

## **Family Life with Teens: Navigating Uncharted Waters**

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This is the second in a series of four articles on adolescence.

### **Part II: The Paradox of Adolescence: Integrating Diverging Challenges**

Tom, a 14 year old freshman in high school, lately has been surprising his parents with his frequent responses to any requests they have: “Leave me alone!” or “Go away!” or “Why do you bother me all the time?!” These distancing remarks alternate with times of clingy behavior, such as insisting that his mother sit next to him while he is doing his homework or calling for his parents to watch a movie with him. There is a similar pattern with his friends. At times, they are inseparable spending untold hours on the phone, at other times they are hardly in contact with each other.

Welcome to adolescence. Tom’s parents are witnessing their son’s beginning struggle with the challenge, fundamental to all of us, to reconcile and integrate two polar existential needs,

the need to be attached to and connected with others and to live as part of a network of relationships, which is the basis of biological survival and personal affirmation, of intellectual, emotional, and social growth, and of a sense of belonging, and  
the equally powerful need to develop agency over one's own individual self and to experience oneself as a separate and autonomous being with unique dilemmas, passions, achievements, joys and pains, failures and hopes.

Enriching and broadening our relationships and grounding our individual self and inner experience are life long tasks for all of us. They become explicit during adolescence, often a time of heightened vulnerability and emotional chaos.

Two key insights will help us as parents to make sense of the challenges our kids are faced with.

1) The process of individuation and relatedness is reciprocal. The formation of our identity happens through our connection with others. Relationships acquire depths and richness through the personalities of the

individuals involved. The more our connection with others increases in emotional significance, uniqueness, and mutual openness, the more we become who we want to be as individuals. And vice versa: the more competent, mature and trustworthy we become as individuals, the more we are able to establish long lasting, committed, and mutually satisfying relationships with others.

2) The process of increasing relatedness to others and the formation of our identity turns out to be particularly intense and complex during adolescence. The transition from childhood through adolescence to adulthood encompasses family members, but is also deeply affected by the relational worlds of school, neighborhood, friendships, and the surrounding society. At the same time, the individual self reaches toward new levels of complexity on a bio-physiological level through hormonal changes and physical maturation and on a psychological level through introspection, emotional growth, and cognitive learning. This process is circular: As “social neuroscience” teaches us, social competence in relationships and attachment to others enhances the neuronal complexity of our “social organ”, the brain, i.e. strengthen our individual self.

It is easy to see how this process can derail and how an adolescent might get stuck at either end of the spectrum. A teenager may get lost in her inner world of fantasies, insecurities, conflicting impulses, and emotional experiences and, therefore, become increasingly isolated and inept at forming relationships. Or a student may get completely absorbed by the relational world of his friends, their dress code, their values, and cultural norms to the extent that he appears empty and without inner substance to his parents.

The process of increasing social relatedness and self individuation during adolescence plays out, of course, very differently in our society depending on a family’s socio-economic class, racial and cultural heritage, and conception of gender roles. Equally influential in this process are the variations in family forms that are part of our modern experience. An urban middle class Euro-American family with two same sex parents presents a teen with challenges around relatedness and identity formation that are quite different from those of a newly immigrated Latin-American family living in a crowded apartment. Quite distinct again is the experience of a youngster of any ethnic culture in a household where mother is raising several children on her own.

Facing the paradox of adolescence and integrating the diverging challenges has common and unique aspects for families with teenagers. The common feature is the critical importance of the family for the teen's development. All the family members' relationships have to go through a profound transformation during adolescence. Growing up is a family affair and not just the teenager's job. The unique characteristics will become visible when people focus on the relational side of the process and observe what happens between the teenager and other family members or between the adolescent and the world outside the family.

The third installment of the series will deal with "The Family at an Impasse". We will address therapeutic guidelines and practical resources for parents.