CARL PICKHARDT

SURVIVING Your Child's Adolescence

How to Understand, and Even Enjoy, the Rocky Road to Independence

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www.josseybass.com

Cover image: © Joseph O. Holmes/Flickr/Getty Images

Cover design: J. Puda

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.josseybass.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pickhardt, Carl E.

Surviving your child’s adolescence : how to understand, and even enjoy, the rocky road to independence / Carl Pickhardt. – 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-22883-8 (pbk.); ISBN 978-1-118-41934-2 (ebk.); ISBN 978-1-118-42122-2 (ebk.); ISBN 978-1-118-43386-7 (ebk.)

1. Parent and teenager. 2. Parenting. 3. Teenagers. 4. Adolescence. I. Title.

HQ799.15.P53 2013

305.235–dc23

2012038559

To all those parents and teenagers who manage to keep their relationship together while adolescence is growing them apart, as it is meant to do

Acknowledgments

I thank *Psychology Today* for the opportunity to write the weekly blog Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence, which provided the inspiration for this book. Special thanks need to be given to all the parents at workshops over the years who have taught me so much as I was trying to teach them a little; to my four grown children, who each introduced me to a new path through adolescence; to my agent, Grace Freedson, who keeps managing to find publishers for my parenting books; and of course to Irene, who is a wonderfully supportive writer's wife.

About the Author

Carl Pickhardt, PhD, the author of fourteen parenting books as well as works of adult and children's fiction and of illustrated psychology, is a writer, graphic artist, and psychologist in private counseling and public lecturing practice in Austin, Texas. He received his BA in English and MEd in counseling from Harvard, and his PhD in counseling psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. He is a member of the American Psychological Association. He has four grown children and one grandchild.

Pickhardt has written newspaper, magazine, and Internet columns about adolescence, family life, and adult relationships. For the past four years he has been writing a weekly parenting blog for *Psychology Today,* Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence.

Pickhardt gives frequent public lectures about parenting and adolescence to PTAs, church congregations, and mental health groups, and is often interviewed by print media about diverse aspects of child development, parenting, and family life. More information about all his books can be found on his website: www.carlpickhardt.com.

Author’s Note

Unless otherwise attributed, all quotations and case examples used in this book are fictional, created to reflect concerns and to illustrate situations similar in kind but not in actuality to those I have heard from clients over the years.

Introduction

> Given what I've heard from other parents with teenagers, I'm dreading our child's adolescence. They make it sound like such a hard time—harder to get things done, harder to get along, harder on everyone. My child and I have been such good company up to now. Can't we just remain friends?

Despite whatever alarming accounts you may have heard, you are not destined, or even obligated, to go through agony when your child enters *adolescence,* a relatively recent concept that dates back to the early 1900s when psychologist Stanley Hall first popularized the term. Adolescence describes the transitional time between the end of childhood and the onset of early adulthood, a period that has lengthened in this country over the years, thanks in part to child labor laws, compulsory K–12 education, and a growing discontinuity between the generations because of increasingly rapid social and technological change.

From what I have seen these many years in private family counseling practice and speaking with parents at workshops, about a third of young people go through adolescence without making much of a ripple in family life, growing and changing well within the home rules and tolerances of their parents. These are the *easy adolescents.* Another third intermittently pushes some family limits, but these episodes are usually successfully confronted and resolved so that life goes forward without any major disruption. These are the *average adolescents.* And then there is the final third of young people, who break significant family boundaries or stumble into serious unhappiness, and it is the parents of these who usually seek counseling help. These are the *troublesome* or *troubled*

adolescents. If you have multiple children, a single “easy” adolescent is all you are likely to get, so don’t automatically expect such smooth parental sailing with the next or the rest based on your harmonious experience with one. Even with an easy adolescent, however, there will still be some normal adjusting to do.

