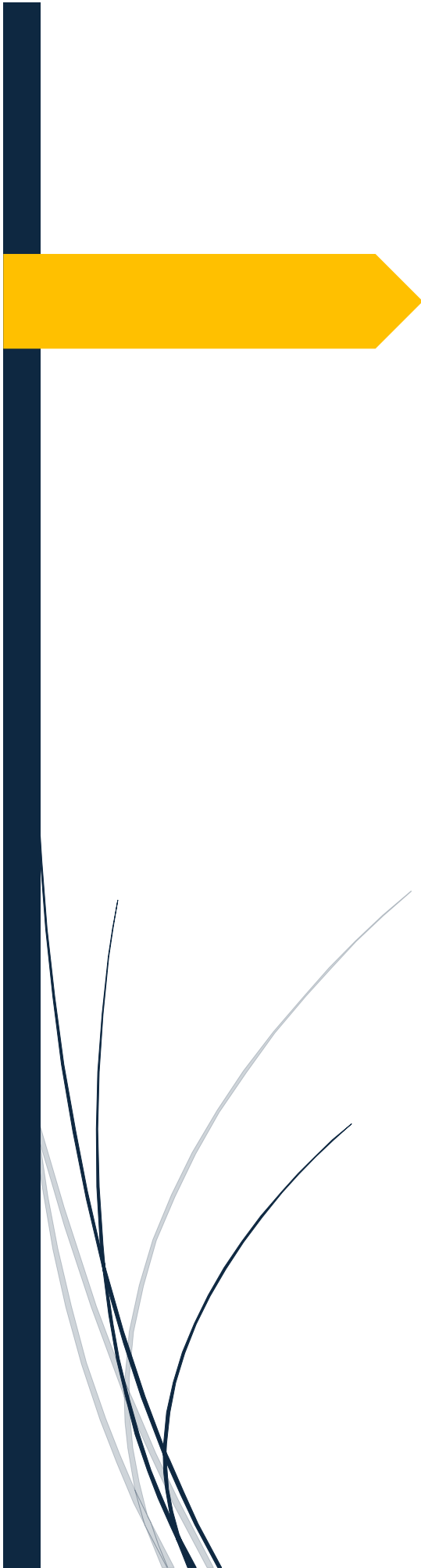




The Parenting Paradox of Adolescence

Reactance, Autonomy,
Responsibility, and the
Changing Parent-Child
Relationship

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Parenting changes as children grow.

When children are young, parents appropriately make most decisions. They determine when children go to bed, where they go, what they eat, how they get places, what is safe, and what needs to happen next. Much of parenting involves directing, reminding, organizing, protecting, teaching, and managing.

Adolescence begins to disrupt this arrangement.

Teenagers increasingly want to make their own decisions, have greater privacy, determine how they spend their time, develop their own opinions, manage their relationships, and decide what matters to them. At the same time, parents remain responsible for safety, health, education, family expectations, and helping prepare their teenager for adulthood.

This creates one of the central paradoxes of parenting:

Your job is to gradually raise someone who no longer needs you to manage them.

To accomplish that, parents eventually have to allow adolescents to practice managing themselves often before they are particularly good at it. Parents begin the transition from protecting to preparing.

That transition can be uncomfortable for everyone.

The Developmental Tensions of Adolescence

Many parent-teen conflicts make more sense when viewed as developmental tensions rather than problems.

Autonomy ↔ Connection

- Teenagers increasingly need to experience themselves as separate individuals while continuing to need connection, belonging, guidance, and support.

Freedom ↔ Responsibility

- Adolescents understandably want more freedom. Parents understandably want evidence that increasing freedom can be managed responsibly.

Control ↔ Influence

- Parents gradually lose the ability to directly control many aspects of their child's life. The opportunity shifts toward maintaining influence.

Protection ↔ Experience

- Parents want to prevent mistakes and unnecessary pain. Adolescents also need opportunities to make decisions, experience manageable consequences, recover, and learn.

