

Understanding The Growing Child

By Dan Jones

The best way to be your child's best friend is not to try and be your child's best friend. Let me explain.

As your child starts exploring the world around them more actively she or he will sometimes do things that could cause them harm. How you react at this crucial time can influence whether the child grows up risk averse or feels comfortable with embracing activities where the outcome, although in no way hazardous, may appear uncertain. The former will restrict their curiosity and may make them overly cautious, the latter encourage further exploration and discovery.

Anxiety over and fear of situations, object, animals and people that pose no actual danger are also learned responses. If a parent has a phobia of spiders, for example, and every time they see a spider they feel panic then their child will learn this is how you are supposed to react to spiders.

How a child feels about starting school is also largely influenced by their parents responses. If their parents are sad and nervous about how their first day go, the child will pick up on this and will feel the same as they enter the school. If the parent is excited and enthusiastic about their child's first day he or she is more likely to feel this way as they enter the school and more likely to have a positive experience.

As a child grows up to be a teenager their focus gradually shifts. Before their 'teen years most children want to please their parents, look to them for guidance and learn from them how to behave in different situations.

Teenagers shift their focus to developing independence and this involves separating from their parents and focusing on creating a substitute family unit with their peers. As a consequence the influence of their peers becomes gradually greater than that of their parents. During this time they still need guidance from their parents but will often push against what their parents say if it conflicts with what they want to be doing with their peers.

This can be a tough time for parents since the brains of most teenagers are still developing and will not fully mature until their early 'twenties. As a result they are incapable of recognising the risks involved in many of the things they do. Parents have to often say and do things that make the teenager claim to dislike them or feel that they are being unfair.

The role of a parent is to be a guide for their child, helping them to become an adult with the skills to cope well in adult life. The way to do this is through an authoritative parenting style where you have clear rules, boundaries and expectations which all come from a place of love for your child, where you remain calm, where you have discussions and negotiation and two-way respect with your child, and where you show respect and love towards your child. It isn't about being your child's best friend, but about being your child's parent. Parents have an effect on their child even before birth.

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