

Chapter One

Preparing for the Inevitable

The change seemed to happen overnight—that suddenly! Through elementary and middle school, our only child was easy to be with, but now with him at high school it's more difficult to stay as close. We don't talk as much, and we argue more when we do. Used to be we could do no wrong, but now it seems we can do no right. Gone is the happy threesome that we used to be. Now he wants to spend his time alone or with friends. We're just not fun to be around anymore. What did we do wrong?

Of course, the entry into adolescence doesn't actually happen overnight, but for many parents it can seem that way. In hopes that they and their child would escape the discomfort of her teenage years, they may have denied small changes they didn't want to see until the unwelcome signs were finally too numerous and intense to be ignored. Thus it's their sudden awareness and admission that happens overnight. Now is when the parental questions begin. What's going on? What happens next? How should we prepare? Suddenly there's a lot that parents need to know—not just about how to manage their changing child but about how to manage themselves. Parents tend to think that the primary challenge with adolescence is how to affect the teenager's conduct when in fact the first order of business is how to maturely conduct themselves. Just as the first injunction for medical doctors is "Do no harm," for parents of adolescents the

first command is “Govern thyself wisely.” To do this, some adult reorientation is required that necessitates changing parental attitude, understanding parental disenchantment, resetting parental expectations, making parental adjustments, and accepting why most parenting goes unappreciated, particularly in adolescence. It all starts with your attitude.

Parental Attitude

Consider *four important changes in attitude* that you can helpfully make when your son or daughter separates from childhood in late elementary or early middle school and begins to act more abrasively adolescent.

1. *Don't take your child's adolescence as a personal affront.* Your son or daughter is not acting like an adolescent to “get you” or to get you upset. They are acting adolescent for themselves, for their own interest, mostly unmindful of you. Inconsiderate adolescents often are, but calculating they are usually not. They are simply too self-centered on their own development to think about the effects of their changing behavior on you. For example, irritating though leaving the snack dishes unwashed, the lights on, the door open, the radio playing, or the faucet flowing may be, these are not deliberate provocations. These are thoughtless behaviors. To maintain a viable relationship, you have to keep perspective while also specifying and insisting on the terms of family consideration you need your adolescent to observe. Just remember that if other parents were put in your place, your teenager would be acting much the same. The parental job is to understand that although adolescent changes affect you, they are not about you. They are about your son or daughter.
2. *Don't punish your child for acting adolescent.* Adolescence is a process of growth. Just because you find some of the changes

offensive doesn't mean you should treat them as an offense. For example, you don't ground or otherwise sanction an adolescent for becoming more moody, less communicative, more argumentative, or less organized. You accept the process, but hold the young person accountable for choices made as the process unfolds. Thus don't penalize your child for the messiness that comes with increased disorganization, but still demand that he pick up after himself, and keep after him until he does. The parental job is to impose sufficient structure, set sufficient limits, and make sufficient demands so that the adolescent acts in ways that work within the needs of parents and family.

3. *Accept that adolescence is a more combative age.* A healthy adolescent is supposed to contest family limits and push for more freedom to grow. Healthy parents are supposed to withstand that push for the sake of ensuring safety and insisting on responsibility. This opposition unfolds throughout adolescence over many common areas of disagreement—adequate communication, household help, social freedom, school performance, and family rules among them. Increased conflict gradually builds up the teenager's determination to live on her own terms and be independent. More conflict does not mean something is wrong with your relationship. Conflict is the process used to broker increasing differences between you and your teen, a necessary part of how you get along.
4. *Understand that adolescence is meant to break the spell of childhood.* What spell? At the outset, parents feel as smitten by the newborn child and little girl or boy as that little person is by them. Add ten years to the child, and that enchantment has begun to lose some luster for both teenager and parents as more opposition and diversity develop between them. The mutual adoration that begins with infancy and that develops into close companionship

in childhood becomes mixed with more frustration and strained by more separation in adolescence and that's okay. After all, if parents and young people were to get through adolescence as enchanted with each other as they began, neither would ever let the other go. This mutual disenchantment does not signify a loss of love, but is founded on other losses experienced on both sides of the relationship, as described in the next section.