Parent Management ↔ Self-Management

- Responsibilities that once belonged primarily to the parent gradually need to become the adolescent's responsibility.

The goal isn't to eliminate these tensions. They are part of development. The task is learning how to navigate them.

Try This

- Before intervening, ask yourself: **“Which developmental tension am I dealing with?”**
 - When your teenager asks for more freedom, explore what additional responsibility could accompany it.
 - Look for areas where you may still be managing something your teenager could begin managing.
 - Identify low-risk areas where your teenager can practice making more decisions.
 - Ask yourself: **“Does my child need me to take over or help them think?”**
 - Notice whether you are responding to an actual problem or to the discomfort of having less control.
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Understanding Reactance

One process that frequently appears during this transition is **psychological reactance**.

Reactance is the tendency to resist when we experience our freedom, choice, or autonomy as being threatened. It isn't unique to teenagers. Adults experience it too.

Someone **tells us what we *have* to do**, and part of us **immediately wants to resist** even when the request itself might be reasonable.

During adolescence, this response can become particularly visible because the desire for autonomy is increasing at the same time parents still have considerable authority.

Reactance can sound like:

- “Stop telling me what to do.”
- “I know.”
- “I’ll do it later.”
- “Why do you care?”
- “Everyone else’s parents let them.”
- “It’s my life.”
- “You don’t trust me.”
- “I’m not doing that.”

It can also appear without words:

- Ignoring.
- Delaying.
- Withdrawing.
- Rejecting help.
- Doing something differently because a parent suggested it.
- Becoming increasingly committed to a position once it is challenged.
- Agreeing but failing to follow through.

Sometimes the conflict isn't entirely about **what is being asked**.

It is also about: **Who gets to decide?**

Try This

When you notice immediate resistance:

- Avoid immediately repeating the instruction louder or more forcefully.
 - Ask: **“What part of this isn't working for you?”**
 - Try: **“Tell me what you're thinking.”**
 - Ask: **“Do you have another way you think this could get done?”**
 - Give the outcome while allowing flexibility around the method: **“This needs to happen tonight. You can decide when and how you handle it.”**
 - If there are choices, make them explicit: **“Either option works for me. Which would you rather do?”**
 - If there isn't a choice, say so clearly rather than creating a false one: **“This part isn't optional, but we can talk about how we make it work.”**
 - Notice whether repeated reminders are helping—or creating another reason to resist.
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Reactance Isn't Necessarily Defiance

Parents can understandably interpret resistance as disrespect, laziness, irresponsibility, stubbornness, or defiance.

Sometimes those descriptions may capture part of what is occurring.

But not always.

A teenager may also be communicating:

- **I want some ownership.**
- **I want you to trust me.**
- **I want to figure this out myself.**
- **I don't want every decision made for me.**
- **I want my opinion to matter.**
- **I need some space.**

Recognizing reactance doesn't mean accepting inappropriate behavior. It means becoming curious about what may be underneath it.

Instead of asking only: **“Why won't my teenager listen?”**

Parents can also ask: **“What about this interaction might be creating resistance?”**

Try This

Before labeling the behavior:

- Replace **“You're being difficult”** with **“Something about this isn't working. What's going on?”**
- Replace **“Why are you arguing about everything?”** with **“What feels important to you about this?”**

- Replace **“Because I said so”** with a brief explanation of the reason behind the expectation.
 - Ask: **“Is the problem the expectation—or how we're trying to get there?”**
 - Separate disagreement from disrespect. Your teenager can disagree without automatically violating a boundary.
 - Address genuinely disrespectful behavior separately from the adolescent's opinion: **“You can disagree with me. You can't call me names while doing it.”**
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Autonomy Is Not the Same as Independence

One important distinction is between **autonomy** and **independence**. Independence means needing less assistance from others. Autonomy means increasingly experiencing yourself as the author of your own choices. Healthy adolescent development does not require teenagers to disconnect from parents.

