Navigating the tricky world of parenting adolescents

‘They want to feel cared for. They want to feel love. They want to feel safe.’

By Jane Sutter

Has your formerly sweet adolescent turned into an argumentative rebel practically overnight? Did you smell cigarette smoke on his clothes? Did she get caught skipping school with a posse of girls you don’t know? It doesn’t mean it’s time to lock him or her in a closet and throw away the key, say adults in the know.

These adolescents’ behavior simply reflects that they are not all grown up, despite what they think. The part of their brain that helps them control impulses, rationalize, and make good decisions is still developing, and it will be until they are in their 20s, said Stephanie Godleski, associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Rochester Institute of Technology.

“The big struggle really of this period is that adolescents are seeking autonomy and feeling that they are ready to make all of their choices, and the parents know they’re not quite there yet,” Godleski said.

The teen years are not the time when parents should disengage from their child’s life, but it is a time of delicate balance in the relationship, said both Godleski and John Sarafine, who has been counseling students in high schools for almost 40 years. He worked as head counselor at Fairport High School, logging 34 years. He’s now in his fourth year as director of college counseling and student advisers at McQuaid Jesuit High School.

Navigating these situations depends on the existing relationship between the parent and the child.

“If you have a good trusting relationship with your kids, a two-way trust where you trust them and they trust you, then I think they make the good choices of who to associate with and who not to associate with,” Sarafine said.

“If parents are detached from their child, and a bit out of touch about the activities and the whereabouts of their kid, and there’s not a lot of trust there, it becomes harder,” she added.

Ideally, a loving and trusting relationship begins developing between parent and child when the child is very young, Godleski noted.

“The more you have a stronger relationship to fall back on, the more likely they are to come to you when things go wrong,” she said. “It’s helpful if a teen believes he or she can talk to a parent about something that’s happened even if the parent is not going to be happy about the situation.

It’s a delicate balance, Godleski and Sarafine noted.

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Some tips on parenting

Stephanie Godleski and John Sarafine offer the following advice about parenting adolescents, especially when their behavior is worrisome:

- Stay involved in your child’s life and recognize that the part of his or her brain that helps them control impulses and make decisions is still developing.
- Model the behavior and values you want to see in your kids.
- Set up a time to talk regularly with adolescents about what’s going on in their lives.
- If their behavior is less than desirable, explain why that is. Make the punishment fit the crime. Once they’ve fulfilled it, then move on. Don’t hold a grudge.
- Be positive and praise your teen when you see the behavior you want to see. Make time to have positive interactions with your teens, perhaps by doing an activity together.
- Encourage your adolescents to invite their friends over so you can meet them. Get to know the parents of your kids’ friends, perhaps through a phone call or by attending school events.
Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.

**1. Keep it practical.** Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

**2. Tell your children that saying “no” is okay.** Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

**3. Give your children a way to alert you.** Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

**4. Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.** Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

**5. Trust them.** If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.
ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS’ SAFETY SITES:

Webronauts Internet Academy:  
http://pbskids.org/webonauts/  
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:  
http://www.nsteens.org/  
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media  
https://www.commonsemedianewspaper.org/parent-concerns  
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education.

Family Online Safety Institute:  
http://www.fosi.org/  

iKeepSafe:  
http://www.ikeepsafe.org/  
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:  
http://www.faithandsafety.org  
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center  
(Monroe, Wayne counties):  
www.BivonaCAC.org  
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:  
607-737-8449  
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:  
315-253-9795  
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program  
(Ontario County):  
www.cacfingerlakes.org  
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:  
www.d2l.org

STEUBEN COUNTY:  
Southern Tier Children’s Advocacy Center:  
www.sthcs.org  
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry  
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):  
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)  
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:  
www.theadvocacycenter.org  
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:  
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:  
315-531-3417, Ext. 6

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