

Re-Parenting Self Through Parenting an Adolescent

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As a mental health professional working in the field of human Psychology for past 20 years, I have come across many parents approaching a psychologist to help their adolescent. There are challenges ranging from disruptive behaviour, addiction, low self-esteem, inability to study, anger issues, incapacity to express themselves, sexual identity challenges, bullying, and many more. They range from mild to very high intensity challenges. In an urban setting, lot more parents are becoming aware and are ready to take support for their adolescents. Most of the times, parents may bring in the adolescent from a very clinical and correctional perspective. Just get him/ her ok and that's it. Their responsibility seems to get over with the intervention they have made of getting the adolescent to the psychologist.

In this article I aim to introduce a perspective shift on how parenting an adolescent can be an insightful opportunity for the parent to self-reflect and bring about a long-term shift in the parent-adolescent relationship. Think about re-parenting yourself and becoming the parent you always wanted to be. It is also a space for reflecting on the inter-generational patterns that are being reflected in the adolescent's behaviour. When a parent works on themselves, it brings a huge shift in the adolescent's behaviour and the family dynamics. So, it may not be that the adolescent is the trouble maker, but actually, he may be acting as a mirror, reflecting parts of us which we may be uncomfortable to look at

This article is based on a personal experience with my adolescent and my experiences as a psychologist and biography consultant.

My son became a teenager and I was getting ready to embrace his adolescence. In my head I felt I knew it all, I am a trained Psychologist. But as I believe, life challenges you where it hits the most. There were huge anger outbursts and constant fights between him and me. He wanted to keep his room closed most of the times, didn't want to talk with us. Frustrated, I would keep asking him to open his room and talk to us. His grades were slipping and he was not ready to talk to me and my husband. There was no apparent reason for his behaviour. The only

report we got from his school was that he was a great kid, his behaviour was courteous and he just needs to focus on his studies and writing skills, which he was not really fond of. In hindsight, he was just being an adolescent.

When it hits so close, it throws you off balance. That's what happened with me. As a parent, I was reacting rather than responding, either by getting into a verbal argument or by showing passive-aggressive behaviour and not talking at all. Every single interaction was turning into a confrontation and leaving our relationship in a worse space. After every single interaction, I would feel I wish I had responded differently. I really don't know how all these confrontations left him.

I held a strong intent to change the dynamics of our relationship and work towards building a strong, healthy one. I also realized that as an adult, I needed to take the onus of working on the relationship. After all, I was expecting him to behave like one. I also knew very well that as I change and respond differently, his response would definitely change. Just like, it takes two for a tug of war and if one person is not ready to even hold the rope, you cannot have a tug of war.

I also decided to look at my relationship independent of my husband's relationship with our son. I made a conscious effort to understand whether I was adding to the fire, rather than merely holding my son responsible for causing this continuous fire of confrontations.. It takes effort, time and patience to build the objectivity muscle, in your personal relationships. It was also about drawing boundaries. This is not easy and neither a relaxing process.

The first step that came for me was to review the interaction between us, in hindsight, and see how it really flowed. I would start reviewing our conversation, right from the beginning. It helped me to look at things objectively and understand the space I was coming from. It helped me understand

- What was I feeling – angry, relaxed, balanced, anxious;
- My thinking – was I carrying pre-conceived notions about him, our interactions, what were

we interacting about?, was I worried about his performance in his academics and how it would be perceived by my family? , was I carrying judgments linking my parenting to his behaviour?

- My body language and behaviour while interacting with him.

I would also try and analyze his real message behind his tone, and his confrontational body language. Was there any truth in it? What was I not noticing? Or what part of his behaviour, thoughts and feeling triggered me. All these points were not something I noticed from the beginning. Gradually as I started reviewing our interaction, I began to uncover so many layers and dimensions. It was a slow process and it takes time.

Looking at all these aspects it made me realise that my son's first response comes from what he sensed in my tone. So even if I am talking politely by trying to hide my anger, he would sense that anger and would respond from that space. This was my first insight and was very helpful. It gave me a huge check-point. It was a big eye opener and confirmation to my understanding of human interactions. It reiterates the fact that we respond to how we sense the other person. So, if I was not coming from a space of sarcasm or anger, we would have a much more comfortable interaction.