Adjusting to what? This is the question parents need to be able to answer if they are to be adequately prepared for the teenage years. To effectively keep up with an adolescent, it helps to stay ahead of the growth curve by anticipating what common changes, tensions, problems, and conflicts will typically arise as the process unfolds. Confusing to parent and teenager as adolescence may seem, it is a developmental process, orderly in its larger outline. Most important for parents to accept at the outset of this transformation is that an adolescent is *not* a child. They need to understand and work with this change, not fight against it. In adolescent parlance, they must “get used to it!” *Surviving Your Child’s Adolescence* is intended to help parents do just this.

Chapter One helps parents prepare themselves for the inevitably changing relationship to their child that adolescence brings. Chapters Two and Three present a road map to four stages of adolescence through which young people must grow on their way to young adulthood. In Chapter Two, I map out early and mid-adolescence and the transformation from childhood. In Chapter Three, I map out late adolescence and trial independence, and the challenges of your child acting older. Chapter Four distinguishes the adult-adolescent relationship depending on whether one is mothering or fathering a teenage daughter or teenage son. Chapters Five through Ten each describe a significant focus in the parent-adolescent relationship: communication, conflict, discipline, education, peer relationships, and the power of parents. Last is an Epilogue that provides some

perspective on the journey of adolescence through which parent and teenager have traveled together.

An adolescent is an adult in training, a young person on an arduous ten- to twelve-year journey of transformation that begins in late elementary or early middle school, and doesn't usually wind down until after the college-age years, in the early to mid-twenties. During this process, the dependent child, learning from parental preparation, from peer association, and through experimenting with new experiences, gathers enough power of knowledge, competence, and responsibility to finally claim independent standing as a young adult.

Compared to childhood (up to about age nine), adolescence is the *harder half of parenting* because now the parental job becomes a more unwelcome one—for both adult and adolescent. Why? The general answer is that it is difficult to stay as closely and influentially connected with a child once adolescence increasingly puts parent and teenager at cross-purposes over matters of freedom and starts causing them to grow apart.

Adolescence is not just a simple passage from childhood to young adulthood. It is a revolutionary process that changes the child, and the parent in response, and redefines their relationship. It is also a ruthless process. Adolescence begins with the loss of childhood, proceeds through increased conflict over freedom, and ends when the young person moves out and empties the family nest. Along the way, parent and adolescent learn to tolerate increased distance, differences, and discord as more independence is established between them. Fortunately, this abrasiveness is intermittent, not constant. There is still the caring they feel for one another, the enjoyment they have together, and the future family connection they count on being able to share.

Adolescence is a moving and fascinating time. Parents get to see their child transform from a little girl or little boy into

a young woman or young man by journey's end. I hope this playbook for parents, based on many years of counseling families with teenagers, will help you find a loving and constructive way to participate in this exciting period of your daughter's or son's growing up. As you do, remember this: parenting adolescents is least of all a science, more of an art, and most of all an adventure. So hang on, hang in there, and enjoy the ride!

Voices of Parents Past

“Maybe adolescence is a child’s way of getting even with her parents.”

“If there’s two of us and only one of him, how come we feel outnumbered all the time?”

“She’s allergic to work. It irritates her mood.”

“He said he’d do it in a minute, and it’s been over an hour.”

“She said it isn’t lying if she only tells us what we think to ask.”

“He said we never said he couldn’t, but that’s because we never thought he would!”

“She said she wouldn’t have gotten into this trouble if she hadn’t been caught.”

“The furthest he can see into the future is now.”

“The only time she’s considerate is when she wants something from us.”

“He’ll argue with us about the time of day!”

“She says we used to be such great parents, but now we’ve changed.”

“No matter how much freedom we give him, it’s never enough.”

“She doesn’t care what we think, but she hates being criticized.”

“He said he’s just going to hang out with friends, will be back later, and for us not to worry.”

“All she’s asking for is enough support so she can live independently.”

“He promised we’d never catch him doing drugs, and we never have.”

“She doesn’t want to be included, but resents it when we leave her out.”

