

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING - TEENS

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I have heard it said that kids leave the planet at 13 years of age and come back when they are 21 years old. I am sure many parents would say that they wish they could leave the planet instead! Teenage years are always turbulent as kids begin to challenge their parents' values and authority.

From the time kids first learn to walk, they are learning what independence means. As they grow and develop, they are exposed to others who think and believe differently from them. As teenagers they rely less and less on parents for many aspects of their lives. They learn that wrong decisions create negative consequences. They learn that they have to take personal responsibility for their actions, and that parents will not necessarily come to their aid. Age brings greater expectations and accountability, and without appropriate training, these can create great traumas for teens.

Even prior to teen years, others' opinions become more important than parents' opinions and tend to dictate kids' taste in clothing, the way they speak, how they react to things, who they hang out with, what they believe in, and their choice in musical genres. Others' opinions often dictate how kids feel about themselves, and how they regulate their self-esteem.

There is an inherent need in all of us 'to belong'. To belong is to be accepted, to feel part of the group, to be cared for, and to be loved by others. As kids go through physical and hormonal transformation, their feelings become very fragile and they gravitate towards those who will sympathize and not criticize them. When my brother was 17 years old, he decided he was not understood at home, so he left and joined the 'Hells Angels' biker gang. The family was appalled. I used to go and visit him where he worked or where the bikers gathered, just to keep in touch with him. All he was looking for was love and acceptance. He found it in a gang.

Many young girls get pregnant because they are desperate for someone to love them unconditionally. Some kids turn to alcohol and drugs to escape stress, such as family break-ups, or just to be accepted as part of a particular group.

How can we, as parents, create the kind of environment where our kids can learn to be responsible, fun loving, law abiding young adults? We need strong family values from the beginning. Kids need to know that conforming to these values will create a peaceful, happy and protective environment. Maturity comes when kids make choices based on wanting what is best for them and for others, rather than 'wrote obedience'.

Parents need to pick their battles. They need to anticipate, and discuss the 'hot spots' before they are likely to be an issue. Hopefully, by the time a teenager is asked, by his friends to try smoking, the family has already talked about why smoking is bad for health and what a good response would be. Other topics might include issues such as, 'What is acceptable and unacceptable behavior?' 'How can I maintain a positive attitude?' 'What is appropriate clothing for different settings?' 'What is a reasonable curfew time?'

Parents should guide their kids by example and explanation, and not wait till unacceptable behavior has reared its ugly head. Kids need to be encouraged to engage in sports, hobbies, or youth groups. They need plenty of physical activity, and they need the support of parents who will play with them and cheer for them.

Home needs to be a soft place to land when they are facing the many changes going on in and around them. A positive atmosphere in the home with opportunities for kids to talk one-on-one with parents or trusted friends, is a place where kids will want to be rather than feel that they have to find others who will accept them.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.