

Teenage Transitions

Try as I may, I cannot put a finger on the exact time when my sweet-natured, well-mannered eldest daughter turned into a very spiky cactus with mood swings. Gone are the times that one could tell her to go and clean up her room and she did it! Now everything, or almost everything, one asks her or tells her to do is questioned.

by Sylvie Arn

It all started about five to six years ago, when we first noticed some mood swings similar to sunshine in the morning and thunderstorm in the evening, or vice versa. Then came the joy of the budding womanly figure, the development of her own unique fashion sense and the use of make-up.

Yep, you guessed right, she is a teenager, pumping full of hormones and on her way to adulthood.

Three culprits

Always being one to research things thoroughly, I have learnt quite a lot about teenagers and why do they behave as they do. Based upon my opinion and experience, there are three reasons why our children turn into Aliens from Mars for a few years: **hormones** that start flooding through the teen's body, their **socio-cultural environment** and **the re-wiring of the brain**. These are the 'culprits' or the reasons we don't recognise our children anymore.

I came across a very interesting article in the Swiss magazine 'Beobachter', which supports the background of the documentaries I have seen on TV, particularly the BBC series with Professor Robert Winston, which I highly recommend: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/tv/teenspecies/index.shtml>

It's not only the gender-specific hormones which cause turmoil in our teenagers. The re-wiring of the brain is what accounts for much of what we consider "irrational behaviour".

The frontal lobe of the brain hosts the pre frontal cortex, which is responsible for self control, judgement and organisational skills. In adults this part of the brain is like a guard, hindering impulses and guiding logical thinking. Because this part of the brain undergoes a second growth spurt in puberty — similar to a rewiring — teenagers lack this emotional 'brake', often leading to their incalculable behaviour.

Here are a few examples to illustrate the aforementioned:

Teenager: "My friend scowled at me today and ignored me, I am sure she doesn't like me anymore."

Father: "Hey, I am sure s/he just had a bad day and it's nothing against you."

Reason: Without a fully functioning pre-frontal cortex, teenagers are virtually unable to see/realise emotional contexts resulting in interpretations that are often completely wrong. This was illustrated by an experiment on television, where six-year olds, adults and teenagers had to look at photos of persons with an exaggerated facial expression of fear. The children as well as the adults were able to describe the feelings 'right'. NONE of the teenagers got it right!

Mother: "Don't drink and smoke pot, that's dangerous!"

Teenager: "Let that be my concern. I need to relax too sometimes."

Reason: In adult brains, the pre -frontal cortex puts a brake on immediate cravings and an adult is able to judge if he wants to give in or if he wants to wait. As this part of the brain is undergoing massive renewal and is not yet fully developed, or is missing altogether in teenagers, they are not very receptive to these feelings and often only get a 'kick' with things such as drugs or alcohol. This makes them very susceptible to drug or alcohol addiction.

Teacher: "If you keep on working so slowly and not doing your homework, you will never go forward in your life!"

Teenager: "Huh? What are you saying? It's my concern whether I am doing my homework or not!"

Reason: Because the frontal lobes of the brain are not yet in full working order, teenagers are often not able to see the immediate consequences of their actions, don't think of that and are often doing things impulsively.

Parents shouldn't stress too many long-term goals (college, university, and job) as a teenager simply cannot think so far ahead! Instead, parents could act as the 'external front lobes' of their children by pointing out attainable goals and by example spurring them on — now and then with a little bribery. It really does work!

Mother: "Please put your clothes and shoes away."

Teenager: "What? Are you crazy, you stupid cow? I will certainly not do that!"

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Reason: With regard to the emotional and cognitive processes of a teenager, (ie, rational thinking and perception are not very well developed in their brains) many of the connections that allow them to think in this manner must still be 'built' in the teenagers brain. This is also one of the reasons why teenagers 'suffer' from emotional outbreaks, which often have nothing to do with actual happenings.

Cutting the cord

Another reason that might help explain teenagers' changing behaviour is the fact that they want to cut the cord and become adults in their own right. To do this they need to distance themselves, which they do in many ways. This is where the **socio-cultural** aspect comes into play in that process of change.

They start to find their own style, which may not necessarily be what Mum and Dad like. Suddenly they've got a piercing and walk in the house with a green-tinted Mohican haircut, they start to idolize pop stars and other famous people and want to be like them. Of course this causes issues with the parents, part of which may be intentional and some unintentional. Where else than in the safe haven of home can they try to argue their side of a discussion? By being confrontational, they distance themselves from their parents.

