



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

adolescence

This month, I recycle a column from ten years ago. I wrote this column when we were having a hard time with our son during his high school years. We were frightened by his behavior and fearful for his future. Friends who had been through similar experiences reassured us that he would be okay, but it was hard to believe. Ten years later, a college graduate, he is hiking the Appalachian Trail with his sweetheart. It took time, but we sorted things out and we are all stronger and wiser for the experience. Take heart gentle readers if you are going through a hard time with your child.

What were you like as an adolescent? What were your aspirations? What caused you pain? How did you deal with that pain? What were your parents like?

As with any stage of parenting, getting in touch with our own experience can be very helpful in understanding our children and make our parenting more conscious. I think my father believed that children are born bad and have to be figuratively and, at times, literally whipped into shape. He never really knew me. I was an overly conscientious, anxious, eager-to-please kid. He was proud of the things I accomplished but that didn't translate into trusting me, encouraging me, urging me to take risks. I have spent much of my adult life overcoming the fear that was ingrained during my childhood.

WE EITHER HEAL OUR CHILDHOOD WOUNDS OR WE PASS THEM ON

Watching my children grow and develop has gone a long way to heal the wounds of my own childhood. In the popular "ten essential things" format, I would like to share what I have learned, from books, from friends, from experience, and from my work with many struggling parents. This advice is offered with the utmost humility. I certainly was not always able to follow it, but that is the best thing about parenting—you don't have to be perfect, just good enough.

- Remember always the wonder and awe you felt at your child's birth or adoption day. They are miracles, children of God, and each is very special.
- Love them unconditionally, remember what they do is different from who they are.
- Have faith in them. Keep their dreams alive.

- Respect them, listen to their views and opinions and disagree respectfully. They have the right to think and feel whatever they want; it is their behavior that has to conform to family standards. Let them know your values, don't preach, just share.
- Validate their feelings: teach them to label their feelings and express them appropriately. Help them learn to tolerate distress.
- Help them develop good problem-solving skills.
- Set reasonable, age-appropriate limits, assign reasonable age-appropriate responsibilities, and finally have reasonable consequences when they do not comply.
- Seek help and support from family, friends, teachers, or professionals when they have trouble emotionally, socially, or academically.
- Spend time with your children. A study some years back showed that for most kids, increasing the amount of positive parental interaction was as effective in changing negative behavior as implementing behavioral contracts. The former is so much easier and you become the ultimate reinforcer.
- "Give your adolescent a little more freedom than you are absolutely sure they can handle," Connie Toverud, Carolina Friends School Counselor, advised. Remember they will be on their own at 18. They will make mistakes, but they will learn from their mistakes and you will be there to help them.

Raising children is a risky endeavor and there are no guarantees. Ultimately, as parents, we do the best we can and pray! We reach out to others for support when times are tough and we try not to judge others who may be having difficulties. We gradually learn that, despite our best efforts, things do not always turn out the way we want. Our children come into this world with their own personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. For some, life will be fairly smooth and uncomplicated, for others it might be very hard.

As parents we can lay the foundation and offer love and structure and support but we can only do so much and then it is up to them. We can neither accept all of the blame nor take all of the credit. We do our jobs as well as we can and wait with humility to see how things turn out. **h&h**

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: www.stewartpsychologists.com