Chapter One

Preparing for the Inevitable

> The change seemed to happen overnight—that suddenly! Through elementary and middle school, our only child was easy to be with, but now with him at high school it's more difficult to stay as close. We don't talk as much, and we argue more when we do. Used to be we could do no wrong, but now it seems we can do no right. Gone is the happy threesome that we used to be. Now he wants to spend his time alone or with friends. We're just not fun to be around anymore. What did we do wrong?

Of course, the entry into adolescence doesn't actually happen overnight, but for many parents it can seem that way. In hopes that they and their child would escape the discomfort of her teenage years, they may have denied small changes they didn't want to see until the unwelcome signs were finally too numerous and intense to be ignored. Thus it's their sudden awareness and admission that happens overnight. Now is when the parental questions begin. What's going on? What happens next? How should we prepare? Suddenly there's a lot that parents need to know—not just about how to manage their changing child but about how to manage themselves. Parents tend to think that the primary challenge with adolescence is how to affect the teenager's conduct when in fact the first order of business is how to maturely conduct themselves. Just as the first injunction for medical doctors is "Do no harm," for parents of adolescents the first command is "Govern thyself wisely." To do this, some adult reorientation is required that necessitates changing parental attitude, understanding

parental disenchantment, resetting parental expectations, making parental adjustments, and accepting why most parenting goes unappreciated, particularly in adolescence. It all starts with your attitude.

Parental Attitude

Consider *four important changes in attitude* that you can helpfully make when your son or daughter separates from childhood in late elementary or early middle school and begins to act more abrasively adolescent.

1. *Don't take your child's adolescence as a personal affront.* Your son or daughter is not acting like an adolescent to "get you" or to get you upset. They are acting adolescent for themselves, for their own interest, mostly unmindful of you. Inconsiderate adolescents often are, but calculating they are usually not. They are simply too self-centered on their own development to think about the effects of their changing behavior on you. For example, irritating though leaving the snack dishes unwashed, the lights on, the door open, the radio playing, or the faucet flowing may be, these are not deliberate provocations. These are thoughtless behaviors. To maintain a viable relationship, you have to keep perspective while also specifying and insisting on the terms of family consideration you need your adolescent to observe. Just remember that if other parents were put in your place, your teenager would be acting much the same. The parental job is to understand that although adolescent changes affect you, they are not about you. They are about your son or daughter.

2. *Don't punish your child for acting adolescent.* Adolescence is a process of growth. Just because you find some of the changes offensive doesn't mean you should treat them as an offense. For example, you don't

ground or otherwise sanction an adolescent for becoming more moody, less communicative, more argumentative, or less organized. You accept the process, but hold the young person accountable for choices made as the process unfolds. Thus don't penalize your child for the messiness that comes with increased disorganization, but still demand that he pick up after himself, and keep after him until he does. The parental job is to impose sufficient structure, set sufficient limits, and make sufficient demands so that the adolescent acts in ways that work within the needs of parents and family.

3. *Accept that adolescence is a more combative age.* A healthy adolescent is supposed to contest family limits and push for more freedom to grow. Healthy parents are supposed to withstand that push for the sake of ensuring safety and insisting on responsibility. This opposition unfolds throughout adolescence over many common areas of disagreement—adequate communication, household help, social freedom, school performance, and family rules among them. Increased conflict gradually builds up the teenager's determination to live on her own terms and be independent. More conflict does not mean something is wrong with your relationship. Conflict is the process used to broker increasing differences between you and your teen, a necessary part of how you get along.

4. *Understand that adolescence is meant to break the spell of childhood.* What spell? At the outset, parents feel as smitten by the newborn child and little girl or boy as that little person is by them. Add ten years to the child, and that enchantment has begun to lose some luster for both teenager and parents as more opposition and diversity develop between them. The mutual adoration that begins with infancy and that develops into close

companionship in childhood becomes mixed with more frustration and strained by more separation in adolescence and that's okay. After all, if parents and young people were to get through adolescence as enchanted with each other as they began, neither would ever let the other go. This mutual disenchantment does not signify a loss of love, but is founded on other losses experienced on both sides of the relationship, as described in the next section.