The second insight helped me understand the patterns of my interaction with him. Most of my interactions were about things he was not good at, or values which he held differently. I, as a parent would have wanted different set of values to be absorbed and shown by my son in his behaviour. When I looked at my parenting, I realised I had raised my son to be an independent thinker, who questions and sent him to a school which also believed in the same. So, it was time for me to question what was making me difficult to accept when he was trying to exert his independence now.

I also realised that talking about things he was not good at and repeating the same message about how he needs to work on his subjects was not helping because he was well aware of all the things. After all, how many of us want to hear our criticisms and ways to improve it all the time. He was unable to bring it to his actions, and not because he didn't want to, but because he was unable to. He was unaware of the reason.

We both were. I had to stop doubting his intention that he didn't want to. After all, who wouldn't want to do well and if someone doesn't want to, then it definitely is a cry for help.

I also reviewed what adolescence actually meant and how my son was probably just being one. Though I already knew it, it helped to go back to my reading. Something that helped me was to review what adolescence is? I share a summarised version here. Adolescence is a stage of finding one's own identity and to develop that, one need's to somewhere disconnect from the people you are closest to i.e. your parents. You are in the process of finding your own. Also, with the pull between all the hormones playing up in the body and our inner desire to build and experience an ideal world; it is a huge struggle that every adolescent faces. With all this happening at different levels of consciousness, they tend to close the door for renovation and reformation. Thus, the point to remember is to avoid taking anything they share personally and to stop blaming them for their behaviour. It is important to do this while drawing some boundaries.

As I was getting more and more observant and reflective of the process, our interactions slowly began to change. There were times when we would still fall back in the same old groove sometimes until I reflected on it. One fine night, I suddenly got up and walked to his room; saw him watching a series on his phone. I was flustered; I decided to have a conversation with him, without blaming him for what he was doing. As our empathic conversation proceeded, he broke down and we realised that the task seemed so daunting that he felt he didn't have the ability or the courage to face it. It also brought out a pattern for him that in stress, he is unable to work, even if he wants to. The whole not care attitude was a façade behind which he was hiding his fears. We spoke further and decided to work on it together. We worked with a belief that he can make it because he had been able to work on tasks, he was not good at and work successfully in past. Citing examples from his past where he had done it helped.

Slowly our interactions started improving, after having seen his stress; I was not blaming him anymore, which I was doing earlier. Also, my own reflective work helped me work on my fears as a mother and deal with questions such as what if I failed as a mother. I also decided to accept

that his life, his work was his responsibility and I will have to let him take onus, no matter how much time it takes. He will have to find his own way to do things and I have to respect the process and the outcome. My fears, anxieties cannot decide the content of our interactions. Only our joy of the relationship and connection can. At the same time, I now realised that if I was not comfortable with the way he was talking, it was now a lot easier for me to draw a boundary and not take him personally.

The summarised version of the process and the steps has been presented below, in case any parent intends to work on their relationship with their adolescent. I feel that these steps should be valid for anyone wanting to work on any relationship.

- Set an intention for the relationship
- Look at one interaction objectively, from the beginning till the end, objectively.
- Explore the space you come from, your innermost feelings, thoughts, actions, without judgment.
- Identify your triggers and what triggers the other person.

- Mark the patterns in your interaction.
- Accept your contribution to the relationship and its working, as an equal.
- Trust the other person's ability and intention.
- Draw and maintain your boundaries.
- Work on your triggers and exchanging the unhealthy patterns with the healthy patterns of communication.
- Trust the process.

It was a long and arduous journey for it is never easy to work with one's own shortcomings. There were times when I would fail and would start again. However, every part of it was worth it, for what I learnt about myself and shifts it brought in my attitudes helped shift a lot of things in my personal space, not only as a mother but also as an individual. In other words, I became a better parent honing skills and processes that helped me for life. I am only filled with gratitude for my son to come in to my life and help me learn a lesson, which was worth learning and otherwise not possible.