Mutual Disenchantment

Parenting an adolescent can stand in painful contrast to parenting a child, and the name of that pain is *loss*. It is loss that creates the disenchantment that grows between parent and adolescent. Consider a few common losses about which each can complain.

Parents often have complaints like the following:

- The child wanted time together with parents, but the adolescent wants more time apart with friends.
- The child was admiring (even adoring) of parents, but the adolescent is more critical.
- The child wanted to tell parents everything, but the adolescent wants to be more private and less confiding.
- The child was compliant with most of what parents requested, but the adolescent is more actively and passively resistant.
- The child liked to please parents, but the adolescent seems to court more disapproval.
- The child was proud to be seen with the parents, but the adolescent often considers this public association an embarrassment.
- The child wanted a lot of physical affection with parents, but the adolescent prefers to have less loving touch.

The adolescent can have complaints like the following:

- Parents who used to be calm and relaxed are often more worried and tense.
- Parents who used to be trusting are often more questioning and suspicious.
- Parents who used to be more satisfied and accepting are often more critical and disapproving.
- Parents who used to be playful and fun to be around are often more serious and demanding of work.
- Parents who used to enjoy doing for you, often want you to start doing more for yourself and them.
- Parents who used to encourage freedom of expression and activity are often more intolerant and restrictive.
- Parents who used to be interesting company often become more boring to be around.

Now their mutual admiration society begins to turn into a mutual irritation society as each increasingly rubs the other the wrong way. The other party, who used to do no wrong in their eyes, now seldom seems to do much right. So who's to blame for this abrasive turn of events? That's what they all want to know. "You used to be such a great kid. What happened to you?" ask the aggrieved parents. "Well, you used to be such great parents. What happened to you?" retorts the aggrieved adolescent. Blaming each other is not the answer, as the real culprit is adolescent change. Better is to understand that come adolescence, both parent and teenager have more in common than they like to think, actually sharing many of the same complaints:

"You never listen to what I say."

"You don't do what I ask."

"You keep putting me off until later."

"You don't appreciate all I do."

"You're always criticizing."

"You always want something more."

"You stay in a bad mood."

The change is hard on them both. To bring parental adjustment to adolescent change a little closer to home, consider it in metaphorical terms.

When Your Dog Becomes a Cat

Years ago, a parent tried to explain to me how disenchanting the adjustment to her child's adolescence was by giving me a metaphor that has stayed with me. Describing how hard it was when her warmly affectionate child started acting like a more coolly distant middle school adolescent, this parent asked, "How would you like it if your affectionate and loving dog started acting like your standoffish and irritable cat? That's the kind of change I mean. What happened to my beloved dog, is what I want to know. I miss my companionable and cuddly dog!"

After our conversation was over, I started playing with the metaphor she used, and was surprised where her comparison led my thinking. For openers, the dog can be demonstrative, friendly, empathetic, compliant, social, close, playful, predictable, communicative, and constant. The cat can be aloof, moody, apathetic, detached, solitary, distant, watchful, unpredictable, inscrutable, and changeable. Then I tried to amplify the differences:

The dog welcomes attention most of the time. The cat wants to be left alone a lot of the time.

The dog comes when called. The cat comes when it wants.

The dog walks on a leash. The cat walks by itself.

The dog is more even-tempered. The cat is more temperamental.

The dog is easier to read. The cat is more unreadable.

The dog likes to do what you like to do. The cat likes your doing what it likes to do.

The dog seems more under your control. The cat seems more committed to its own agenda.

The dog wants to please and works not to displease.
Sometimes it can be hard to tell if the cat really cares.

The dog is always glad to see you at the end of the day.
The cat may or may not be interested. (This comparison reminds me of Nora Ephron's wonderful line from *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*: "When your children are teenagers, it's important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you.")