Ideally, adolescents gradually learn:

- **I can make decisions AND consider other people's input.**
- **I can disagree AND remain connected.**
- **I can have freedom AND accept responsibility.**
- **I can ask for help without giving up ownership.**
- **I can be influenced without being controlled.**

The developmental goal isn't: **“I don't need anyone.”**

It is closer to: **“I can increasingly manage myself while remaining connected to others.”**

Try This

- Ask permission before giving advice when the situation allows: **“Do you want my thoughts, or do you mostly need me to listen?”**
 - When they ask for help, resist immediately taking over. Ask: **“Which part would you like help with?”**
 - Encourage them to bring you a proposed solution rather than only a problem.
 - Say: **“You don't have to make the decision I would make. Walk me through how you're thinking about it.”**
 - Let them solve low-risk problems differently than you would.
 - When they make a good decision independently, acknowledge the process rather than claiming credit: **“You thought that through well.”**
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Differentiation: “Where Do You End and I Begin?”

Adolescence also involves **differentiation**.

Teenagers begin developing increasingly distinct preferences, beliefs, relationships, identities, interests, values, and ways of approaching the world.

This may include questioning things they previously accepted from parents.

- Music changes.
- Clothing changes.
- Friends become increasingly important.
- Opinions become stronger.
- Family traditions may be questioned.

Parents may hear: **“That's what YOU think.”**

Although uncomfortable, difference does not automatically mean rejection. A teenager can disagree with a parent and still love them. They can develop different interests and remain connected.

They can question family beliefs without abandoning the family.

Part of adolescence involves discovering: **Where do my parents end and I begin?**

Try This

- Become curious about differences instead of immediately correcting them: **“Tell me how you came to that conclusion.”**
 - Ask: **“What do you like about that?”**
 - Allow harmless preferences to remain preferences.
 - Notice when you are trying to persuade your teenager about something that doesn't actually require agreement.
 - Share your own perspective without demanding adoption: **“Here's how I see it. You may end up seeing it differently.”**
 - Look for opportunities to participate in their interests without needing to make those interests your own.
 - Practice staying connected during disagreement.
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Control and Influence Are Different

As children grow, parents encounter an uncomfortable reality: **Control decreases.**

Parents cannot control every friendship, conversation, thought, choice, interaction, or eventually even many behaviors. This doesn't mean parents become irrelevant.

It means the parenting task increasingly shifts from **control toward influence.**

- Control asks: **“How do I make them do this?”**
- Influence asks: **“How do I help them think about this?”**

Control emphasizes compliance. Influence develops judgment. Control solves today's problem.

Influence helps develop the person who will solve tomorrow's problems without you.

Excessive attempts to maintain control can sometimes reduce parental influence.

When adolescents expect judgment, interrogation, punishment, lectures, or immediate attempts to control their decisions, they may begin sharing less information.

Parents then know less. Knowing less creates anxiety. Anxiety can produce more monitoring and control.

And increased control can create even less disclosure.

Try This

Shift from giving answers to asking questions:

- “What are your options?”
- “What do you think could happen if you choose that?”
- “What's the upside?”
- “What's the downside?”
- “What aren't you considering?”
- “What would make this a good decision?”
- “If it doesn't work, what's your backup plan?”
- “What would you tell a friend who was making this decision?”
- “What do you need from me?”

When possible, finish with: “It sounds like you've thought about it. Let me know if you want my help.”

Structure Is Not the Enemy

Supporting autonomy does **not** mean becoming permissive. Teenagers still benefit from structure.

Parents remain responsible for establishing reasonable expectations around safety, substance use, driving, school, technology, sleep, family responsibilities, respectful behavior, money, curfews, health, and treatment of others.

The distinction is between **providing structure** and unnecessarily controlling the adolescent's internal world. A parent can establish a curfew without demanding that the teenager believe the curfew is fair. A parent can require respectful communication without requiring agreement.

One of the most useful parenting distinctions is: **Behavior can have boundaries. Thoughts and feelings don't require parental approval.**

Try This

When establishing a boundary:

- State the expectation clearly.
- Briefly explain the reason.
- Identify what is negotiable and what isn't.

