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Raising a Spirit- ed Young Adolescent (and Your Spirits, too)

by Margaret Sagarese and Charlene C. Giannetti

Do you ever feel like a failure as a parent?

Your easygoing daughter or good-natured son of yesteryear has morphed into a disrespectful rebel. He storms into his room every time you question him She cries every time you tell her no. You know that children are supposed to change as they grow, but now you worry. What lies ahead: the principal's office, the psychologist's couch, the drug treatment center, the hospital emergency room, or the county jail?

Today's parents push the panic button faster than any generation in history. They judge themselves failures, (and their adolescents as well) too quickly. Why? The world is a scarier place. Our expectations are higher than ever before. Neither parent nor child can measure up to the current popular standards. It's high time for a different measuring stick.

Typically, we focus on academics, popularity, athletics, leadership; hoping our sons and daughters will excel. In a climate where 2nd graders take French lessons and 5th graders zero in on their odds for Harvard, too many of us want "designer children." That label begs for a child who is attractive, stylish, charming, athletic, an A student, talented enough to get the lead in the play, class president---a kind of Stepford Child. Is it any wonder we, along with our offspring, feel lacking?

For a moment, put aside visions of the honor role, prom queen, super jock, and class president and take a close look at what is normal for children. Nearly every young adolescent will test you. Middlers (as we coin 10 to 15-year-olds) are in the business of testing---testing your limits, your values, your rules, even basic common sense. Experimenting with hair, clothes, friends, and pop music is common. Be patient. This doesn't mean you need to abandon curfews, standards, and supervision. It does mean you have to give children room to test the waters, know when to reel them in and when to let them take risks. A number of kids go bad for a patch during their youth. According to a 1999 Institute of Medicine Report on Adolescents, one quarter of all young adolescents are at risk for psychological or social problems and that means drugs, drinking, run-ins with the law, and academic failure. Think back; were you the 1 in 4? If not, surely you can name names within your own family or neighborhood. That statistic is not meant to excuse the misbehavior, or to wipe away your foreboding; just to remind you that foolishness accompanies youth.

Having the patience of a saint will serve you well, no matter what your religion. Consider other historically-strained parents. St. Monica lost sleep over her son, Augustine, who slept around and espoused blasphemous beliefs before finding his religion and imagine the plight of Job's mother. It takes time for some children to outgrow their rebelliousness, bad decisions, or just plain old bad luck.

Is it better to not know all the sordid details of what your 16-year-old is doing on Saturday night? No. Beware of a instinct to stick-your-head-in-the-sand. Knowledge is power. Get to know who your child is becoming as his interests change. Middle schoolers whiz through a range of hobbies and fads. Talk with your child about school and friends. Instead of gauging how she is doing in classes or sports, let your conversations revolve around traits like perseverance, fairness, kindness, and courage. Rather than finding the right friends, check to see if she is befriending caring human beings. Has she the courage to stand up to middle school teasing and

bullying even if the cool kids are doing it? Underline this truth: being a good person is more important than being a good student, a good center forward or quarterback, or a good party animal.

We all need faith more than ever these days. In our first parenting book, “The Roller-Coaster Years,” we commiserated with mothers and fathers about the darker world in which our children come of age. As teens, neither we, nor our mothers, had to process Internet predators or AIDS. M & M was a candy, not a risqué rapper. Ecstasy was a state of mind, not a designer drug. Hooking up referred to telephone lines, not casual oral sex on Friday night. Our world has gotten scarier each year. Angry boys and girls go into schools shooting, heretofore an unimaginable response to being teased. Last year on September 11th, terror struck home. A cell is no longer just part of a biology lesson, but fanatics possibly living next door.

It's natural to respond by becoming stricter. Not letting go during a time when 10 to 15-year-olds need more freedom is bound to make control and independence battlegrounds. You need faith more than ever before. Your religion offers the road map. You need faith in yourself and the values you have imparted. You need faith in human nature or in God. You need faith in your child until she proves she doesn't deserve your trust.

When your child falls short or slips up, then you need to respond by seizing upon humility. Nearly all middle schoolers hit the wall academically, students with As and Ds. Most young adolescents can't be the stars of the team, the fantasy dates, or the leaders of the student council. All young adolescents feel scrutinized and self-conscious. They judge themselves harshly in their mirrors. When you act embarrassed by a child's mistake, or mediocre performance, your child knows it. Your disappointment or your criticism adds an additional weight burden, to already sagging shoulders, sabotaging an already fragile ego.

Despite what you think teenagers still want to please their parents. Failing to do so makes them feel even more the failure. If your son screws up badly or if your daughter doesn't fit your bill, get rid of your bruised ego. What counts is your child's heart, and your child's soul, and your child's character; not your child's body, report card, dance card, or resume.

The best thing you, as a parent, can aim for is to love the child you have. There will certainly be times during adolescence when you may not like your son or daughter very much. Between hormones and hellions, adolescence isn't always a walk in the park. Breaking your rules and bucking your values happens. Don't throw out the rules or the ethics, but always show forgiveness. All religions have prodigal son tales and holy men and women renowned for their ability to forgive. If St. Maria Goretti could forgive her murderer on her deathbed, can't you forgive your child for whatever wrongdoing comes home to roost?

Love works miracles. You won't feel like a failure as a parent once you trade in your old yardstick for a new vision. Nurture yourself and your adolescent spiritually. When a teen is spirit-ed, remember to focus on the spirit.

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