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TEEN RELATIONS -- by Klaus Klein MA, RCC

Feature Article: The Village Concept And Your Teen

Getting Your Village Together

If you are like some of the parents I work with in counselling, you may approach the start of school with mixed emotions. Parts for you may feel liberation and relief, while other parts may be concern, worry, and even nervousness about how the school year is going to be for your teen. To alleviate some of your concerns, it is important to remember that the beginning of the school year can also be a time to create your village to help raise your teen. Being a parent of a teenager can be one of the most challenging times of your life. It is therefore important that you get as much support as you can.

--It takes a village to raise a kid--

The truth about this quote is that you alone cannot possibly do it all on your own. In my work with parents and teens one of the most common themes that come up time and time again is the myth that “I (the parent) have to raise my teen alone”. If this sounds like you, you will eventually end up being worn out mental and emotionally. You will also

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likely have to deal with feelings of guilt, shame, frustration, and embarrassment. You may even feel like a failure as a parent at times.

Like most parents, you mean well and try very hard, yet can easily become exhausted. If you have been going at it in isolation carrying the disappointment, frustration or anger of living with a teenager who is having problems, it is common to feel tired and hopeless at times. If you have reached a certain point of exhaustion and frustration you may begin to focus on finding fault and blame with:

- each other
- your teen son or daughter
- the school
- society
- the culture

Blaming others is an understandable reaction when you are tired and upset. However, the problem with blaming is it eventually leads to more isolation, exhaustion, and frustration in the end. Blaming doesn't help you solve the problems.

A Broader Approach That Prevents Burn Out

An alternative school program for teens that I have been working with as a therapist uses a 'team or village approach' that has helped both students and parents alike. Parents are invited to work closely with the school staff. Sometimes there are between 4 to 7 adults in a room at the same time with a teenager working together as a team. This can have a

powerful impact on a teen. Having a group of adults working together for a teenager shows the teen that they are cared for, will be held accountable, and that they are not alone.

Not every teenager and parent can be involved in such a program. However, as a parent, you can attempt to get support through teachers, counsellors, social workers, relatives, or any other adult that is attached to your teen.

Possible Village Members For You To Recruit

- Sport Coaches
- Teachers
- School Counsellors
- Church Pastors
- School Police Liaison Officer
- Relatives
- Adult Friends or neighbors
- Teen's Employer

Making the Most of Your Village

Once you have your village, there are many ways it can be utilized. You could periodically meet as a group, or have special meetings during difficult times. At other

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times, perhaps just keeping in telephone contact will be all that is possible and practical. Either way, the myth that you have to go at it alone is replaced with the knowledge that you and your teen have a group of adults that are involved with you on a regular basis. Everyone will have different roles with your teen, but all will have the common goal of helping your teen become the best that he or she can be.

The purpose of the village is to help your teen move forward by acknowledging what is going well, and perhaps address some issues that need improvement, i.e. attendance, tardiness, homework, study habits, respect of rules, boundaries at home, etc. Meetings should never be a bashing session.

As a parent, having other adults to connect with can give you that extra hope and energy to get through the tough times. Pacing yourself is important -- similar to running a long marathon race. Many times I have seen a teen take one or two steps forward and then one step back. Parents often get very excited and hopeful seeing the forward steps but then get very disappointed, confused, and even devastated when a teen slips up again and makes a bad choice. Parents often think “But my son or daughter changed and we were doing so well, and then...”

Remember that habit patterns often take time and effort over an extended period of time for a complete change. Look at the big picture and see if they are still moving forward in a positive direction overall despite the set backs at times. Keep in mind that it will not

always be smooth sailing and to have people around you as you weather some of the storms of raising a teen will be beneficial to you and your teen.

Not only is the village there to support your teen. It can provide tremendous support to you. Talking with another adult that knows you and your teen can help you to be proactive instead of reactive. Being reactive usually leads to regret whereas proactive comes from clear thinking that will have a better result with your teen.

Creating a network of people around you that you can communicate with can help you stay focused and grounded. Having adults around that are involved in different ways with your teen gives him or her a chance to be influenced and guided from a variety of adult sources.

The connection between parent and child is always unique and special. The village is there to help support and develop that connection through the challenges that are faced particularly in the teen years. You as a parent can be in charge of creating the kind of village support that you and your teen need during this new school year and in the next years to come.