

“Whatever!” Surviving Home Education with Teenagers

The teenage years can be quite a challenge, however you decide to educate your child. If your child has been home educated for at least a few years before reaching adolescence, then they will probably be accustomed to the lifestyle. If you are lucky, your teenager will also have learnt how to educate themselves with support from you and others and will be reasonably self-motivated and confident in their abilities. But what if that doesn't happen or if, for whatever reason, you decide to withdraw your child from school once they reach their teenage years? Many parents who approach me when they are in this situation feel they are in crisis and that there are many obstacles to their ensuring a suitable education for their child. This article identifies some of those challenges and explores how to move from crisis to opportunity.

What are the challenges and opportunities?

Changing responsibilities

Deciding to home educate your teenager changes the way you handle your responsibility to ensure that they receive a suitable education. Rather than delegating a large part of that responsibility to a school, you are now directly in control of all of it. Or are you? How do you do that when your teenager knows exactly what they do or don't want to learn and it bears no resemblance to your ideas of what constitutes “an education”? What about if your teenager doesn't appear to want to engage with anything? Parents in the latter situation have told me that this seems to be a normal reaction to stress. Many teenagers go through this when they are first removed from school as they need time to de-stress and find themselves again. A few may react in the opposite way and study manically, because they feel they “ought to” and will need additional encouragement to take a break for a while.

If you find your teenager happily occupied but in activities that you do not consider to be “educational” then I believe this is another one of those opportunities for us to reassess our perspectives as parents. What is “education”? What constitutes a “suitable education” for our child? If you question your own assumptions on this then you may well find that your beliefs stem from how you yourself were educated. Many parents equate gaining an education with gaining qualifications and exam success. Do you still want to hold those beliefs now? How have your ideas changed with the benefit of your experiences as an adult?

From my experience with working with many parents, the key here is to reassess your role as parent/educator/facilitator and keep the communication between the two of you going. Educate yourselves on learning styles and methods and broaden your horizons beyond what was expected by the schooling system. Above all, remember this is team work. Between the two of you, you will find a way to proceed which suits you both.

Battle of wills

One of the challenges of living with a teenager can be that they seem to be programmed to rebel! It's at this point in their childhood when just about all our values and beliefs as parents can be put in the spotlight and questioned by them. Discussions can become heated and personal and may lead to large amounts of stress for all concerned. This can be tough enough to deal with when our teenagers are attending school and being supervised by others for a large part of the week. Once we are home educating them, however, the thought of spending much more time around them can seem very daunting to say the least!

The opportunities that can arise from these situations are many. Perhaps we ourselves haven't examined our behaviour traits, beliefs and values for a while and having them highlighted is proving painful! Reassessing how we lead our lives can be a very enlightening and fruitful endeavour and may well lead to some positive and useful changes.

Whilst many teenagers may not be adept at communicating with compassion and respect, these are qualities we can model for them, once we let go of our immediate reactions to being challenged. When we are consistent in this approach, our children will learn these more acceptable and wholesome behaviours from us and they are much more likely to do so by interacting with someone who models the behaviour than just by being told that's how they should conduct themselves.

We can use these time to develop our listening skills. When teenagers feel they are being heard, they are more likely to feel loved and respected. We can view this as an opportunity to strengthen or re-establish a bond of trust with our child and encourage their self-confidence.

Emotional and Physical Growth

Of course, at the same time as your teenager is engaged in learning and studying, they are experiencing marked growth both physically and emotionally. Just about any book on the psychology of learning will emphasise that your emotional state is critical for you to learn effectively. This is something many of us will have experienced as adults. Our teenagers may not be sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge or understand all of their feelings and physical strengths and weaknesses. This is another opportunity for us to aid them with their self-awareness and to model it ourselves. By cultivating self-awareness and self-motivation in yourself and in them, you will help them to empower themselves.

Conclusion

The prospect of home educating a teenager can seem daunting and indeed there may be many challenges we are asked to face.

The opportunities are the learning experiences embedded in those challenges. For those who choose to embrace those challenges, the rewards will be the emergence of a happy, self-confident and well-adjusted teenager, whatever!

Further Reading

Unqualified Education. A Guide to Learning at Home for 11-18 year olds. Gareth Lewis

The Teenage Liberation Handbook. Grace Llewellyn

Parent-Teen Breakthrough. The Relationship Approach. Mira Kirshenbaum and Charles Foster

Non-violent Communication. Marshall Rosenberg

Listening to our Children. Sally Lever (see Articles page on my website).

Free-Range Education and it's Lessons for the Adults. Sally Lever (see Articles page on my website)

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