

**Parenting Discussion Group Article & Questions  
For Parents of Children 7 -12 yrs  
Topic: Responsible teens**

**Article:** Raising responsible teens, Perspective Magazine, Adapted from Hacer Familia

Please read the following article and then answer the questions at the end of this document.

The Parenting Discussion group should not run for longer than an hour. If you have any feedback about this topic or the questions used please forward your comments to [elisabeth@familyeducation.org.au](mailto:elisabeth@familyeducation.org.au)

**How to Manage the Small Group**

- select a leader for the session
- know the time limit and organise time accordingly. Leave time for summing up at the end.
- try to include everyone without letting someone dominate
- don't let people talk too much about their own children.
- avoid unnecessary digressions. This can be done by refocusing the group's attention back on the question and using questions like:
  - "What does everyone else think?"
  - "Does everyone agree?"
  - "What about.....?" or
  - "Do you think....?"



by Andrew Mullins

## Raising responsible teens

It seems that some Avoca Beach kids now get their kicks by jumping without surfboards from the headland rocks into heavy swell. They time their jump for when the surge is up and going out... and they time their swim back so they are lifted clear onto the rocks with the swell. Their astonished audience consists of holiday makers out on the rock platform and adulating primary kids, wannabe thrill-seekers.

I find this concerning. Some people talk of healthy risk taking, but this is not the same. This is more sinister because the stakes are obviously higher. The sandstone cliff behind these kids is decorated with brass plaques in memory of fishermen who were washed off the rocks at this point, and who didn't manage to make it back. Many of us know persons who have drowned. This is reckless driving and binge drinking gone one step further. Why is this happening?

This aimlessness and self-centredness are one more manifestation of what Dr Thomas Lickona calls, in his book *Educating for Character*, "Troubling Youth Trends". He identifies various upward trends in violence and vandalism, in stealing, cheating, disrespect for authority, peer cruelty and bullying, bigotry, bad language, sexual precocity and abuse, increasing self-

centredness and declining civic responsibility and self-destructive behaviours. The list transfers all too readily from New York to Down Under.

From the studies of Resnick and others we know that dysfunctional families put teenagers at greater risk of harming themselves. But apart from the long-range solution of strengthening families, how should we raise adolescents to better prepare them for responsible adulthood?

An absolute priority is to hold a positive view of adolescence. We must look beyond the superficial features of adolescence: the self-absorption and moodiness, the insecurity and impressionability, the wanting to be noticed, the emotional rollercoaster.

These surface features of adolescence have always been apparent. In the *Odyssey*, Homer wrote that a young person will try "break the rules", that "young people are thoughtless as a rule." The philosopher Aristotle described youth as permanently "in a state resembling intoxication", and he noted that "young men have strong passions and tend to gratify them indiscriminately".

There is the comment of a Roman, Pubilius Syrus. Reflecting on youth, he said, "There is no fruit that is

not bitter before it is ripe." Doesn't this capture the wisdom, or resignation, of one who knows that character is not built in a day? Cicero preferred to focus on the refrigerator. He joked that he was "terrified" of his nephew's appetite. Young people have always been like this.

A few years ago I attended a course in San Francisco entitled "Parents and their adolescent children", in which Professor David Isaacs argued that there are several discoveries made in adolescence. First, the discovery of self, the personal world that is proper to human existence. Then the discovery of freedom and the responsibilities that this brings. Finally, it is the time when a young person settles on the values that will take him or her through life. Isaacs proposed that, until young people develop these convictions, they effectively don't leave adolescence.

And don't we see this around us...? older persons who act more like teenagers, still unreconciled to the fact that they no longer have the body they once had or hankering after a former lifestyle.

Isaacs stressed time and again that teenagers change on the inside first. How often they complain that their parents and teachers don't understand them. They can be completely correct. We can fall into the trap of thinking that the main changes in adolescence are merely physical. But by the time physical changes are becoming obvious, other profound changes on the inside have already been happening.

Adolescent rebellion is essentially positive. It is the natural process whereby young people start to think for themselves. All forms of over-management or coercion are an infringement of legitimate au-

tonomy. "A young man must be overcome by reason, not by force," said the Romans.

At schools we must not over-manage senior students. In less than two years they will be adults, may well have left home, and will need to make their own decisions in life's most important matters. Nor should we defend them from the consequences of their actions, particularly if the situation can provide a lesson for the future. This is essentially why schools must not go soft on drugs.

It is important for teenagers to think critically about their own decisions, but, except when it is a case of moral or physical danger, don't do the thinking for them. Pull back. Normally, it is counter-productive to be giving orders to a teenager.

Allow consequences to take their course, and insist that your student, son or daughter accepts what follows from his or her actions. Don't fight their battles; they have to learn to fight their own.

Do not make excuses when your teenage student is capable of achieving acceptable application grades in every subject. It's his or her problem. You don't need to propose a solution; he or she must think it through. Life will present greater problems than this.

"Require teenagers to think, not to do," is David Isaacs's advice. Don't oblige conformity, but do expect children to reflect on their consistency with the values they profess. The great Roman Plutarch wrote that "for intelligent people the passage from childhood to adulthood is not an abandonment of rules, but a change of ruler".

Adolescents need good reasons, the criteria to judge right from wrong. They see through pat responses, and "because I'm tell-

ing you" type answers.

Part of the process in teaching kids to think for themselves is to help them see that there are very good objective reasons for doing the right thing... good reasons out of love for others involved, and for reasons of one's own health, and more importantly, happiness.

All parents want to pass on their values to their children, but not all succeed. Why do some seem to fail? We have all met hard-working parents who seem to have lazy sons. Every church has parents whose children wouldn't think of coming with the family on Sundays. I have met health-conscious parents whose children smoke, drink and even take drugs. How can this be?

Parents and educators need to show by their lives that the values they profess do bring them happiness. Talk and example are not enough. If a parent's values do not make that parent content, there is a real risk that the children will look elsewhere for principles to guide them through life. In homes where a parent is chronically cranky, or critical, there is little likelihood that the child will want to imitate that parent. The same is true for classrooms. Children need to see us looking on the positive and cheerful side of life. And most importantly, by doing so we teach children to be happy.

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**Questions:**

Q1) Discuss ways in which you can teach your teenagers to think for themselves.

Q2) Discuss what principles you would like to pass onto to your teenagers and how you would go about passing them on.

Q3) Discuss ways in which to get your teenager to do chores and school work responsibly without nagging or giving orders.

Q4) Discuss when parents should step back and let your teenage sort through their problems and when parents need to step in.