This "child to adolescent–dog to cat" comparison was only an analogy, but the parental adjustment the mother suggested was real enough. Could she still love her teenager as "cat" the way she did her child as "dog"? Yes, but the relationship had become more challenging than it was before. A particularly frustrating part is when the adolescent behaves more like a cat-dog. Consider the conflicted, mixed messages a parent can be given. Sometimes the adolescent acts as though she wants to be treated like a dependent "dog," and sometimes like a more independent "cat":

"Help me."	"I can do it myself!"
"Talk to me."	"Don't talk to me!"
"Show me how."	"I can figure it out!"
"Pay me attention."	"Leave me alone!"
"Give me a hug."	"I don't like being held!"
"Tell me what to do."	"Don't tell me what to do!"
"Take me along."	"Why do I have to go with you?"

Which way does the adolescent want it? Both ways: the child (doglike) part of her wants to stay the same, but the adolescent (catlike) part of her wants to become different.

Of course, the adjustment challenge is on both sides. This adjustment from child to adolescent, from dog to cat, is hard for the teenager as well. And as she struggles with the change, her old pet's-eye view of her parents alters as well. Sometimes the kind masters act like mean rulers. Sometimes the favored companions become a social embarrassment. Sometimes the approving adults become disapproving critics. Sometimes the interested confidants become unwelcome inquisitors. Sometimes the authorities who were mostly right are often wrong. Sometimes parents who used to understand her so well, now act as though they haven't a clue. No wonder the teenager feels conflicted—wanting to be adolescent and act more grown up, but regretting the loss of all that went with being a child, including how wonderful parents once were.

So, what I told the parent who gave me this disenchantment metaphor was this: "It's all right to miss the familiar ways of your child as 'dog,' but don't let that loss get in the way of appreciating the more mysterious ways of your teenager as 'cat.' And don't forget, when your child starts changing into an adolescent, you start changing in response, which takes some getting used to for your teenager." The antidote to disenchantment is acceptance, which is where the power of expectations comes in. What doesn't work is for parents to expect their child to continue acting doglike during his or her more catlike adolescence. They have to reset their expectation to accept and fit the reality of adolescent change.

Resetting Expectations

Most parents, particularly with a first or only child, or with a second child if the first has been particularly "easy," are unprepared for that young person's adolescence. They consciously try

not to think about it because all they've heard about it scares them, or if they do think about it, they often assume that these unwelcome changes will happen to other people's children, but not to one of their own. However, denial is not a good coping strategy. In fact, denial is the enemy in hiding. By refusing to consider what they do not want to have happen, parents are unprepared when their son or daughter lets it be known that he or she is no longer content to be defined and responded to as just a child. "I'm not your little girl anymore, so stop treating me that way!" snaps the sixth-grade daughter refusing to laugh at her dad's playful joke, the kind he was fond of making to cheer her up when she had a sad day in elementary school. She is putting him on notice that this kind of humor is no longer fun or funny.

It behooves parents to develop a realistic set of expectations about the harder half of parenting, the adolescent years. A primary expectation to begin with has to do with duration. Today's parents can generally assume that adolescence will commence around ages nine to thirteen in late elementary or early middle school, and not to wind down until the early or mid-twenties, a little after the college-age years. Must it last this long? In most cases, the answer seems to be yes. It takes a lot of psychological and social growth to gain sufficient knowledge, skills, confidence, and maturity for stepping off on one's own, taking charge of one's life, supporting oneself, and making one's way in the world as an independent young adult.

So why are expectations psychologically important? Think of them this way. Expectations are mental sets we choose to hold (they are not genetically endowed) that help us move through time (from now to later), through change (from old to new), and through experience (from familiar to unfamiliar) in order to anticipate the reality we shall encounter next. To appreciate the power of expectations, consider being in a circumstance where you have no idea what to expect. Ignorance tends to beget feelings of anxiety: "I've never faced a situation like this before!" "I

don't know where to go, what to do, or what to say!" "I have no idea what the results will be!"

Most parents usually appreciate the importance of clarifying expectations when it comes adjusting their child to change. They see the preparatory role that expectations can helpfully play. So when it comes to helping the child make a geographical move, start a new school, or get ready for a medical operation, for example, they take the time to realistically anticipate what these new experiences are going to be like in order to smooth the way. "Even though rehabilitation after the operation will be tough, it's better for you to know that there will be discomfort and work for you to do to get better." Parents understand that anticipated hardships are easier to deal with than those that are unexpected because they have been denied.

