Countdown To Launch: Managing Difficulties Which Can Arise As Kids Grow Up and Prepare To Leave Home

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Thank you for joining us for this discussion of adolescent development with particular focus upon the sometimes-difficult period of growing up and leaving home. We'll be covering a number of the points below during the presentation and we welcome your participation—feel free to share your own thoughts about the information presented and to ask any questions about the items listed below, or other related issues.

☐ Mark Twain displayed a fine grasp of one of the central features of adolescent development when he famously observed, *"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned."*

    ○ What common aspects of the developmental period we term "adolescence" are embodied in this wry observation by Twain?

- The tendency for adolescents to show dislike for their parents and to seemingly reject parental preferences and/or values.   Many parents fear that their child has not adequately incorporated their values.
- The idea that adolescence is a phase which has an endpoint.
- The idea that after the period of adolescence as concluded, kids' views of their parents may shift a bit, such that mom and dad are seen in a more positive light. More than that, the adolescent-now-young-adult has joined his/her parents as a fellow grown-up and has a better appreciation of the basis of the parents' views. In fact, it is common for kids to eventually show a striking similarity to the values of their parents once they reach adulthood. (hence the truism, *the acorn doesn't fall far from the oak*).

☐ We're here to talk about the "launching years" –that period of kids' lives which correspond roughly to the senior year of high school and the beginning years of college, when the majority of American children leave home. Common difficulties during the launching years include the following (adapted from *The Launching Years: No Time to Stop Parentin*g by Kastner & Wyatt at h*ttp://www.newhorizons.org/lifelong/adolescence/kastner* :

    ○ During senior year, the typical struggles of adolescence about rules, achievement, and teens' social lives can be exacerbated by launch-related dynamics such as "senioritis" and "spoiling the nest":

- *Senioritis* can include an academic slump, "the blahs" and power struggles.
- *Spoiling the nest* explains the behavioral friction that precedes a child's departure and eases the difficulty of saying good-bye. Sometimes it seems that kids deliberately exacerbate tension at home to make it easier to launch from the nest. On top of these challenges, no matter how bright the future, the anticipation of change, loss, and the disruption of the daily life everyone has known for nearly two decades can create anxiety and emotional volatility.

    ○ Against this shaky backdrop, parents confront difficult decisions about the next best step for their child's life and their own. All too often families succumb to a phenomenon referred to as "launch anxiety". This refers to feels of doubt and insecurity experienced by some parents at this time during the launching transition, as parents try to take in the reality that their child is departing the home.

- A parent's job during the launching years remains the same as it has always been: to nurture qualities that support the development of a resilient, responsible, productive, socially and emotionally competent young person. But during this period of time parents need to come to terms with their own sense of loss, deal with empty-nest anxiety and cope with worries regarding their kids' capabilities and their own need to develop a new form of parenting.
- Some parents channel their launch anxiety into a vigorous, intense pursuit of the absolute best college placement for their kids. Given the competitive nature of college admissions, this is understandable, but an excessive sense of pressure and urgency surrounding the college admission process can aggravate conflicts between parents and their teenagers.
  - A more worrisome development is the complete rejection by the adolescent of the need to spring into a new identity or formulate goals for himself/herself. In this scenario, the teenager moves into young adulthood only in the chronological sense—they may still conduct themselves in a manner more akin to an adolescent, having few goals, little apparent interest in moving on to another phase of their lives or truly separating from the family.
  - Then, of course, there are the "boomerang kids"—those who successfully separate, at least for a period of time, but then they come back!

- Why can this period be so difficult? Adolescent developmental issues are often implicated in complicated launches:
  - The cognitive changes of adolescence
    - It is during adolescence that the cognitive achievement of *formal operations* (to use a Piaget term) occurs, enabling abstract reasoning at a much deeper level. Many of the mood and behavioral changes associated with adolescence can be linked to the onset of formal operations—this is why kids become so emphatic about the *underlying principal* of various issues and conflicts. The good news is that, eventually, the adolescent becomes less enamored with his/her capacity to think about things abstractly and more agreeable.
  - Related to the cognitive changes are tendencies for greater affective intensity: the characteristic stormy moodiness of some teenager. This is a period of development when adolescents are further developing their ability to regulate their own experience of emotions.
  - Separation from family naturally occurs throughout the adolescent period—often a shift in the "source" of one's self esteem, moving away from the family group towards the peer group, sometimes leading parents to feel rejected and discarded. Paradoxically, it is common for high school grads to have "fired" their parents with respect to the parenting tasks of supervision and guidance, retaining them only, it seems, to fund college.
  - The tasks of adolescence, in today's culture, make it a developmental period with a fuzzy endpoint. In our society, there was once a time when a clearer threshold from adolescence into adulthood existed. Recent studies show, however, that on average it takes five to ten years for young people to shift fully from their family of origin to their own home base. Some developmental psychologists describe 18- to 25-year olds as "emerging adults," who need support from their parents and can benefit from a close relationship with them. In surveys, 18- to 21-year-olds say that they feel like an adult in some ways but not in others. Not until their mid-20's do they report feeling like an adult. When are the developmental tasks of adolescence completed? In our society the tasks of adolescence are generally viewed as including:
    - The development of the capacity for lasting, committed relationships.
    - The development of a lasting sexual orientation/identity.
    - The development of career/vocational goals.
    - The completion of training or preparation for one's career/vocational goals.
    - The development of improved frustration tolerance and impulse control.
    - The development of more lasting values and belief systems.
    - Achieving separation from one's family of origin and then returning as a fellow grown-up.

