

# Adolescence: The Ping-Pong Stage of Life

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“But everyone else is doing it.”

I do remember saying it often when I was a teen, although I can't for the life of me remember about what. More vivid is my mother's refrain: “If your friends jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you do it too?” Being an adolescent in the early 60's, I probably maintained an at least somewhat respectful silence. But the truth is I neither knew where Brooklyn was, nor had any appreciation for the height of the bridge. All I knew at the time was that my answer was a silent but resounding “Yes!”

What is it about the peer group that is so compelling to teens? Think back and remember. The big push of the teen years is for independence. You wanted to be respected as a young adult. You wanted to make your own decisions. You wanted to have more control over your own life.

But you were probably also terrified. What if you made the wrong decision? What if things didn't work out as you expected them to? What if you fell on your face and everyone knew it? This duality, the push for autonomy and adulthood, and the pull of being cared for and childhood, is the underlying tension of the teen years.

The solution? For most adolescents, it's a game of emotional ping-pong. The kids go back and forth between assertion of autonomy (ping: “Get out of my life”) and retreat back to the parental nest (pong: “Want to go shopping?”).

Ping: They spend most of their time in their group. Being “different” - exactly like everyone else - is a whole lot less frightening than stepping off into the unknown alone. Accepting the very real but unacknowledged control of the group's mores, fads, and activities looks like an alternative to control by parents and authorities. The kids don't see the paradox. To them, separating from the older generation is confirmation that they are coming into their own.

Pong: And yet most teens also long for parental approval. They want our love. They want our respect. They want us to witness their efforts and their achievements. They check to see if we're on the bleachers. They want us in the audience. They tell us not to bother coming to this or that event and then are crushed if we take them up on it. They might allow an acknowledgment after the game or show or ceremony but they absolutely don't want a public display of affection. Ping: Close in for a hug and the kid who was glad to see you quickly checks to see if peers are watching. Hugs are kid stuff and kid stuff isn't cool. Pong: But fail to give the same kid a high five and you've failed as a parent.

Confusing? You bet. It's confusing for the adult who one minute is told to “Leave me alone!” and the next minute is asked to give some advice or is invited to watch a movie. It's confusing to the teen who one minute wants to do almost anything to assert independence and the next minute wants to metaphorically crawl back in our lap.

As much as teens at times seem to want us to end any efforts at parenting RIGHT NOW, they do need us. How we manage the teen years can make the pinging and ponging more or less extreme, more or less upsetting. Whether they know it or not, whether they appreciate it or not, they count on us to guide them in the game of this stage of life.

## Reminders for Parents of Teens

- **Stay an adult.** As tempting as it is to try to relive your own teen years by joining your kid in teen culture, don't. Stay out of your kid's closet (even if you are proud you are the same size). Resist the temptation to tattoo your back or dye your hair green if that's what the kids are doing. Absolutely do meet your kids' friends and enjoy them for a few minutes of greeting but absolutely don't assume they want you to hang out with them for the afternoon. Kids can't do the task of separation if a parent insists on joining the peer group.

- **Catch them being right.** Teens who are trying to assert their independence can be exasperating. It's only natural that we correct, remind, and nag in our efforts to get them to do their chores, look presentable, and do well in school. But if all the kids hear is criticism, they soon tune us out. At least once a day (ideally more than that), catch your kid doing the right thing, looking good, or behaving admirably - even if it's a stretch; even if they're only doing what they ought to be doing. When kids feel recognized for the positives, they are more likely to pay attention when we offer suggestions and critiques.
- **Don't add your noise to their noise.** Like people who get louder when trying to communicate with a person who doesn't speak their language, the kids up the decibels as a way to make a point. The sure way to lose a fight is to respond in kind. When invited to a shouting match, you'll get further if you instead kindly and sympathetically tell your teen that you'll be happy to discuss the issue adult-to-adult when he or she is ready. Then go about your business until things can be talked out rationally.
- **Give in on some things.** This is a version of "pick your battles." Remember: Part of the motivation for teen pigheadedness is to show you that you're no longer the boss all the time. The kids want to be the boss of themselves. There are probably some things that aren't really worth the struggle to you. Does it really matter if your teen gets in at 10:00 or 10:30? Do you really care if she drops violin as long as she keeps up piano? Is it worth it to battle over standards for her room if it's at least minimally sanitary? By all means, give the kids the tussle they're looking for but let them negotiate a compromise now and then. They'll feel empowered. You'll have a little control over what they are feeling empowered about.
- **When you can't give in, give way.** Once a teen has taken a stand, pride becomes more important than the issue. Listen for places where you actually agree. Be willing to entertain a compromise. Offer a deal that preserves kid dignity even though it means that your way is how it's got to be. This preserves the relationship between you so that you can play another day.
- **Be a role model of adults behaving responsibly.** You might win coolness points by offering the kids a beer or ignoring obvious drug use. But your kid will lose respect for the law and won't get what it means to be a responsible adult if you do. As much as they resist it, they do count on us to be clear about the rules and to be consistent about applying them. While they are ping-ponging, they need us to be the "net." Adult steadiness provides much-needed stability in an otherwise confusing time of life.

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