Unpreparedness is emotionally costly and, where it is unnecessary, not worth the expense. This is the case where parents are blindsided by the adolescent transformation in their son or daughter because they chose to expect that he or she would continue behaving like the darling little child they had always comfortably known. Now see what happens. Consider three kinds of expectations parents can hold—predictions, ambitions, and conditions—and consider the outcome when they don't fit the realities of adolescent change.

Predictions have to do with what parents believe *will* happen. "My adolescent will be as openly confiding with me as she was as a child." But come adolescence, many young people for the sake of independence tend to become more private and less disclosing to parents. Now, when their prediction is violated, parents can feel surprised and anxious in response to the diminishing amount of communication. "We're hardly told anything anymore!"

Ambitions have to do with what parents *want* to have happen in adolescence. "We want him to continue to be as academically conscientious as he was as a child." But come adolescence, many young people suffer an "early adolescent achievement drop" (see

Chapter Eight) when homework and school performance suffer from a lowering of motivation. Now when their ambition is violated, parents can feel disappointed and let down in response to the falling effort. “He doesn’t seem to care about making good grades anymore!”

Conditions have to do with what parents believe *should* happen in adolescence. “She should continue to keep us adequately and accurately informed about what is going on in her life.” But when adolescence begins, many young people become more deceptive with parents, sometimes lying about what is going on for illicit freedom’s sake. Now when their condition is violated, parents can feel betrayed and angry in response to more dishonesty. “We’re not told the whole truth as often anymore!”

Unrealistic expectations can have emotional consequences for parents. Feeling surprised, disappointed, or betrayed by a normal adolescent change, parents can overreact with worry, grief, or anger, thereby “emotionalizing” a situation and making it harder to resolve effectively. This doesn’t mean that parents should just accept it when a young person cuts off communication, stops doing schoolwork, and acts dishonestly. *Expect does not mean accept*. Parents must address these new behaviors to let the young person know that they still need to be adequately informed, that performance effort at school still must be maintained, and that there must still be truthful communication. But if these parents had anticipated the likelihood of these changes, a rational discussion and not an emotional encounter would have ensued.

This book is meant to help you create realistic expectations about the journey of your child’s adolescence. Parents who are adequately informed about some of the normal changes, tensions, conflicts, and problems that typically unfold during adolescence are best positioned to cope with these challenges in appropriate and effective ways because they expected that these unwelcome issues and alterations might arise. By way of additional example, consider what can happen for parents emotionally when they fail

to set realistic expectations about how normal adolescent change may alter their traditional relationship to the child.

- The parent who predicts that the adolescent will continue to prize parental company more than any other is rudely awakened when the young person now prefers spending time with peers instead of time with parents. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of companionship.*
- The parent whose ambition is to enjoy the same interests with the adolescent that were shared with the child is rudely awakened when differentiation from childhood and parents causes that similarity to be lost. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of common interests.*
- The parent whose condition is that the adolescent should continue to look up to and want to please the parent as in childhood is in for a rude awakening when the young person becomes more critical, even putting Mom and Dad down for what they don't know. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of approval.*

These parents can certainly choose to maintain these unrealistic expectations, but they will do so at an emotional cost—feeling abandoned, rejected, and disparaged. It would be better for them to adjust their expectations to fit the new adolescent reality. Protest normal developmental alterations they cannot change, and they are in danger of overreacting when times get hard. In addition to resetting expectations, many parents have some hard adjustments to make.

Adjusting to the Five Realities of Adolescence

Not only does adolescence challenge the child to change; it challenges parents to change as well. They must adjust to some hard realities in relationship to their teenager that can be difficult for them to accept and that can require some hard

adult growing up to do. As their son or daughter acts less like a child and more like an adolescent, parents struggle to make five major adjustments—to ignorance, estrangement, abandonment, control, and conflict. These adjustments can be more difficult when tied to unresolved issues of a similar kind that parents themselves carried into their adulthood. For example, a parent who grew up in an abusive family may feel frightened when the adolescent becomes more easily frustrated and emotionally intense in conflict. In this case, it becomes more difficult for the parent to cope in the present because memories of past anxiety are being revived by a normal adolescent change. Let's look at these adjustments in detail.

