

## **Introduction: Learning and Gaining Wisdom from Your Teenager**

*There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.*

Jiddu Krishnamurti

*Age shows wisdom, but wisdom shows no age.*

Unknown

### **An Alternative View on Parenting and Personal Growth**

Parenting is a series of mostly unpredictable interactions between child and parent intertwined with fluctuating thoughts and emotions. It is as much of an art form as a skill. Parenting is not learned overnight, nor is there a universal handbook on how to properly raise a child. Over time, the relationship unfolds with your children having as much influence on you as you have on them. Along the way, you can learn valuable parenting tips and helpful life lessons, growing and developing individually and as a family.

Parenting is a learning process that involves taking risks and making mistakes. You will make decisions and do things that may seem reasonable without knowing that your actions will produce the desired result. Parenting can make you question your confidence and take you on emotional roller coaster rides. It will have you wondering what family, friends, and neighbors think of you and leave you scratching your head, wondering what could possibly happen next.

Why does the life of a teen's parent sound like the life of a teen? It is all part of the human design to teach us how to connect with one another. Teenagers will do what anyone who wants to be better understood would do. They will directly or indirectly pull you into their world. You may begin thinking, feeling, and even behaving alike; you'll experience similar physiological symptoms. This mirroring effect is a powerful interpersonal tactic that all humans use, given our inherent and insatiable need to connect with others. Your teen wants to connect with you, and overcoming difficult moments necessitate this need. Where there is adversity there is opportunity, and the person to thank for all these learning possibilities is your teen!

Every life stage presents opportunities and challenges. Unfortunately, adolescence has traditionally been branded as a time of hardship. *What You Can Learn from Your Teenager: Lessons in Parenting and Personal Growth* challenges this widely held perception and inaccurate portrayal of teens. It also illustrates how this phase in life is rife with possibilities for living a more fulfilling life. Your teenager is building mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and intuitive strength, all in preparation to deal with the realities of adulthood. The book shows appreciation by acknowledging how your teen can help you become the parent you want to be and the person you truly are.

### **Perception Is Everything**

Parenting can be challenging, and sometimes it helps to change your perspective in order to learn and grow. It is better to see the glass half full instead of half empty. There is much to gain from looking carefully at what teens are trying to accomplish through their actions. Approach your teen's questionable behavior from a supportive perspective. The impact of your response to your teen's behaviors is greater than you think.

You can project either trust and confidence or mistrust and lack of confidence onto teens as they take on more responsibility, become more self-sufficient, and discover their true nature. Teenagers are the embodiment of learning, and as such, there is much you can relearn from them. Recall that you were once a teen. Now you are privileged to be living with one, so be mindful of this, and take advantage of the time you have left with your teen. The tips provided in this book will help you create a long-lasting relationship and allow you to tap into the wisdom your teenager possesses.

Parenting does not mean giving every ounce of energy and minute of your time to your child. Nor does it mean that you are the sole role model, teacher, and expert on life and how to navigate it. You are in the leading position, but parenting is a process through which you can learn as much about yourself as you can about your child. You will have daily opportunities to teach your child skills and life lessons; however, you can also learn from teens about how to become more in tune with them as well as how to become more in tune with yourself.

You can always learn something in a parent-child relationship as long as you keep an open mind. Avoid generalizing the teen attitude and behavior as typical. This diminishes your teen's individuality and ability to be regarded as a contributing member of the family and society. Instead, look at your teen as someone who can offer helpful insights into improving both your relationship and your life. Teens have as many unflattering stereotypes of their parents as parents have of teens. If teenagers wrote books on managing their parents' emotions and actions, imagine how those titles would read!

Some general characteristics may apply to teenagers, but this can also be said of other life stages, including adulthood. Teenagers are individuals whose idiosyncrasies more accurately describe their nature. These personal traits require your full understanding and appreciation. In order for you to work most effectively with yourself, you must understand, accept, and appreciate your distinct nature as well. Teens have answers you are looking for, but you must value their existence, respect their opinion, appreciate what they are trying to achieve, and listen to what they have to say.

For sixteen years, I advocated for improved services, equal rights, and the social reintegration of youth in conflict with the law. This was a group whose voices were heard little, if at all. They appreciated someone who stood up for them, supported them in their development, gave them opportunities to try new skills, and believed in them. There was no greater reward than to see a young person accepted back at home or school. I felt an immense sense of pride and joy when a youth passed the GED, obtained a diploma, or enrolled in a college course. There was a sense of accomplishment when a youth who had previously made money illegally went to a job interview, was hired, received a paycheck, opened a bank account, and was able to lawfully support the family.

Now I am advocating for all teenagers who are mislabeled, looked upon with mistrust, or feel underappreciated by society. I am asking you to join me in this campaign, starting with the teen living under your roof. When you see your child as someone from whom you can learn, your perception and interactions will be more healthy and rewarding. You will recognize the undervalued knowledge and wisdom within your teenager and tap into your innate parenting abilities. You will gain the confidence to go deep within yourself and rediscover potential that you left behind in your young adult years.

