

Understanding teens

Teenagers have to rebel to grow up, parents are told in a lecture series that encourages open and positive communication

MARY SINANIDIS

HELP is now at hand for exasperated parents struggling to understand their teenager's hormonal cascades, outlandish hairstyles and typical adolescent obsessions.

"Parents-Teens and Career Orientation" debunks myths associated with the challenges of the teen years. The programme is part of a new cycle of seminars hosted by the Counselling and Careers Orientation Office (GRASEP) and takes place at the Evangeliki School in Nea Smyrni.



The first meeting, entitled "Adolescents and their Problems", brought together parents, teachers and psychologists from around Athens.

"This amazing response shows the need that exists for such events," said GRASEP career advisor and psychologist Nikos Demertzis, who tabled the programme's agenda after being inundated with requests for such an event.

"Parents, especially Greek ones, are concerned when they see their youngsters gain independence, spend more time with friends and test their limits," Demertzis said. "They feel they are losing control, and yet this is normal, desired behaviour for an adolescent moving towards adulthood."

Many in the auditorium audience sighed and nodded in agreement during the first seminar which highlighted typical teen behaviour, from the negative triangle of laziness, risk-taking and anger to cognitive development as young minds enter the realm of analysis, abstraction and creativity.

Why so grumpy?

Vasso Artinopoulou, a Panteio University lecturer, outlined exactly why an average teen may roll out of bed in a grumpy mood. Her no-nonsense explanations showed that controversial behaviour that makes parents cringe is actually necessary.

"Revolution is needed so that they can restructure their thoughts before processing these," Artinopoulou said. "There is a conflict between what they 'are' and what they want to 'become', between 'change' and 'staying the same', between the adult and child within themselves."

Working through the conflict and turbulence is what will ultimately help teens succeed as individuals in the long run, Artinopoulou explained. She warned that studies have shown that parents who overemphasise the negative and keep stigmatising their teens, risk having their words become self-fulfilling prophecies in their offspring search for their own identity.

"Indeed, most criminals were found to have had caregivers who negated them during their juvenile years," she said, stressing the importance of building a relationship based on trust.

Understanding why teens feel like invincible adventurers on the one hand and strangers in their own growth-spurting bodies on the other may be the first signs towards learning how to guide them through the choppy waters towards adulthood.

"They look to parents for guidance and limit-setting," said Artinopoulou, pointing to Greek statistics that show that almost 91 percent of Greek teens mention that they had good or excellent relations with their families.



'A good thing'

Constant squabbles that are part and parcel of adolescence make it difficult for parents to believe in their own value in their children's lives. After all, it is necessary for teens to establish their individuality and to look for answers regarding who they are by challenging authority and testing rules and limits.

"This is actually a good thing," said Demertzis, pointing to cases of children who did not rebel during their teen years and delayed their coming of age.

Artinopoulou excitedly pointed to the brilliance of adolescence and stressed its

positive aspects. She pointed out indigenous cultures that celebrate this time with coming-of-age ceremonies in contrast to the Western world that sees it as a time of trepidation.

Both Demertzis and Artinopoulou encouraged beleaguered parents to simply change perspective. Despite negative portrayals of teens in the media, most research shows that many parents never encounter serious conflicts with their adolescent children.

Indeed, the good news is that they can live peacefully simply by keeping communication open and positive while maintaining reasonable rules.

Growing a thick skin may help, too.

Evangeliki School teens were called in to give a performance of a typical family with teenagers. The plot focused on a decline in the child's academic performance in school. While the first version showed how most typical families lash out at teens, the second act featured parents that remained calm and used the opportunity to better understand their child. Parents in the auditorium giggled as the protagonist uttered the typical teen excuses such as "I'm bored" and "I'll never need maths in real life".

Demertzis said the trick to convincing teens to stay on track was keeping calm, open dialogue, providing alternatives and using humour.

Tips for parents

- * Give teens leeway to establish their identity.
- * Choose battles wisely as you can't change everything. Focus on the issues that matter.
- * Invite their friends regularly, even the ones you are wary of, to be aware of who your teenagers are hanging out with.
- * Talk to teens about risks, such as drugs and unwanted pregnancy, in a factual way without being too intimidating.
- * Set clear rules about checking in, television and other issues. Brainstorm ideas as to what they should do if certain issues arise. For example, call a parent to come and pick you up rather than get in a car with a drunken driver.
- * Keep communication open by showing interest in their views and hobbies.
- * Be a good role model. Actions speak louder than words.

Steps to a Successful Career course

Part 1: Adolescence

March 3 - Parents and teens: from conflict to collaboration - psychologist M Paschou

March 16 - The teen seeks his identity: Parents' role - social worker K Vamvoura

Part 2: Career orientation

March 23 - The teen chooses his profession: Parents' role - work guidance counsellor
A Kappou

March 30 - Professions of the future in a constantly changing work market -
Economics University lecturer I Nikolaou

These presentations take place at the Evangeliki School (corner of 4 Lesvou and Aria Sofias sts, Nea Smirni), at 7-9pm. They are followed with questions from parents. Admission is free. Everyone is welcome.

** The conference takes place at the Eugenides Foundation's Planetarium at 7-9pm on April 6. For more information, call GRASEP's offices at 210-933-0177, or visit their site on <http://grasep.evsch.sch.gr>*