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Don't panic!

Welcome to Planet Teen!

Welcome to *Teen Talk Parent Talk* – the book written especially for parents who have the great privilege, yet onerous responsibility of raising the next generation of young adults.

I admit that I have been somewhat reluctant to write a book for parents about raising teens for quite some time. After writing particularly for a teen audience for the past few years, I have received numerous requests to create a similar type book for the parents of teens. What a daunting task! Writing a book for fellow parents tends to assume that I must 'know it all', which I most certainly do not; nor would I ever claim to.

What I do bring to the table however, is over eighteen years of experience in the 'front line', so to speak, immersing myself in the daily lives of adolescents in the role of a secondary teacher. I also spend time throughout the year, speaking with many hundreds of adolescents in schools and youth camps throughout the county. Coupled with this, is years of on the job training in listening, counselling, advising and at times, crying with countless parents of adolescents who are almost at their wit's end. And finally, I am also in the midst of parenting my own teenage son!

'When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.'

Mark Twain

In working with adolescents for the past two decades, I can honestly say that, for the most part, it is an absolute privilege and great fun. I choose to spend my days immersed in teen world because I generally find teenagers great fun to work with, eager to broaden their experiences, and incredibly wise. We often sell this generation short with phrases common in the media such as the 'Me Generation' who want everything now, and have an often overbearing sense of entitlement. What I have experienced is that many teens are actually incredibly focussed and well-adjusted, and do care about many issues other than themselves. Many want and do make a worthwhile contribution to society. I have great faith in our teens and you should too!

What I have found to be true, is that often in the midst of battle with teens, in the most stressful times of being a parent, the most basic of knowledge, understanding and advice can be an absolute God-send!

And very often, in the thick of battle, parents find it difficult to see their way through and can lose sight of some of the simplest tactics.

Parenting can be just plain hard work – no doubt about it!

As an educator, I have found that offering the most basic, and sometimes obvious advice and a listening ear, can be so valuable to parents who just cannot seem to find the way through with their struggling adolescent. What a privilege it is to be able to support one another – and we should! As parents, we should not seek to point our finger at parents who seem to be struggling with their teen, thinking ‘We certainly wouldn’t parent *that way!*’ Or ‘No wonder their teen behaves *that way!*’ We should be able to support each other in one of the most difficult roles of a lifetime. Rather than challenging other’s parenting styles and coping strategies (and boy, don’t we ALL get it wrong at times!!), let’s offer support and encouragement rather than judgement.

Crying at the window

I was talking with a mother of a 15 year-old recently. The chat quickly moved to that emotion that a parent feels, watching a child slowly move into adulthood, changing along the way.

‘You know, my son is 15 years-old now,’ she said. ‘He’s making his own choices and decisions, many that I find difficult to condone.’

‘And I see his struggles,’ the mum confided. ‘To outsiders, he is a 15 year-old teen.’

‘But you know, when I look at my son, this young man, I still see that little toddler, standing at the window of the day care centre when I came to collect him after work, crying at the window. He’d call out, “Mummy, Mummy”.’

‘To me, he is still my little boy, and I’ll always be fiercely protective of him.’

I can so relate. We all have dreams and visions for our children. Hopes and desires... and that sense of wanting to protect them while letting them grow up...

As you read on, you’ll see statistics and research, academic ideas, advice and strategies that I’ve seen work.

You’ll read how many have succeeded in their parenting.

What I hope you'll see most of all, is a friend in those words – a sense of being supported by others who've done it before you and survived.

This planet you're on is not a lonely place. I'm here with you, and so are many others, even when you can't see us.

So let's begin...

The day my son became a teenager

I woke up this morning
At the usual time, after falling asleep
Amidst the blissful recollections
of my firstborn's childhood.

I fondly recalled walking back to my hospital room
After his birth, pushing this beautiful baby boy in his
Hospital bassinet, feeling so much pride and awe
That I was certain I might burst.