- Let your teenager disagree.
- Avoid repeatedly defending the boundary once it has been explained.
- Keep consequences connected to the behavior when possible.
- Avoid adding unrelated punishments simply because the teenager became upset.
- Revisit boundaries as capability changes.

Try: **“You don't have to agree with this rule. You do need to follow it.”**

Or: **“The curfew isn't negotiable tonight. How you get home safely is something we can work out together.”**

Freedom and Capability Do Not Always Develop at the Same Speed

Teenagers may understandably want considerable freedom before they consistently demonstrate the planning, emotional regulation, risk assessment, organization, communication, or follow-through necessary to manage it.

Parents sometimes respond: **“You're not responsible enough.”**

That can quickly become an argument about character. A more productive approach is making autonomy developmental and observable.

Instead of: **“You're irresponsible.”**

Try: **“You're asking us to give you more ownership. Let's figure out what would show us you're ready to manage it.”**

Try This

Connect additional freedom to specific behaviors rather than vague judgments about maturity:

- Want a later curfew? Demonstrate consistent communication and arriving home when agreed.
- Want fewer homework reminders? Manage assignments independently for an agreed period.
- Want greater access to the car? Demonstrate safe driving and responsible communication.
- Want more control over spending? Practice managing a defined amount of money.
- Want less parental monitoring? Demonstrate reliable communication about plans and changes.

If something doesn't work:

- Review what happened.
- Identify what got in the way.
- Adjust the plan.
- Practice again.

A setback doesn't always require returning to complete parental control.

Whose Problem Is This?

Parents can unintentionally remain responsible for things their teenager increasingly needs to own.

Consider:

- Homework.
- Getting out of bed.
- Remembering equipment.
- Communicating with teachers.
- Completing applications.
- Managing spending money.
- Remembering appointments.
- Keeping track of assignments.
- Resolving minor friendship conflicts.

The parent reminds. Then reminds again. Then becomes frustrated.

Eventually the parent may be working harder to solve the problem than the adolescent.

A useful question becomes: **“Whose problem is this becoming?”**

Try This

Before stepping in:

- Ask: **“What happens if I don't solve this?”**
- Ask your teenager: **“What's your plan?”**
- Ask: **“Do you want help brainstorming or do you have it?”**
- Agree on whether reminders are wanted rather than automatically providing them.
- Allow manageable consequences when safety isn't involved.
- If they forget something, resist automatically delivering it.
- If they miss a deadline, allow them to communicate with the teacher, coach, employer, or other person themselves.
- Help them develop a system rather than becoming the system.

Instead of: **“I'll make sure you remember.”**

Try: **“What could you put in place so you remember?”**

Protection Versus Experience

Parents possess something teenagers don't: **Years of experience. Practice. Reps.**

Parents can often see the mistake coming. That creates a powerful urge to intervene.

But knowing that a teenager is about to make an imperfect decision doesn't always mean preventing it is the best developmental choice.

Some lessons require experience.

The useful question becomes: **“Is this dangerous or simply uncomfortable?”**

There is an important difference between allowing a disappointing grade, forgotten lunch, awkward conversation, poorly managed allowance, or missed opportunity and allowing serious safety, legal, substance-use, driving, violence, or exploitation risks.

Try This

Before rescuing:

- Identify the actual risk.
- Separate **danger** from **discomfort**.
- Ask yourself: **“What could they learn by handling this?”**
- Let small mistakes stay small instead of preventing all of them.
- After a mistake, lead with curiosity rather than **“I told you so.”**
- Ask: **“How did that work out?”**
- Ask: **“What would you do differently next time?”**
- Ask: **“Do you want help figuring out what happens next?”**
- Step back in when consequences exceed what is reasonable or safe for the adolescent to manage alone.

Privacy Is Not Automatically Secrecy

Adolescents generally begin wanting more privacy.

- Closed doors.
- Private conversations.
- Personal messages.
- Time alone.
- Thoughts they don't immediately share.
- Relationships they manage themselves.