Mutual Disenchantment

Parenting an adolescent can stand in painful contrast to parenting a child, and the name of that pain is *loss.* It is loss that creates the disenchantment that grows between parent and adolescent. Consider a few common losses about which each can complain.

Parents often have complaints like the following:

- The child wanted time together with parents, but the adolescent wants more time apart with friends.
- The child was admiring (even adoring) of parents, but the adolescent is more critical.
- The child wanted to tell parents everything, but the adolescent wants to be more private and less confiding.
- The child was compliant with most of what parents requested, but the adolescent is more actively and passively resistant.
- The child liked to please parents, but the adolescent seems to court more disapproval.
- The child was proud to be seen with the parents, but the adolescent often considers this public association an embarrassment.
- The child wanted a lot of physical affection with parents, but the adolescent prefers to have less loving touch.

The adolescent can have complaints like the following:

- Parents who used to be calm and relaxed are often more worried and tense.
- Parents who used to be trusting are often more questioning and suspicious.
- Parents who used to be more satisfied and accepting are often more critical and disapproving.
- Parents who used to be playful and fun to be around are often more serious and demanding of work.
- Parents who used to enjoy doing for you, often want you to start doing more for yourself and them.
- Parents who used to encourage freedom of expression and activity are often more intolerant and restrictive.
- Parents who used to be interesting company often become more boring to be around.

Now their mutual admiration society begins to turn into a mutual irritation society as each increasingly rubs the other the wrong way. The other party, who used to do no wrong in their eyes, now seldom seems to do much right. So who's to blame for this abrasive turn of events? That's what they all want to know. "You used to be such a great kid. What happened to you?" ask the aggrieved parents. "Well, you used to be such great parents. What happened to you?" retorts the aggrieved adolescent. Blaming each other is not the answer, as the real culprit is adolescent change. Better is to understand that come adolescence, both parent and teenager have more in common than they like to think, actually sharing many of the same complaints:

"You never listen to what I say."

"You don't do what I ask."

"You keep putting me off until later."

"You don't appreciate all I do."

"You're always criticizing."

"You always want something more."

"You stay in a bad mood."

The change is hard on them both. To bring parental adjustment to adolescent change a little closer to home, consider it in metaphorical terms.

When Your Dog Becomes a Cat

Years ago, a parent tried to explain to me how disenchanting the adjustment to her child's adolescence was by giving me a metaphor that has stayed with me. Describing how hard it was when her warmly affectionate child started acting like a more coolly distant middle school adolescent, this parent asked, "How would you like it if your affectionate and loving dog started acting like your standoffish and irritable cat? That's the kind of change I mean. What happened to my beloved dog, is what I want to know. I miss my companionable and cuddly dog!"

After our conversation was over, I started playing with the metaphor she used, and was surprised where her comparison led my thinking. For openers, the dog can be demonstrative, friendly, empathetic, compliant, social, close, playful, predictable, communicative, and constant. The cat can be aloof, moody, apathetic, detached, solitary, distant, watchful, unpredictable, inscrutable, and changeable. Then I tried to amplify the differences:

- The dog welcomes attention most of the time. The cat wants to be left alone a lot of the time.
- The dog comes when called. The cat comes when it wants.
- The dog walks on a leash. The cat walks by itself.
- The dog is more even-tempered. The cat is more temperamental.
- The dog is easier to read. The cat is more unreadable.
- The dog likes to do what you like to do. The cat likes your doing what it likes to do.

The dog seems more under your control. The cat seems more committed to its own agenda.

The dog wants to please and works not to displease. Sometimes it can be hard to tell if the cat really cares.

The dog is always glad to see you at the end of the day. The cat may or may not be interested. (This comparison reminds me of Nora Ephron's wonderful line from *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*: "When your children are teenagers, it's important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you.")

