



## Fostering Independence

By Adam Sarff, MA, LAMFT

“FREEDOM!” This is the statement bellowed by many teenagers all over the US around the beginning of June. After nine months of stress at school most teens long for the days of no reports, essays, and tests. As for parents, there is a collective worry about what trouble our teens can get into? Parents may desperately stress about how to find that balance between too strict and too lenient when making sure their kids stay on the straight and narrow. These intentions are all well and good, and the true question we have to ask as parents is, “How can I foster appropriate independence in my teen’s life?” As far as brain development, a teenager is naturally starting to think about their independence around the age of 13, even though there are some aspects that have already begun at ages 2-3 (i.e. “I want to do it myself.”) It tends to be much less stressful to let your 3 year old pour the macaroni in the pot rather than let your 16 year old go on a weekend trip with his friends to a family cabin. As stressful as it might be, we as parents need to foster independence so that when they leave the nest, they are well equipped for the world ahead of them. Summer time can be an excellent time to provide opportunities for our teens to learn, and to see their capability to make healthy choices on their own AND learn from their mistakes. Most of the mistakes that teens make will be as harmful in these early years as they would in the adult years. Here are a few pointers to fostering your teen’s independence:

**Pace the amount of independence.** A 13-year-old is not likely to be ready for a trip to Florida with his or her friends over spring break. Someone that age needs some smaller-scale options to practice independence. For instance, giving them the option to make their own chore list is a good starting point. This helps them understand that doing chores for themselves not only benefits their parents, but also shows respect for themselves. As they graduate from these independence milestones, you can up the ante a bit by giving them more slack.

**Develop a family contract.** Knowing the expectations are a big part of independence. A family contract is designed for a team (i.e. family) to know what their role is. A teen should also be involved in the creation of this contract so that they can see that their input is valuable. And bonus, the contract will have all the consequences laid out so that the contract can do all the disciplining.

**Mind the “Crucial C’s”.** The Crucial C’s is an Adlerian principle that was adapted by Any Lew, PhD and Betty Lou Bettner, PhD.

- *Connect:* Even though it seems that your son or daughter does not want anything to do with you, they appreciate you trying. Find ways to spend time with them and if they refuse, do not get upset with them, let them know the offer is always on the table. Parents too quickly see their influence as non-existent in the teenage years and may give up and typically only “connect” when something goes wrong. Find ways to replace negative attention with positive attention.

- *Capable*: Frequently ask your teen their thoughts on a family decision. This does not work well with bigger issues like parent's financial or marital status, but instead, what ideas do they have about family vacations, or what ideas do they have about decorating the house. Also, this entails avoiding power struggles. Teens may initiate power struggles to prove that they are capable, and when a parent responds to a power struggle, the teen may perceive they are incapable. Instead, a parent may respond by communicating understanding for their frustration and ask them questions that open the door to solutions and other alternatives. Go out of your way for your teens to see that they have all the necessary tools to make the best decision for themselves.
- *Count*: Acknowledge that your teen is loved no matter what good or bad things they do. This will make your input to their behavior later on be seen as options for them to make the best choice instead of a determination of their value. This gets compromised when a parent who is hurt by their son or daughter personalizes it, and the teen is made to feel ashamed.
- *Courage*: When a teen makes a mistake, do not spend your time criticizing, and making comparisons to things that others have done better. These things teach them fear when it comes to making mistakes instead of benefiting and learning from them. Have a discussion on how the decision impacted them and encourage them to think of ways that they can make better choices. This will promote bravery to face difficult circumstances in the future. In other words, courage to be imperfect.

At the end of the day, fostering independence can be one of the scariest things you will do as a parent. Yet, it is vital to the success of your teenager. It also takes some work. Keeping ourselves in check emotionally, biting our tongue at times, and promoting self-responsibility can be challenging at times. Don't pass on the opportunity you have the rest of this summer to open the door for you teenager to successfully figure out what they can do on their own.