

'A parent is not a friend'

JAI RANJAN RAM

It is when such terrible, heart-wrenching tragedies happen that we come face to face with one of the most vexing issues that most parents struggle with: how do we discipline our teenage child?

There is no dearth of glib advice from all over; social media is full of it and resident mental health professionals on television channels are ready with their contradictory and indignant advice, explaining how parents have all got it wrong.

According to these self-appointed experts, parents seem to never get it right. Parents will be accused of "helicopter parenting" if they monitor every activity of the child and, on the contrary, will be labelled "lax" and "indulgent" if they do not.

So which direction or strategy to follow? One of the unnerving developments for a professional like me, who deals with teenagers in conflict with their parents, is this new trend of parents trying to be "friends" with their children. Can a parent be or try to be a friend to their children? The answer is an unequivocal NO.

There is a difference between being friendly and empathic with your child and being a friend to your child. The relational dynamics and the responsibilities of a parent are poles apart from that of a friend. It is not only naive but also extremely counter-productive to pander to such so-called "liberal" parenting practices. It is best left to folks like Gwyneth Paltrow. Let us not implement this in the real world of a teenager who is growing up in a noisy world full of confusing signals.

Teenagers of 2016 are smart, tech-savvy and have information on their fingertips.

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This does not mean that they are wise and can chart their journey through the complex maze of life without clear and firm guidance from adults around them. One of the curses of modern parenting, if I am allowed to call it so, is ignoring the fact that children are resilient beings, who can accept rebuke. Refusal to meet their every demand will not scar them. Life is such that not every wish is fulfilled and we do a great disservice to those whom we care for if we do not learn to say no to young people.

In my experience, parents underestimate their own wisdom and experiences gained through their own lived experience. They feel because their 15-year-olds can rattle off the technical specifications of the latest gadget, they are intelligent and thoughtful, and hence they can make correct choices at all times. This ignores the basic scientific truth that an adolescent's brain is geared towards making impulsive decisions, which can be misguided and wrong. Their decisions often need to be tempered and altered through the lens of age and wisdom.

Failures are our best teachers. Parents have failed more, simply because they have lived more. This gives them the authority to direct, arbitrate, goad and on occasions force their children to make choices they otherwise would not have.

Are parents always right? Are they always empathic? Of course not. Therein lies the importance of learning the art of knowing your child's

Parent and expert eye

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One of the biggest determinants of success in parenting is knowing the child's mind. Teenagers tend to cut off their parents. It is universal and nothing new.

The best thing that a parent can do is invest time and energy, over a period of time, to know his or her child's friends. They are the guide to what each child is up to.

Purists might equate it to snooping, but I have no hesitation in recommending it.

Another method is having snippets of conversation with your teenager while you are doing something else, like accompanying him somewhere or buying groceries in a supermarket. Research has shown that lack of eye contact helps us talk about sensitive things.

I do not for a moment suggest that parenting is a cakewalk. But it is the most rewarding privilege that some of us are bestowed with. Do it with care and soul-searching.