This "child to adolescent–dog to cat" comparison was only an analogy, but the parental adjustment the mother suggested was real enough. Could she still love her teenager as "cat" the way she did her child as "dog"? Yes, but the relationship had become more challenging than it was before. A particularly frustrating part is when the adolescent behaves more like a cat-dog. Consider the conflicted, mixed messages a parent can be given. Sometimes the adolescent acts as though she wants to be treated like a dependent "dog," and sometimes like a more independent "cat":

"Help me."	"I can do it myself!"
"Talk to me."	"Don't talk to me!"
"Show me how."	"I can figure it out!"
"Pay me attention."	"Leave me alone!"
"Give me a hug."	"I don't like being held!"
"Tell me what to do."	"Don't tell me what to do!"
"Take me along."	"Why do I have to go with you?"

Which way does the adolescent want it? Both ways: the child (doglike) part of her wants to stay the same, but the adolescent (catlike) part of her wants to become different.

Of course, the adjustment challenge is on both sides. This adjustment from child to adolescent, from dog to cat, is hard

for the teenager as well. And as she struggles with the change, her old pet's-eye view of her parents alters as well. Sometimes the kind masters act like mean rulers. Sometimes the favored companions become a social embarrassment. Sometimes the approving adults become disapproving critics. Sometimes the interested confidants become unwelcome inquisitors. Sometimes the authorities who were mostly right are often wrong. Sometimes parents who used to understand her so well, now act as though they haven't a clue. No wonder the teenager feels conflicted—wanting to be adolescent and act more grown up, but regretting the loss of all that went with being a child, including how wonderful parents once were.

So, what I told the parent who gave me this disenchantment metaphor was this: "It's all right to miss the familiar ways of your child as 'dog,' but don't let that loss get in the way of appreciating the more mysterious ways of your teenager as 'cat.' And don't forget, when your child starts changing into an adolescent, you start changing in response, which takes some getting used to for your teenager." The antidote to disenchantment is acceptance, which is where the power of expectations comes in. What doesn't work is for parents to expect their child to continue acting doglike during his or her more catlike adolescence. They have to reset their expectation to accept and fit the reality of adolescent change.

Resetting Expectations

Most parents, particularly with a first or only child, or with a second child if the first has been particularly "easy," are unprepared for that young person's adolescence. They consciously try not to think about it because all they've heard about it scares them, or if they do think about it, they often assume that these unwelcome changes will happen to

other people's children, but not to one of their own. However, denial is not a good coping strategy. In fact, denial is the enemy in hiding. By refusing to consider what they do not want to have happen, parents are unprepared when their son or daughter lets it be known that he or she is no longer content to be defined and responded to as just a child. "I'm not your little girl anymore, so stop treating me that way!" snaps the sixth-grade daughter refusing to laugh at her dad's playful joke, the kind he was fond of making to cheer her up when she had a sad day in elementary school. She is putting him on notice that this kind of humor is no longer fun or funny.

It behooves parents to develop a realistic set of expectations about the harder half of parenting, the adolescent years. A primary expectation to begin with has to do with duration. Today's parents can generally assume that adolescence will commence around ages nine to thirteen in late elementary or early middle school, and not to wind down until the early or mid-twenties, a little after the college-age years. Must it last this long? In most cases, the answer seems to be yes. It takes a lot of psychological and social growth to gain sufficient knowledge, skills, confidence, and maturity for stepping off on one's own, taking charge of one's life, supporting oneself, and making one's way in the world as an independent young adult.

So why are expectations psychologically important? Think of them this way. Expectations are mental sets we choose to hold (they are not genetically endowed) that help us move through time (from now to later), through change (from old to new), and through experience (from familiar to unfamiliar) in order to anticipate the reality we shall encounter next. To appreciate the power of expectations, consider being in a circumstance where you have no idea what to expect. Ignorance tends to beget feelings of anxiety: "I've never faced a situation like this before!" "I

don’t know where to go, what to do, or what to say!” “I have no idea what the results will be!”

