

4 Steps for Preparing for Your Kids' Adolescence

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

The first precious days and weeks of a child's life are filled with awe and wonder for parents. The "terrible two's" of toddler-hood may seem like a challenge at times but they're eventually outgrown. The first day of kindergarten seems to come and go all too quickly leading to the elementary school years when the moods of children can leave parents exhilarated one minute – and exhausted the next. And then, suddenly, the rude awakening of adolescence takes over!

The adolescent years seem to hit from out of nowhere and they often leave parents wondering exactly what has happened to that relatively intelligent and well-mannered child they used to call their son or daughter. Well, while it's true there is no way you can accurately predict exactly *when* adolescence will begin, there *is* a way you can begin preparing for it so that it doesn't seem like such a startling jolt when it *does* hit (and believe me, it *will*!)

Dave and Claudia Arp wrote a groundbreaking book on this topic of preparing for your kids' adolescence. It was a huge help to Cathy and me when each of our three daughters hit the teen years. The book is called, [*Suddenly They're 13 \(Or, "The Art of Hugging a Cactus"\)*](#) In it, they outline "4 Steps for Preparing for Your Kids' Adolescence" that have proven to be most helpful:

1. **Regroup.** Too many of us, as parents, are trying to parent our teen and pre-teenage children the same way we did when they were toddlers. Well, that's not going to work. Call a "timeout" for yourselves, Mom and Dad, and go out for some coffee, dinner or whatever works for you both and reassess your situation with your kids. You've got to be a bit more flexible during the teen years, but temper that flexibility by remaining fair and firm.
2. **Release.** Be sure to mark the milestones in the lives of each of your kids. Their 13th birthday is a big one. So is the day they get their driver's license, or have their curfew extended for reaching a particular age or goal you've set for them. In doing so, you're not only rewarding their good behavior, you're also *releasing* them from childhood into adulthood in small, age-appropriate steps.
3. **Relate.** This is sometimes tough as the "communication bridge" between our kids and us isn't always working. A good objective is to "Listen *more* – Lecture *less*." It's also helpful when you remember to "Major on the majors" and "Minor in the minors." In other words, try not to make a big deal out of issues that really may not be all that important while keeping an eye open for big life issues.
4. **Relax.** It always amazes me when I hear from a parent who has grown overly concerned when his or her child begins "acting weird" right around his or her 13th birthday. It's then I have to remind this parent that adolescence is perfectly *normal*! We all went through it and we lived to tell the tale. Our kids will also. Of course, relaxing does *not* give you a "free pass" to shy away from instructing and correcting your kids – on the contrary! Just strive to be fair, firm and consistent with the discipline and you should be fine.

Finally, let me add a “Burns Bonus” fifth “R” to the list – and that is:

Remember. Don’t keep score of every little mistake your son or daughter makes during his or her adolescent years. Rather, remember what kinds of things you went through when you were a teenager and how your own parents handled things when you messed up. Were they compassionate? Irrational? Understanding? Borrow from their good examples and learn from the bad. (And, also **Remember** who will be taking care of you eventually as you get older. Good instruction coupled with understanding and compassion now could make your “golden years” a lot sweeter!)

Enjoy your kids’ adolescence. These are fun and foundational years for them -- and for you!

(Based on principles included in the book, [Suddenly They’re 13: The Art of Hugging a Cactus](#) by Dave and Claudia Arp.)