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Adolescence - the difficult years ... for whom?

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There comes a time when many parents wake up to see that they now share their home with a strange, almost alien, creature who looks a bit like their child, but isn't really. They don't recognise it and they think, *'Hey, you strange thing! What have you done with my kid?'*

Adolescence is often a time when - as we say in English - *the shit hits the fan*. Suddenly, the child who went along with everything its parents said and did has opinions and wants to be heard. The parents can't figure it out at all! Adolescence is a very, very difficult time for kids and, unfortunately, parents don't always help.

Many of us parents put our own suffering at losing the little darling before the pain and suffering that the kid is going through. Many of us don't want our children to grow up. *I've been mummy for so long! What am I going to do now?* But, aren't we the ones who are supposed to be in charge? So why do we seem to be at a loss when our children start to become adults.

Brazilian psychotherapist Dr. Augusto Cury says *'there are no difficult teens, there is just inadequate education'* and most of those we see as 'difficult teenagers', you will find, were spoilt children when they were small. They've just grown up! However, sixteen-year-old feet stomp much harder than six-year-old ones and a tantrum-throwing toddler can soon become a potentially aggressive teen.

So how should parents approach adolescence? Well firstly, by making sure we don't abdicate our responsibility during the childhood years. Most teen problems arise because we've *ignored* our children for years and the adolescent that emerges is somebody we don't really know.

During adolescence, the child is going through a period of metamorphosis, much like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. French doctor and psychoanalyst, Françoise Dolto spoke of the protective *cocoon* and the vulnerability of the adolescent until she has emerged. Fully formed. Adolescence is one of many stages of a child's development; umbilical separation, separation at weaning, learning to walk etc. Each time, the child has to detach itself from one world in order to become aware of another and emerges grown and more human. The parents' responsibility is to help the child to successfully overcome *all* of these stages. Including adolescence.

The adolescent stage brings all sorts of 'first times' that can scare and worry parents. First period, first sexual desires, first kiss, first love, first broken heart etc. Some *firsts* may involve parents; others will most definitely exclude them. Parents need to know when to facilitate, when to give space and when to just stay out of the way. Of course teens won't involve us in everything and they have their secrets, but we should be there when they need us and listen to what they *do* want to say not only what we want to hear.

Some parents exclude themselves from their kids' lives by not empathising, not trying to feel what's going on in there inside the cocoon. Many parents distance themselves from 'silly' or 'uncomfortable' adolescent issues, creating a gap that may well affect the parent-child relationship for years to come as the new adult life will of course be conditioned by the 'rites of passage' experienced in adolescence.

Teenagers want to be independent, to fall and get up and learn from their own mistakes and we should let them. This doesn't mean abdicate. It means facilitate. Kids may say that their parents are a pain, but they do love and respect them and they do crave parental recognition and appreciation.

We parents need to be very careful not to burn bridges with our teenagers. Many parents forget very quickly what it was like to be a confused and often frightened adolescent and dedicate so much time and energy to criticising them and berating them for no longer being children yet not being adults yet. We should accept the adolescent discovery of spirit as another normal step on their developmental path. We were all teenagers once and we should accompany them on this trip, not distance ourselves from it.