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## The Importance of Family Time for Teens

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family interaction, although there also needs to be flexibility in accommodating social needs and desires of your child as well. One essential point: The rationale you present for spending time together needs to be positive -- because you enjoy his company and miss being with him -- or something to that effect. Mandatory get-togethers, on a "because I said we're having family time" basis, tend not to produce desirable results.

Some examples of family time may include regular family dinners, game nights, bike rides, walks, hikes, volunteer activities, outings of all kinds, creative pursuits such as cooking together or playing music together, doing chores together such as painting a room or planting a vegetable garden. Allow your child to choose among activities and timing, and also to make his own suggestions as much as possible. We don't hesitate to do these activities with our children when they are young, and it is just as important to continue doing them when our children are older. Of course, time together with your teen will necessarily be more limited than when he was younger, but perhaps it is possible to expand on what you are already doing together.

Even if the family consists of two or three members, it is important to spend alone time together. Many parents compromise and agree to include friends of their children in this family time. This makes teens happiest, of course. But the idea of family alone time is not just about pleasing your teens; rather it is vital to continue building communication, common experiences, understanding, and fun into your relationship. So while it's wonderful to include your child's friends in your family activities at times, it's also important to carve out enough exclusive family time with your teen.

Research indicates that teens who lack significant parental contact fill this vacuum with peer and media influences and values. Unfortunately, it sometimes takes children experiencing problems and requiring therapy before parents take a stand. It can be hard to find the fine line between imposing your will on your teen and gaining cooperation, but parents need to continue to try.

My practice is full of examples of how increased parental involvement helped a great deal in the healing process. Tyler, age fourteen,

Anyone who has teenage children knows that parents' popularity takes a rather drastic dive during these years. We go from being the center of our darlings' universe when they're little, to the years of being well-tolerated and sometimes admired servers and providers, to the teen years of being regarded as slightly above plankton on the food chain.

Some parents make the mistake of letting their teens' pervasive silence, grumpiness, or outright disdain drive them away. They think something along the lines, "Well, if I'm not wanted, I'll take the hint and make myself scarce. Maybe in a few years my child will want more time together." A few times of being ordered to walk several body lengths behind her teen son when in public led to one friend's understandable desire to avoid putting herself in such a situation again.

A neighbor confided that her daughter asked her not to laugh when she was around her daughter's friends because she sounded like a donkey. The message seems to be, "Mom and Dad, avoid drawing attention to yourselves in any way at all times." Isn't this a fun period of time for parents? If your self-esteem is not firmly in place, this is the time for it to take a complete nose-dive.

In working with parents of teens, I urge them to resolve to hang in there and establish a presence, despite what can be overwhelming feelings of rejection. Many teens would love to spend the majority of their time with their peers. They have common interests, speak the same language, and provide each other with limitless fun, drama, and social education. But the truth is they need us, just as they need to eat vegetables and get enough sleep. As our teens become impacted by so many physical, emotional, academic, and social influences, their families can be a safe refuge. Even though they are forging their own identities and need to detach a bit from us emotionally, we are the constants in their lives during these years.

I suggest that parents not be deterred by initial poor attitudes of their teens toward family time. It is important to insist on regular

felt somewhat abandoned by his mom, a single parent who was preoccupied with her new boyfriend. Tyler came in for help with anxiety and depression. When we included some family therapy sessions, his mother was able to see how, despite his being withdrawn and seemingly uncaring, Tyler still needed regular contact with her for meals, activities, and the communication that was a natural part of spending time together.

Stacy was a sixteen year-old who had very little involvement with her parents or younger brother. She had her own car, a credit card, the usual electronic devices for communication, and evidently no desire for family relationships. Her parents both worked long hours and also traveled occasionally for work. They made no demands on Stacy, and no chores, curfew, family dinners, or family time. All they required was that she get good grades in school. And when she didn't, they dragged her in for therapy.

Stacy's parents were so out of touch with her that they had no idea who she hung out with or what she did in her free time. Unfortunately, she was sexually promiscuous, experimented with numerous drugs, including cocaine and mushrooms, and had very little self-respect. While Stacy's parents thought they were doing her a favor by giving her freedom and what they thought were ingredients for happiness, she was actually suffering in silence.

After participating in family therapy, Stacy's parents were able to provide the structure and family involvement she had been lacking. Initially, of course, Stacy resisted all attempts to establish limits and expectations. But eventually she grew to enjoy the time her family spent together. She began to feel more worthwhile and deserving of good treatment from others and, most importantly, from herself.

So, difficult as it may be, try to ignore your teen's snarls or lack of enthusiasm when you initiate plans together. Making time with him a priority is ultimately one of the best gifts you can give him.

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