



PARENT TRUST

FOR WASHINGTON CHILDREN

Holidays and Your Teens

Holidays can be pretty trying for parents of teenagers.

This is the time of year for big family get-togethers and connecting with old friends. But things will be different this year. This year the thought of facing family members or friends you haven't seen for a long time sends a cold chill through you that almost creates a sudden drop in room temperature.

This is the holiday season when your family and friends will be re-introduced to your "new" teenager.

What happened?

Your once "normal-looking" child -- t-shirts, jeans and sneakers -- is now marching to a different drummer. In fact, your teen is dancing to a lot of different drummers! He's experimenting with a new "self", exploring new looks, and trying new, "in-your-face" attitudes that seems to draw stares and suspicion. This year your child has decided to open the closet of human characters and is trying on different hats and personalities.

But what is Aunt Lizzy going to think? What will Grandpa Jones say?

- Your daughter is wearing funny, baggy, clown-like pants and shirts that are five times too big for her.
- Your son decides to change his hair color to fit the autumn season -- pumpkin orange and maple-tree red.
- Or your child is in a perpetual state of mourning -- dressed in black; complete with an attitude of eerie bleakness that fits this year's dreary wardrobe of choice?

How about the accessories?

- Heavy, dangling chains attached to belts and disappearing into pockets,
- big, black shoes with soles like heavy-duty, all-weather tires
- patches of various size and shape sewn onto jackets with dental floss, with statements that decry social discontent.



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For the active, sports-minded teenager, 10-speed bikes and baseball bats are forsaken. Instead they have colorful skateboards, roller-blades, and snowboards, all designed to bring fear to the hearts and minds of concerned parents everywhere.

And their music!

It's loud and repetitive.

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Dancing has been reduced to vigorous head bobbing and skyward fist thrusting. Or they're slamming into each other in a so-called "mosh pits" with someone occasionally leaping into the crowd and being passed around like a giant leaf dropped on a blanket of ants.

Yes, your child is definitely quite different this year.

So when the big family reunion comes,

your biggest concern is trying to explain to friends and relatives why your sweet child has turned into such an interesting character. You're dreading their looks of pity and disbelief. You're fearful of your teenager's response to their obvious show of disapproval.

So what do you do? You can try two things:

1. Ask your child nicely, "Can I be a flaky parent, just this once? I don't think Aunt Lizzy or Grandpa Jones will understand your new look. I think you're a terrific kid, and normally I wouldn't ask this of you, but....."
2. Or you can LIVE WITH THE SORROW and do it with a smile and with unconditional love.

Normal expressions of individuality:

What teenagers wear, how they look, and the music they prefer are normal expressions of their individuality as they search for their own identities.

Criticism can be devastating for teens.

They have fragile egos. They may never admit it, but they do care about what others say and think, and they especially care about what their parents say and think. As long as they are basically responsible people, how they dress or what their hair looks like is of little consequence.



Let them know that you really want them to be a part of your holiday gathering. Don't act displeased or appear embarrassed when your friends see your teenager. Say positive things about him/her and treat them with respect. And above all, tell them that you love them, especially during the holidays when family, friends and being together have so much significance.

Who knows, perhaps your teen might even enjoy him/herself and Aunt Lizzy and Grandpa Jones might even discover that your teen is still the same person -- only different.

From *Some Personal Ruminations on Being a Parent of a Teenager* By Thelma Dirkes
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