Ignorance

Adolescence causes the child to become more private and less forthcoming as one way to define and defend a growing independence. Thus the adolescent is often less communicative with parents than was the child. As their son or daughter spends increased time with peers, away from home, and out in the world, parents have a higher need to know about what's going on, while their son or daughter has a higher need for his or her actions not to be known. The emotional consequence of this parental ignorance is more worry from knowing less when they want to know more. Those parents who have a very high need for information, perhaps from growing up in families with a lot of instability or unpredictability, can find their child's erratic adolescence particularly scary. When in ignorance, they are prone to become frightened and anticipate the worst. *The challenge for these parents is to prevent imagination from exploiting ignorance to fearful effect.*

Estrangement

Adolescence causes the boy or girl to differentiate from how he or she was as a child and from how his or her parents are in order

to establish a more unique and individual identity. Thus, for parents, the teenager's experimentation with new and varied interests, images, tastes, and friendships can create a degree of unfamiliarity that did not exist before. Sharing less in common with the adolescent than with the child, they feel they know the teenager less well. The emotional consequence is a degree of parental discomfort with the adolescent, whom they feel more awkward to be with and who fits less well into the family. Now it becomes more difficult to communicate and to connect. Those parents who need high similarity with their adolescent to feel close can feel more alienated at this time. And if they experienced significant alienation from their parents during their own adolescence, this difficulty in relating to a teenager of their own can feel very sad. *The challenge for these parents is not to be put off by what seems unfamiliar, but to keep bridging emerging differences by expressing interest, and not to pull away.*

Abandonment

Adolescence ordains more separation from parents as the young person asserts social independence of family, now preferring to spend more time with peers, and more time by himself or herself when at home. This growing apart means that parents have a harder time competing for the teenager's attention, and they may miss their son's or daughter's company. The emotional consequence is a degree of loneliness made worse if they have lost a best buddy or constant companion—a child who wanted nothing more than to be and do things with them. Those parents for whom this young companionship was most rewarding can feel most bereft come adolescence. And if they prized closeness with the child the more so for having grown up with an unavailable or absent mother or father, parents can deeply miss the old, close relationship to the child. *The challenge for these parents is to accept that less contact does not mean less love, to sincerely*

appreciate and mourn the passing of how things were, and then to forge independent relationships to satisfy their unmet companionship needs.

Control

When a son or daughter separates from childhood and enters adolescence, wanting to please parents tends to diminish, and willingness to displease parents in service of asserting more independence becomes the new order of the day. Thus, for parents, there is some loss of traditional authority when adolescence arrives. The emotional consequence of having less power is more frustration when the teenager questions or challenges a parental decision or deliberately resists or disobeys. Now it becomes more difficult to get the teenager to fit or follow the adult's agenda. Those parents who grew up identifying and complying with strict parents can feel very angry when they discover that their ruling power now depends on the teenager's willingness to cooperate with what they want. *The challenge for these parents is to accept that although they can't control their son's or daughter's choices, they can inform them, asserting influence through communication they make and stands they take.*

Conflict

Adolescence causes the teenager to become more abrasive and difficult to live with. Now he or she contests more parental decisions, disagrees more with what parents have to say, and pushes against old restraints to gain more freedom to grow. Thus begins the long process of opposition to liberate the teenager from parental rules and requirements and claim independence at last. The emotional consequence is increased disharmony between parents and teenager. Now parents find themselves dealing with a young person who has become more of a pusher and less of a

pleaser to live with and who is more prone to argument than agreement, creating a relationship in which there is more tension and stress. If parents grew up with little exposure to conflict or in families where conflict was an interaction to beware, they may feel threatened by a teenager who regularly takes them on, in the moment treating them more as enemy than as friend. *The challenge for these parents is to calmly engage in conflict as a normal communication process through which they can constructively broker disagreements with their adolescent.*