Parents can experience this change as withdrawal or as evidence that something is wrong.

But increasing privacy can be part of developing autonomy.

Privacy says: “There are parts of my life that belong to me.”

Concerning secrecy says: “I need to conceal something because disclosure may expose significant risk, harm, or behavior that requires intervention.”

The long-term goal isn't simply obtaining information.

It is developing a relationship in which adolescents are increasingly willing to share important information.

Try This

- Knock before entering when appropriate.
 - Avoid reading messages or searching belongings simply because you are curious.
 - Be clear ahead of time about circumstances that would justify greater parental monitoring.
 - When your teenager voluntarily tells you something difficult, manage your first reaction.
 - Avoid immediately turning disclosure into interrogation.
 - Thank them for telling you.
 - Ask: **“Do you want me to listen, help you think, or help you do something?”**
 - Distinguish information you **want to know** from information you **need to know for safety**.
 - If additional monitoring becomes necessary, explain why rather than doing it covertly when circumstances allow.
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Parent Anxiety Can Become Part of the System

Adolescence isn't only a developmental transition for teenagers. It is also one for parents. Giving children more autonomy means accepting greater uncertainty.

Parents may have to tolerate:

- Not knowing everything.
- Watching imperfect decisions.
- Waiting longer than they would like.
- Allowing their teenager to solve something differently.
- Seeing disappointment.
- Not immediately fixing a problem.
- Having less control.
- Trusting without guarantees.

Parental anxiety can unintentionally lead to overfunctioning: **Worry → Remind → Check → Monitor → Correct → Rescue → Repeat**

The adolescent may then underfunction: **Wait → Resist → Forget → Let Parent Handle It**

Both sides can unintentionally reinforce the other.

Try This

When you feel the urge to intervene:

- Wait before sending another reminder.
 - Ask yourself: **“Has something actually gone wrong yet?”**
 - Notice whether you are solving your teenager's problem or reducing your own anxiety.
 - Decide how many reminders you are willing to give before allowing ownership to shift.
 - Resist asking the same question repeatedly in different ways.
 - Allow silence after asking a question.
 - Let your teenager think before answering.
 - If you are activated, delay the conversation when possible.
 - Ask yourself: **“What would happen if I did 20% less here?”**
 - Notice whether stepping back creates an opportunity for your teenager to step forward.
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Connection Before Correction

Parents remain enormously important during adolescence. But influence is often easier when adolescents experience parents as people who are willing to understand them not only manage them.

Understanding does not require agreement. Validation does not require permission. Listening does not surrender authority.

Try This

Before correcting, try:

- **“Tell me what happened.”**
- **“What was that like for you?”**
- **“I can understand why you're frustrated.”**
- **“That makes more sense now that you've explained it.”**
- **“What do you wish I understood about this?”**
- **“Do you want me to listen or help you solve it?”**

Then, if necessary: **“I understand your perspective. The boundary still needs to remain.”**

Both things can be true.

Reducing Unnecessary Reactance

The objective isn't clever wording that makes teenagers comply.

It is reducing unnecessary struggles over autonomy while maintaining appropriate parental responsibility.

Try This

Instead of: “Go do your homework.”

- **Try:** “What's your plan for getting your homework finished?”

Instead of: “Clean your room right now.”

- **Try:** “Your room needs to be cleaned before Saturday. When are you planning to handle it?”

Instead of: “Put your phone away.”

- **Try:** “Phones are done at 10. Where do you want to charge yours?”

Instead of: “I've told you three times.”

- **Try:** “We've talked about this already. What's getting in the way?”

Instead of: “No. You're not going.”

- **Try:** “Help me understand the plan and let's see whether we can get to yes.”

Instead of: “You need to calm down.”

- **Try:** “We don't have to solve this while we're both frustrated.”

Instead of: “You're making a bad decision.”

- **Try:** “Walk me through how you're thinking about this.”

Instead of: “You never listen.”

- **Try:** “I don't think we're hearing each other right now.”