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- ☐ The dilemmas of parenting do not necessarily automatically improve when your high school grad heads off to school:
  - ○ Colleges report that more students than ever are arriving on campus freshman year already overwhelmed, some because of unstable family situations. The numbers of students suffering from mental health problems are at an all-time high, with counseling referrals for eating disorders, stress disorders, and depression outstripping the resources of most colleges. Whether pertaining to alcohol abuse or mental health issues, problems of this severe a magnitude typically necessitate parent involvement.
  - ○ Legislation such as the Buckley Amendment of 1974, which restricts information flow between colleges and parents, puts college administrators in a bind about sharing students' problems with parents. Some colleges admit to steering clear of parents out of bad experiences with invasive, micromanaging parents who feel entitled to call the shots because they're footing the tuition bill. Kaster & Wyatt feel that cutting families out of the support system isn't the answer. It needs to be colleges' business to communicate with parents when students are in trouble, rather than hiding behind the cloak of confidentiality and failing to include parents as part of a team.

- ☐ <u>Tips for parents</u>:
  - ○ Consider what the goal has actually always been: to allow your child to separate and then later return as a fellow grown up. If parents allow themselves to think about "why" they've elected to have children and work so hard for their kids' health and success, the "answer" is often rooted in the prospect of being rejoined by their children as fellow adults, once successful launching has occurred. Parents need to have faith in this process—their children generally do return as fellow adults, so long reasonably healthy launching happens. Try not to do anything which would jeopardize a later rebuilding of a relationship with your son or daughter as a fellow grown-up. The goal now is to try to keep your kid intact until such time that he/she can return, emotionally, as a fellow adult.
  - ○ Have faith that your values and goals have actually been successfully transmitted to your teenager—know that he/she is simply unlikely to allow you to see that your values have been embraced, at this time in his/her life.
  - ○ Randy and Colleen Russell conduct workshops for parents concerning adolescent launching and they offer the following advice for parents (adapted from http://www.strugglingteens.com/artman/publish/TenStepsEmpoweringLaunchingES_080206.shtml) :
    - Be the example of a balanced and meaningful adult life worth emulating.
      - ♦ Never forget that modeling is the most powerful way we learn—what model do you set for your kids with respect to your own adjustment to the demands of adulthood, career satisfaction, ongoing development throughout the lifecycle?
    - Embrace your own transition into second adulthood.
      - ♦ Remember: the launching of your kids also represents a developmental milestone in *your* life.
    - Make "child parenting" your job rather than your identity.
    - Treat adolescence as a necessary temporary multi-chaotic identity phase.
    - Help your child build a foundation through self-discovery of their unique strengths.
    - Teach your young person to focus on assets rather than fears.
      - ♦ Teaching your child optimism may be one of your most important gifts.
    - Wean your adolescent from "being parented" to inspired "self government".
    - Enlist other adults to mentor your child through adolescence and early adulthood.
    - Encourage and support at least one "life-altering adventure".
    - Create and perform rituals that formally end childhood and begin adulthood.
      - ♦ Really try to celebrate this important milestone in your child's development with something special—a trip, a getaway to a Wisconsin cabin, etc.

○ Try not to be overly influenced by your own sense of anxiety or, worse yet, anger towards your departing adolescent. Parents can calibrate their involvement so that they're encouraging independence, gradually reducing their level of involvement. Parents should anticipate that they will maintain a connected, trusting relationship with their child during the college years, following their progress, setbacks, and struggles, offering them guidance and resources when necessary.

○ Parents can be good consultants in advising their children in ways to pursue their interests, find work-study and employment opportunities, and hone a path toward a career. The art of parenting an emerging adult is to strike the right balance between intervening thoughtfully during true crises and standing aside during mild difficulties so that emerging adults can work through their dilemmas and thereby develop their own competencies. Your son or daughter will have difficulty learning by their mistakes unless they are permitted to fall from time to time.

○ Be honest with yourself about the possible challenges to you and your marriage which are brought about by your child's launch. Some parents have difficulty adjusting to the growing maturity of their child and inadvertently prolong the launching process due to difficulties adjusting to the next phase of their own lives.

○ Reflect on how you launched from your own family of origin—if it was complicated or overly strained, be mindful of the risk that you may inadvertently use your personal prior experience as a model, for better or for worse. Perhaps your own launch was comfortable, healthy and uneventful. However, if your own family-of-origin struggled with the launch emerging adults you may find yourself lacking a suitable model for parenting your child during this time. The solution for this circumstance usually involves reflection, personal honesty and support from your family.

Good Luck!

*Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem's practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at **(847) 680-0755** or contact him via email at **jjochem@aol.com** .*