Parents having the hardest time making these five adjustments are those who are unable or unwilling to let go of the child relationship so that the adolescent one can unfold. These adults often identify themselves through statements they make. About ignorance: "I must know everything that is going on." About estrangement: "We are going to stay as close as we were in childhood." About abandonment: "I will always be my child's best friend." About control: "I should not be challenged or resisted." About conflict: "I can't stand for us not to get along." I believe that these parents to varying degrees have some of their own growing up to do. This requires that they make the following five adjustments in their reaction to their child's adolescence:

- *They will be inadequately informed:* "I must get by on less information than I would ideally like to know."
- *They will be less compatible:* "We do not share as much in common as we once did."
- *They will be left more alone:* "I am no longer my child's favored company."
- *They will be less in charge:* "I have less influence to get my way."
- *They will be more in opposition:* "We have more cause for disagreement between us now."

Then, of course, there is the additional adjusting to a fall from grace, whereby the adolescent is less appreciative of his or her parents than was the child. Let's consider this adjustment next.

Lack of Appreciation

Adolescence can be a reminder of how most parents feel unappreciated most of the time, tending to the needs of a young person who doesn't want such tending to. Here are some of the things parents of teenagers often hear: "Leave me alone!" "I don't want to talk about it!" "You never let me do anything!" "You're always on my case!" "You never understand!" "Why do I have to?" "I'll do it later!" In the adolescent's defense, it's truly hard to value parents when their demands and restraints keep getting in the way of all the freedom one wants at a more independent-minded age. This is why adolescence is the age of *thankless parenting*. For the sake of their child's best interests, responsible parents must take unpopular stands against what the adolescent wants, and they do not receive gratitude for their efforts.

Parents of adolescents are frequently ignored, taken for granted, discounted, tolerated, criticized, resented, and resisted, so they often feel that they are being treated as people their children are barely able to put up with, not caregivers who are sacrificing self-interest on a daily basis to help their son or daughter grow. What recently brought this neglect to mind was the complaint of one hardworking mother of two adolescents: "Most of the time I feel like I'm invisible for all I do!" Except that this is not really a problem, I suggested. It's a reality. Most parents labor in obscurity because invisibility of effort is simply an unrewarding condition of parental life, a condition that gets worse once one's child enters adolescence. Years ago, I put this in writing when working with a group of parents who had teenagers.

Thankless Parenting

*All parents labor in obscurity,
The work they do too ordinary
To be recognized by the society
That depends for future citizens
Upon the preparation
Parents give.*

*The endless daily tasks
Are too many to enumerate,
Too small to notice and too transitory
To be remembered by the beloved beneficiaries,
Grown children unable to recount one nth of all the effort
Made on their behalf when parents set themselves aside,
Home from the job still working to provide,
Did it all when all their energy was spent,
Responding to an infant's crying need,
Sacrificing to fulfill a child's heart's desire,
Rushing to meet an adolescent's dire emergency.*

*Just suppose on graduation into adulthood,
Grown children got a printout listing
Every act of care taking
Received since birth,
A million pages
Itemizing each parenting decision,
Necessary and discretionary service,
And painful problem-solving deliberation,
The more mundane the better:
"Nineteen eighty-one,
On the fourteenth of May
I kept you home with a fever,
And wiped your nose eleven times today."*

*Surprised,
 The young adult
 Politely scans the document
 Promising to look it over later,
 But never does since daily parenting
 Makes for such dull reading,
 Wondering:
 “Who would want to know all this?”*

*No one.
 That’s why parents labor in obscurity.*

Parenting is an inequitable arrangement, particularly with adolescents, because parents invest far more of themselves in their self-preoccupied teenager than their teenager ever invests in them. However, lest you consider this inequity unfair, think of it this way. Parenting is a great privilege. It is the only job that matters so much—accepting primary responsibility for nurturing and preparing the next generation of human life. Given the importance of the work, the self-sacrifice is worth it, particularly when the investment is made with love.

Preparing for the inevitable, parents need to ready themselves for the harder half of parenting that the adolescent years begin. “Harder” doesn’t mean bad or worse or unhappy. It means different and more demanding and more complex. It also means more rewarding as they get to witness and participate in the growth of their child into a young adult, in the development of their daughter or son into a young woman or young man. In the next two chapters, I propose four stages of adolescent growth, a roadmap to help parents anticipate normal changes along the way.