Most parents usually appreciate the importance of clarifying expectations when it comes adjusting their child to change. They see the preparatory role that expectations can helpfully play. So when it comes to helping the child make a geographical move, start a new school, or get ready for a medical operation, for example, they take the time to realistically anticipate what these new experiences are going to be like in order to smooth the way. “Even though rehabilitation after the operation will be tough, it’s better for you to know that there will be discomfort and work for you to do to get better.” Parents understand that anticipated hardships are easier to deal with than those that are unexpected because they have been denied.

Unpreparedness is emotionally costly and, where it is unnecessary, not worth the expense. This is the case where parents are blindsided by the adolescent transformation in their son or daughter because they chose to expect that he or she would continue behaving like the darling little child they had always comfortably known. Now see what happens. Consider three kinds of expectations parents can hold—predictions, ambitions, and conditions—and consider the outcome when they don’t fit the realities of adolescent change.

Predictions have to do with what parents believe *will* happen. “My adolescent will be as openly confiding with me as she was as a child.” But come adolescence, many young people for the sake of independence tend to become more private and less disclosing to parents. Now, when their prediction is violated, parents can feel surprised and anxious in response to the diminishing amount of communication. “We’re hardly told anything anymore!”

Ambitions have to do with what parents *want* to have happen in adolescence. “We want him to continue to be as academically conscientious as he was as a child.” But come adolescence, many young people suffer an “early adolescent achievement drop” (see Chapter Eight) when homework and school performance suffer from a lowering of motivation. Now when their ambition is violated, parents can feel disappointed and let down in response to the falling effort. “He doesn’t seem to care about making good grades anymore!”

Conditions have to do with what parents believe *should* happen in adolescence. “She should continue to keep us adequately and accurately informed about what is going on in her life.” But when adolescence begins, many young people become more deceptive with parents, sometimes lying about what is going on for illicit freedom’s sake. Now when their condition is violated, parents can feel betrayed and angry in response to more dishonesty. “We’re not told the whole truth as often anymore!”

Unrealistic expectations can have emotional consequences for parents. Feeling surprised, disappointed, or betrayed by a normal adolescent change, parents can overreact with worry, grief, or anger, thereby “emotionalizing” a situation and making it harder to resolve effectively. This doesn’t mean that parents should just accept it when a young person cuts off communication, stops doing schoolwork, and acts dishonestly. *Expect does not mean accept.* Parents must address these new behaviors to let the young person know that they still need to be adequately informed, that performance effort at school still must be maintained, and that there must still be truthful communication. But if these parents had anticipated the likelihood of these changes, a rational discussion and not an emotional encounter would have ensued.

This book is meant to help you create realistic expectations about the journey of your child's adolescence. Parents who are adequately informed about some of the normal changes, tensions, conflicts, and problems that typically unfold during adolescence are best positioned to cope with these challenges in appropriate and effective ways because they expected that these unwelcome issues and alterations might arise. By way of additional example, consider what can happen for parents emotionally when they fail to set realistic expectations about how normal adolescent change may alter their traditional relationship to the child.

- The parent who predicts that the adolescent will continue to prize parental company more than any other is rudely awakened when the young person now prefers spending time with peers instead of time with parents. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of companionship.*
- The parent whose ambition is to enjoy the same interests with the adolescent that were shared with the child is rudely awakened when differentiation from childhood and parents causes that similarity to be lost. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of common interests.*
- The parent whose condition is that the adolescent should continue to look up to and want to please the parent as in childhood is in for a rude awakening when the young person becomes more critical, even putting Mom and Dad down for what they don't know. *This parent cannot make peace with this loss of approval.*

These parents can certainly choose to maintain these unrealistic expectations, but they will do so at an emotional cost—feeling abandoned, rejected, and disparaged. It would be better for them to adjust their expectations to fit the new adolescent reality. Protest normal developmental alterations