The joy of getting to know this precious child
His developing personality
His cheeky smile
His first tooth, words and tentative steps to independence
How quickly that time has flown
Memories that could easily have been created yesterday
They are so vividly etched in my mind
I have watched him tentatively take his first step
Into primary school
Discover friendships, sport and adventures
And recently graduate as a confident, humorous and
Energetic young man about to embark on his
High School and adolescent journey.

So now I awaken to a brand new day
A brand new phase of my life as a parent
A day filled with a mother's hopes, dreams and aspirations
As to what the future holds for her baby boy
For in my mind's eye
He is still that little baby I held in my arms at birth
Reliant on me for his every need

But as from today
He is a teenager
A young man who has the world at his feet
Who will continue to grow in strength and courage
Who will question what his parents think and say
And make his assumptions about the world and
His place in it
Who will make his mistakes along the way
And hopefully learn some valuable lessons

I do not know what the future will hold
But I will be beside him every step of the way
Listening, supporting and just being

Welcome to teenagehood my son
I love you!

Sharon Witt, January 2010



How teens are wired

Welcome to Planet Teen

Sometimes, adolescence can feel like we have landed on another planet.

Back when we were new parents, and our babies were learning to mouth our names, I don't remember anyone putting a space-suit on me and saying that I was headed for another world one day.

And yet, one morning, I think something happened. Surely some force transported me to Mars. Or was it Venus?

Whatever planet took over my life, I sure wasn't expecting it.

By now, I've worked it out. And I think you're there with me! **Planet Teen!**

We know it well now. A new language to learn, different dress codes, and certainly some new behaviours that we're not familiar with.

Coming to terms with the new inhabitants

On Planet Teen, young people grapple with their identity, who they really are and what makes them the unique and amazing individuals that we know they are. They rely heavily on their peers for support – friendships often becoming more important in an adolescent's mind than their families. They look to these peers for support and even more crucial, for acceptance. On Planet Teen, children who were once quite happy to wear whatever items of clothing were on the floor of their room, now want to choose their clothes and experiment with a variety of looks and fashions, often much to the horror of their parents!

On Planet Teen, the inhabitants are seeking what their place in this world is, what will their future look like and how they are ever going to get to where they want to go.

They are born adventurers, experimenters, challengers, and emotional roller coaster riders.

*'Raising teenagers is like
nailing jelly to a tree!'*

Author unknown

Raising a resilient teen

Let's be honest. Most parents do not want to bring to adulthood a series of lazy, disengaged, staring-into-space individuals. *(Don't be upset with me if that's a good description of the person glued to a laptop in the next room.)*

We want to raise independent, resilient and empowered young people, who are prepared to live a fantastic and fulfilling life.

Research tells us there are a number of key factors that have been identified as the building blocks or key development features that help young people grow up to be capable and responsible adults.

The Search Institute has identified through its research, a number of external and internal assets that are identified as being key for adolescents aged 12–18 to develop.

External assets

External assets include support structures, such as family, relationships with other adults and mentors, a caring school climate, as well as local neighbourhood. Being empowered has also been identified as a key external asset, such as being involved in community activities, being in a youth group, serving others and being given roles in the community. Boundaries and expectations are also identified as being key assets in an adolescent's development – including having clearly defined boundaries at home and school.

Finally, constructive use of time is vital for young people to develop, including being involved in youth programs, music, religious communities and time at home. Young people who feel a sense of connectedness tend to do better in developing resilience for when they face trials and stresses that will inevitably follow.

Internal assets

Internal assets are those that are developed within the adolescent, and include a commitment to learning (engaged in school, commitment to completing homework and who care about their school environment). Internal assets also include the development of positive values, including justice, honesty, integrity and a sense of responsibility. A young person develops resilience also through the development of a positive identity (many of which I'll expand on in this book), but include developing a positive self-image, a sense of purpose and positive view of the future.

Research indicates that young people who develop a number of these developmental assets will be resilient and less likely to engage in risk-taking activities. They'll feel a sense of purpose and will most likely have a stronger self-image than those young people who are lacking such assets.

