parenting the second time around. Take time for your own needs. Make sure to get enough sleep and maintain a healthy diet and physical activity. Take walks or participate in a physical activity you enjoy. Exercise keeps us in shape, strengthens muscles, and reduces stress. Finally, see a healthcare professional regularly and take needed medications as prescribed.

Conclusion

The adolescent years are exciting and full of changes. They can be more difficult when teens are being raised solely by their grandparents, however, this does not mean the family

is headed for years of challenges. Generational differences provide an opportunity for learning on the part of the grandparents and the youth. Use this to build relationships and support for your teen. If problems arise that can't be dealt with within the family, seek assistance from others such as a therapist, teacher, or school counselor. Enjoy this phase of life with your teen!

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