Instead of: “Because I said so.”

- **Try:** “You may not agree, but I want you to understand why I'm making this decision.”

Instead of: “You need to be more responsible.”

- **Try:** “What would taking responsibility for this look like?”

When the Boundary Still Needs to Be the Boundary

Sometimes parents can provide choice. Sometimes they cannot.

Safety, health, legal responsibilities, protection of others, and important family responsibilities may require firm limits. Reactance doesn't determine whether a boundary is appropriate.

A teenager can dislike a boundary. Argue with it. Experience it as unfair.

And the parent can still maintain it.

Try This

When a boundary isn't negotiable:

- Keep the explanation brief.
- Acknowledge the teenager's disappointment.
- Avoid trying to convince them that they should like the decision.
- Don't repeatedly argue the same point.
- Identify any smaller areas where choice remains available.
- Stay calm enough that the boundary doesn't become a contest of emotional intensity.

Try:

- “I understand why you're angry. The answer is still no.”
- “You don't have to agree with this decision.”
- “This part isn't negotiable. These other parts are.”
- “I'm willing to talk about how we handle it. I'm not going to keep debating whether the boundary exists.”

Reactance Is One Explanation Not Every Explanation

Not every difficult behavior is reactance.

Before assuming: **“They're just being defiant.”**

Consider other possibilities.

Could this involve:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Executive-functioning difficulties? | • Skill deficits? |
| • Anxiety? | • Feeling overwhelmed? |
| • Depression? | • Confusing expectations? |
| • ADHD? | • A relationship problem? |
| • Sleep deprivation? | • Different values? |
| • Social pressure? | • A need for connection? |
| • Fear of failure? | • Simple disagreement? |
| • Embarrassment? | |

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what function it may be serving.

Curiosity generally provides more information than labeling.

Try This

When a pattern keeps happening:

- Describe the behavior rather than the character: **“Getting out the door on time has been difficult”** instead of **“You’re irresponsible.”**
 - Ask: **“What makes this hard?”**
 - Ask: **“Is there something you’re needing that I’m missing?”**
 - Ask: **“Do you know what you need to do but have trouble getting yourself to do it?”**
 - Look for patterns: time of day, transitions, sleep, school stress, social situations, particular expectations.
 - Consider whether the adolescent needs more autonomy, more support, clearer expectations, additional skills or some combination.
 - When the intensity, duration, impairment, or change in behavior seems outside the adolescent's usual functioning, consider whether something beyond typical developmental reactance needs attention.
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A Parent Self-Check

When you notice yourself pushing harder, pause and consider:

- **Is this actually important?**
- Is this about **safety, responsibility, values, or simply my preference?**
- **Do I need to protect in this situation or prepare them?**
- Does this need to happen **my way**, or does it simply need to happen?
- Have I explained why the boundary exists?
- Is there meaningful choice available?
- Have I listened before repeating my position?
- Am I setting a behavioral boundary or trying to control a thought or feeling?
- Could a manageable natural consequence teach this better?
- Am I solving something my teenager could attempt to solve?
- Is my anxiety causing me to over-manage?
- Have they demonstrated enough capability for more ownership?
- Am I protecting them from danger—or from discomfort?
- Am I trying to control this decision or influence how they think about it?
- **What am I trying to develop for adulthood?**

The Longer View

Adolescence gradually changes the parent's role.

- **Director → Guide**
- **Manager → Consultant**
- **Reminder → Resource**
- **Problem Solver → Thinking Partner**
- **Control → Influence**

This transition doesn't happen all at once. There will be times when parents need to step forward and provide greater structure. There will be other times when the developmental task is stepping back.

A useful question isn't simply: **“How do I get my teenager to listen to me?”**

Consider instead:

“How do I remain connected and influential while helping my teenager develop the ability to think, choose, take responsibility, recover from mistakes, and increasingly manage themselves?”

That is the parenting paradox of adolescence:

To help children eventually become capable of navigating life without us, we have to gradually allow them to practice navigating life while we are still there.