For example, this happened to us only recently: By chance we had the opportunity to go away for a week skiing holiday in February. Melanie had to stay behind due to work commitments and school, which she had to attend that week.

We left her with plenty of provisions and a few rules regarding what to do — as well as what not to do! Sadly things did not go as smoothly as we imagined and it took a whole week for me to digest it all, going through the spectrum of emotions!

To cut a long story short, every wish (ie, rule) that we set for her was broken — multiple times!

Not only did she invite everyone and his cousin to our place for beers, smokes and rock n' roll, sleepovers and other non-permitted 'stuff'. In one particular case she had problems getting rid of the ghosts she called. (Ha! It serves her right!)

It didn't help matters that at one of the gatherings at our place one of her friends vomited and I had to find the soiled rags in our laundry bin.

Unfortunately the neighbours suffered as well from all the hubbub and noise, and this time I was really grateful that we have a very good understanding amongst each other in this building.

Betrayal

As if the betrayal of our trust and the invasion of our privacy wasn't enough, worse was discovering some things without even looking for clues — that she had lied to us on and on.



photo: Deanne Eden

You talking about us?

Even when we knew about something and confronted her with it she denied it.

I, strong Sylv the battleaxe, was felled by my very own daughter who disrespected me and the family — and boy oh boy did that hurt! It was a genuine physical feeling as well — that's how real heartache must feel!

That week was simply hell for me and I was so close to sending her packing because I was so disappointed and hurt. Additionally, the constant thoughts in my head: what did I do wrong? Should I have done things differently? And so on and so forth. I couldn't look at her. I couldn't talk to her. I almost hated her.

In typical teenager mode, she was not able to show any sign of remorse, not to mention a proper apology, so we were stuck in a rut for an entire week.

Then I poured a brew for myself, plucked up the courage to enter the lioness' den, closed the door and said: "I won't leave this room, nor will you, until we have talked properly over ALL of last week's happenings and everything is sorted out."

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A matter of trust

About four to five hours later I emerged again— much 'lighter' than when I went in. We actually had a really thorough conversation, and she confessed to some other bits and bobs that went on that we didn't know about!

Well, at least she found her way back to her old honest self, as this was what had hurt most — I am a stickler for honesty!

I won't say it's all hunky dory again in the Arn household, but at least the major hurt and betrayal have been talked over by all people concerned, and we can start to again build up our trust with our eldest daughter, although I don't think we'll soon go away on holiday again.

One thing that helps parents in such situations is not to take everything personally—it's not directed only at you! This way, false emotions stay out of the discussion and can help a lot to calm down heated arguments. I know from my own experience that this sounds a lot easier to read than to put it into action, because it's only natural that parents are almost always the first ones to feel hurt and may think that the 'deed' was done only to upset them.

Peer pressure

As you can discern from our own story, it really requires much self control to go through situations such as these. With our story, it turned out that Melanie was between a rock and a hard place — on one side she had our wishes to consider, and on the other hand she was suffering from peer pressure. Apparently her mates also threw a party as soon as their parents were away, so she also wanted to be cool and invited them over— so as not to be different from them!

As you can see, it all fits together well with everything the 'experts' tell us about puberty — where else than in the safe haven of home could she have tried to test the boundaries set for her? At school? At work? At other people's places?

Rules and boundaries

It is my personal and very strong belief that you are likely to reap what you have sown in their early years. If you have had a more anti-authoritarian way of bringing up your children and they never had fixed boundaries or rules to follow, then it is very likely that they will not accept the boundaries you suddenly set, and you will have more trouble to rein in your teenager. And believe me, a teenager's desire for freedom and separation from all things they know is extremely strong, and their consideration for anything else other than themselves is very limited. Know that you will have a lot of work in order to guide them through it all.

I found that because we have always been consequent with our rules and boundaries, our daughter could more easily see where she really went wrong, and was able to accept her punishment.

I have many times in my personal environment seen that parents often don't realise that they must act as parents, which means setting the rules in the house and setting reasonable boundaries within which the child develops. They cannot — and never will be — their child's best friend (acting on the same level as their child). It requires much strength and energy to sit out sulking and tantrums. Of course it is always easier to give in so to gain peace of mind, but you won't do your child any favour.

Rearing children is very hard work and needs continuous effort and commitment. As they grow older the problems and sorrows won't lessen, they only move on to a different level than before.

It took me a long time to assemble the information gathered for this article and to make it readable, but during this process I was able to "practise what I preach", and can say that the relationship with my teenager has become more relaxed now. I am ready and prepared to guide my middle daughter through that stage of her life which she, soon 11 years old, has already started. ■



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