

Interpersonal relationships

Life is about relationships. The relationship between you and your parents, siblings, your friends, classmates, and future partners, determines the quality of your life. Family, peer and love form the tripod of relationships that dominate the world of an adolescent.

1. Relationship with your family

The family provides a physical and emotional shelter for us to grow up in. Attention invested in each other – among family members - creates an environment of love and mutual support, which is the nutrient that keeps a family together, harmoniously and happily.

Q: what are the reason why adolescence rebel against parents?

Our reliance on parents weakens, albeit gradually, as we leave childhood to enter adolescence. During this time, we struggle to become an individual and prepare ourselves for the establishment of a family of our own. Conflict arises, when parents are not ready to let go of the control over their children, who increasingly demand more freedom in making decisions relevant to their own surroundings (such as school, workplace or children's clubs), aspirations and dreams.

As children are increasingly exposed to a rapidly changing world, they absorb new information and begin to form their own views. A certain amount of independent thinking and judgment is developed. However, parents are often unwilling to admit that their children are capable, intelligent, or mature enough to make their own decisions. Tension arises when parents continue to adopt an "I know best" attitude, and impose wishes and advice that serve to undermine, rather than enhance, their children's independence.

Frustrations mount up and sometimes, escalate into antisocial and reckless behaviour, when parents are unable to strike a compromise with their children. Major decisions involving future career and marriage plans are usually delicate matters that puts our relationship with our parents on trial. Parental authority and personal freedom do not often come together in a neat package. Frequently, they are at different poles, and taken to extreme, lead to a deteriorating relationship with our parents.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you like most in your family, why?
2. Who do you dislike most in your family, why?
3. Do you want to improve your relationship with a particular family member?

If so, do you think it's possible? How can you go about it?

4. When you disagree with your parents, what do you usually do? Do you try to understand why they think that way, and try to help them understand your position?
5. How do you help your parents better understand your position ?

2. Relationship with peers

As the family's degree of influence dwindles in an adolescent's life, friends move into the forefront. Friends are peers, that is, people of the same age, with a similar background and interest. They may be taught by the same teachers, listen to the same radio programmes, or idolise the same movie star. They have so much to share that they enjoy talking with each other or simply hanging out together.

Adolescence is a time characterised by both rebelliousness and conformity. When teenagers' fragile sense of identity is threatened or suppressed by their parents or any kind of authority at home, they feel frustrated, or upset. So, they seek a way out by turning to their peer group. Friends can share your problems, explore alternatives, cheer you up, and give you joy.

When adolescents get together, they may take to drinking, smoking, or even drugs. These are things considered "cool" and that make them feel that they have achieved adult status.

Many teenagers, however, have a strong sense of what's right or wrong in their conduct. The problem is that they are often unable to face the prospect of being ridiculed, or abandoned by their gang. Their daily lives are dominated by peer values, they conform to group behaviour, even though they are keenly aware of its consequence, and may regret it afterwards.

For teenagers, friends are usually the source of

- new information,
- providing positive feedback and
- giving them a sense of personal freedom.

Very often, it's friends who know them better than family members, or are willing to listen to their problems and stand by them when faced with tension at home.

However, friends can also become the source of social pressure, making a teenager yield to the same standard of behaviour. Although friends can provide emotional comfort, they can also seduce a teenager into drinking, smoking and drug use.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you have friends? What do you think is most important in friendship? (Focus on constructive friendships that help us grow and make progress.)
2. What is peer pressure?
3. Have you experienced peer pressure?
4. What's the harm of peer pressure?
5. How do you deal with peer pressure?

3. Love relationship

Have you noticed how ill at ease a teenage boy feels in front of a girl? Or how bashful a girl is in the presence of a boy? Their awkward reaction toward the opposite sex comes at a time when adolescents are going through physiological and psychological changes. Those changes make them self-conscious, which is a process of adjustment - to a new appearance, new emotional needs and new interests - intensifying the search for self-identity.

A teenager's life is further complicated when he or she starts to enter a relationship with the opposite sex.

The first experience of strong emotion or attraction to the other person is exhilarating, making you happy and alive. At the same time, the relationship is fragile. It has to withstand many tests, pressures and barriers to grow stronger and stronger. A rift can lead to a permanent break-off if the young lovers do not make efforts to communicate, and empathise with the other party's plight. A break-off can cause immense emotional turmoil to the extent that it can drive a teenager into extreme behaviour.

"Falling in love" is an ecstasy so great that you feel you are in heaven. But the opposite of ecstasy is sadness or misery. When a relationship falls apart, when the girl says: "I can't be with you anymore," or "I do not love you, please leave me alone," the disbelief, followed by dejection, sends you from seventh heaven to hell.

In truth, a healthy way of handling a relationship is not just about falling in love. Neither is it all about living happily ever after. It is also about ending a relationship constructively.

Family, peer and love relationships all matter to a teenager. Self-awareness, empathy and effective communication are the cornerstones of a healthy and responsible relationship.

Self-awareness and empathy are the foundation of our relationship with others. In the first chapter, we learned about self-awareness - the ability to know and accept ourselves. The ability to understand ourselves engenders the capacity for sensing other people's needs and feelings and accept their perspectives. Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person.

It is the ability to put oneself in the shoes of another person to understand what he or she is going through. Empathy means you care how others feel and you are willing to offer emotional support.

Empathy is most effective when both parties are willing to apply it. Someone however, has to take the lead. If we simply wait for others to empathise with us, it may never happen. If you are a parent, you can make efforts to understand your child first; if you are the child, you will want to see the viewpoints of your parents first; if you are a husband, you may try help out when your wife is busy with domestic tasks and farming, and if you are a wife, you may want to understand why your husband turns to drinking. Perhaps it is not due to the bad neighbour's influence, perhaps he is frustrated and does not know what to do...

Empathy works wonders when we apply it to our relationships - with our loved ones, classmates, parents, friends, cousins and colleagues. It helps us move closer to solutions, to resolve conflicts, and enhance our quality of life.

Discussion Questions

1. What's the difference between friendship and love?
2. If you have a special feeling toward a boy or a girl, what do you do?
3. When you are interested in someone, but that person doesn't have the same feeling towards you, what do you do?
(Emphasise respecting another person's feelings and will)
4. When your girlfriend/boyfriend decides to break up with you, how exactly do you feel? Can you accept it? (Emphasise the ability to end a relationship constructively)