



Understanding Changes in Thinking

How Do Teens Think?

As a parent, you know that often children are self-centered (or egocentric) in their thinking. This is as true of teenagers as it is of small infants. From about age 7 or 8 to about age 9 or 10, this egocentric thinking works in a certain way. Children of this age are quite simply convinced that their beliefs are correct. They do not understand that beliefs are the result of a thinking process and can be arrived at differently. They assume not only that their beliefs are correct, but that they are the only beliefs that can be held and that they are shared by all people. What's more, if they learn new information that contradicts their beliefs, they will find a way to integrate that information into their beliefs rather than alter them.

As children grow toward the teenage years, they begin to think in a different egocentric way. It is this new way of thinking that often causes problems in their relationships with parents. At about age 11 or 12, children begin to realize that beliefs are the result of a thinking process. They also come to understand that other people think, too, and that their own beliefs on a cer-

tain subject may differ from those of others. However, while they may understand that others have different ideas about the same topics, they still do not understand that other people may think about different topics all together.

Thinking about Self

To the young adolescent, the subject of greatest interest is him or herself. Since young adolescents do not distinguish between what others may be thinking themselves, they assume that every other person is as concerned with their behavior and appearance as they are themselves. So when Mary, for example, sees two of her girlfriends whispering in the school hallway, she "knows" they are talking about her. Or when Jeff sees his parents looking his way, he is certain they are looking at him. Therefore, the hours the young adolescent spends preening in front of the mirror or worrying about pimples are not only self-admiring or self-critical. They are also directed toward satisfying the "audience" that the young teen is certain is always watching. Parents often find the teen's preoccupation with himself or herself rather annoying, selfish, and unhealthy. This preoccupation with self is the result of the young teen's style of thinking, and this style of

thinking occurs in all children and is not deliberate. Also, the teen's concern with what others think is not entirely unjustified. Young teens are, in fact, very critical of one another and notice and pay attention to details.

Following fads appears to play an important role in achieving a positive self-image for the teen; approval from friends can be gained by the teen who looks and acts "right." So while you may veto some fads as too costly or as unhealthy, you may be wise to permit other fads as they can help your youngster develop self-confidence and improve your relationship with your child.

During early adolescence, children think that everyone is interested in them and that they are very special. This feeling of uniqueness is demonstrated when your teen indicates that no one has ever before felt as he or she does, suffered so much, loved so deeply, or been so misunderstood. The teen may say, "You don't understand!" In this case, you may find it helpful to respond, "I may not understand, but I'm sorry you are unhappy. If you want me to, I'll be glad to try and help." In this way, you can express caring without having to argue over whether or not you "understand." In addition, your teen can ask for help if it's wanted.

Adolescents believe in a kind of personal magic that will protect them from the bad things that happen to other people. Belief in this magic may make a girl think that she can't get pregnant or a boy think that he can safely drive in a dare-devil manner. Parents who understand this kind of thinking can take steps that will protect the young teen from dangers that he or she ignores. Although no perfect solution exists for the problem, many parents find that it is helpful to give the teen greater responsibility in nondangerous areas (like selecting bedtime) and retain control over more important and potentially harmful situations. It also helps to try to keep your sense of humor!

Thinking about Values

During early adolescence, the time when children come to understand that there exist points of view other than their own and their family's, children may begin to question their religion, their parent's political beliefs, and other values. There may be a sudden refusal to go to religious services with the family accompanied by statements like "I don't believe in that anymore." Children may, in fact, develop elaborate religious or political beliefs of their own and feel that they have the plan that could save the world.

At an earlier age, children can only love and hate real people and things; now they are capable of loving and hating ideas such as justice and dishonesty. Consequently, they may become extremely critical of parents. The parent who parks in a no parking zone for two minutes while picking up the dry-cleaning may be accused of dishonesty by a child; sweeping statements may be made, such as, "Don't talk to me about honesty! You're dishonest, and I'm not going to listen to you any more."

Many parents have found that it is impossible to try to make children of this age think as they do. On the other hand, it is impossible to simply state your beliefs and refuse to get into a debate. You can say,

"This is what I believe. I would like it if you believe the same things, but you have a right to your beliefs, too. When you are older, we can discuss some of these things. In the meantime, you will go to services with the family (if that's what you want your child to do), because I feel we should all go together. I expect you to accompany us and sit quietly. I do not expect you to believe if you feel you cannot." Most parents find that they can get their teen to do what they want them to do by allowing the teen a minor victory in the situation (such as recognizing that the teen has a right to his or her own beliefs).

Experts feel that by the time the young person is around 15 or 16, this kind of egocentrism is gradually diminishing. It is felt that the more that teens have a chance to talk about their personal theories and listen to those of other teens, the sooner they arrive at a mature level of thinking.

At about this time, the teen is likely to begin to re-establish the warm relationship with parents that might have become strained during the early teen years. The task becomes one of establishing the special relationship that can exist between two adults who are parent and child.

... and justice for all

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