## **You and Your Teen Hold the Key**

Most parenting books come from scientific research and studies on adolescent development, well-known experts, mental health professionals, and brave parents writing about family triumphs. All these viewpoints add different, relevant, and valuable perspectives on the topic of parenting adolescents, but they all neglect a valuable resource on parenting and personal growth, one traditionally portrayed as the bane of parenting and the antithesis of learning: teens.

You and your teen are well versed in each other's habits, strengths, weaknesses, triggers, and routines. I have learned, professionally and personally, that most solutions to interpersonal issues are right in front of us. Finding it is a matter of looking at people for who they are, not how we think they are or would like them to be.

Practicing the techniques presented can increase your chances of creating a relationship in which trust, respect, and open dialogue become the norm, regardless of what is being discussed. Look at your teenager as a whole person. Discover the potential within him. Learn and grow by doing what your teen does best: exploring, playing, inspiring others (and being inspired), and connecting with self and others.

Decisions about parenting are not made haphazardly. Be accountable, and take responsibility. Act with intention, keep an open mind, and be creative when interacting with your teen. For example, you can print the on-line exercises and use the sheets to make a family of origami cranes or paper airplanes and have a flying contest. This is not only clever but also appropriate and purposeful. Doing something fun allows you to connect with your teen. You may teach your child a new skill, or maybe your teen will show you the latest paper-folding methods from having watched countless YouTube videos. Creativity allows you to find new ways to use what you have before you, be it a person or an object. The outcomes from the imagination are endless.

Acknowledge what you already are: the expert on your teen and on yourself. Tap into the expertise within your teenager, because she also knows you as well or better than you may know yourself. How you interact with your teenager will set an example for how she should interact with others. Likewise, how you see your teen interact with the world should be an example for how you can develop as a parent and individual.

## **Clarifications**

This book examines both processes and actions. You will need to do more than read and reflect. You will need to engage with your teen in order to build a healthy and long-lasting relationship. Use your teenager as a model. Your teen can help you rediscover forgotten truths about yourself and of life when you closed the door to your teenage years many moons ago. Sensitive topics such as death, divorce, sex, substance abuse, violence, trauma, abuse, sexual orientation, peer pressure, and teen pregnancy are not specifically addressed; but the lessons and exercises will help you gain the skills and confidence to talk about these real life issues. Seek professional assistance when issues go beyond the capacity of the book or if you are having difficulties resolving them on your own.

Throughout adolescence, many adults will leave an impression on a teen's development. I would be remiss to assume that the term *parent* refers only to a biological parent and equally as negligent to assume that the terms *teenager*, *teen*, *adolescent*, *child*, *son*, and *daughter* refer only to a biological relationship. I use words for caretakers and teens mainly in the singular. Interpret these terms in a manner that best fits your situation.

## **Value Your Teenager's Energy, and Embrace the Teen Spirit**

The approach I encourage you to take with your teenager is similar to the philosophy of martial arts: instead of resisting the force coming at you, use the energy to your favor. By not regarding your teen's attitude and behavior as defensive or aggressive, you will learn how to better support your teen's development and reach greater heights in your own development. This approach will create a compassionate, understanding relationship that will last well beyond the adolescent years.

When you find yourself becoming emotionally entangled in your teen's thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, do not panic. This means that you are connected—maybe too much, but connected nonetheless. If you recognize when your teenager has struck a chord within you, take a step back. It is not about you. Not getting emotionally drawn in will allow you to deal with the situation more calmly and objectively. By emotionally separating yourself, you will be able to control yourself. This will allow you to better

understand the need being fulfilled and what values and rules are guiding the process. The secondary gain of differentiating from your teen and keeping an open mind to the nature of adolescence is that you can gain new insights and ideas from understanding your child's way of relating to the world.

As you go through life, keep the doors to your past open, regardless of its qualities. Carry some of the adolescent spirit with you into adulthood. Knowledge, abilities, and skills gained from childhood and adolescence can serve you well as an adult. The adolescent mentality—being explorative, playful, inspiring, and open to connecting—holds the keys to living a more fulfilling life. We commonly hear parents say to adolescents, “Stop acting like a child!” Why does an adolescent need to act like an adult? What makes us believe that once we become adults, we must never act like an adolescent?

Depending on the adult mind-set alone will only get you so far in life. Is it a coincidence that we may place our hands on sides of our head when we have made a mistake? What you have done most likely is limited your decision making to just your brain. Most of life's challenges are too complex to foresee a certain outcome, or they consist of too many variables for the mind to calculate. The tools needed in such situations are instinct, trust, courage, faith, risk taking, and trial and error. Fortunately for you, the person most adept in this nonlinear way of approaching life lives under your roof. Most of what your teenager is experiencing is unanticipated and consists of too many random variables for the developing mind to process. Your teen must rely on an irrational and intuitive means for navigating life.

I challenge you to question whether responding to complex situations in an adult manner is always in your best interest. Sometimes taking an instinctual adolescent approach when you are faced with a dilemma that cannot be solved by a rational, mature mind may be both necessary and effective. The decisions you make in this manner may be some of the most influential and become your favorite stories to tell.

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