

# Like a Weaning

Peggy O'Mara

I'd like to write about babies because I know that many of you have babies, but I don't. I have teens, and I want to scream. I think it may have to do with being short. Maybe if I were a taller parent . . . Maybe if I were a married parent . . . Maybe if . . . Where have we gotten the idea that we can control human beings? Why do we believe our virtue and good intentions can create perfect children? Which one of us was a perfect child? One analyst I know says she sees more "perfect children" in her chair than those who raised hell.

Something about parenting teens is reminiscent of the early years of parenting. Things are all askew, and you feel as if you've arrived in a foreign land where you certainly don't know the territory and haven't yet learned the language. The things that used to work don't work anymore, and you suddenly realize that you got more than you bargained for. And, no one talks about it. Not really. Not the scary stuff. We're all afraid it might be our fault.

When they are babies, you can keep their outrageous behavior to yourself. You don't have to tell anyone that your daughter cut her hair with pinky shears and then shut her baby brother up in the toy chest. And you don't have to mention what you did when you found out. The behavior of teens is a much



this self-obsessed, antiseptic society, teens have a right to experiment anymore. You wonder about teen bashing. But you're not sure. And you worry.

Then you look at your teens. These are the same sweet children you have loved and trusted over the years. The ones you have intimate communication with. The ones you have, in fact, learned relationship with. You have always trusted them. You have spent years building trust with them. Do you stop trusting them now because the temptations are greater, the risks riskier? Can you afford to let them learn through their own experience, the way you learned, the way anything important is learned when the risks are so great and when you don't have any other choice anyway?

When they were little, you worried about them falling into the swimming pool. You breathed a sigh of relief when they all learned to swim. Now you worry about the whole ocean. There are cars. New Mexico has the highest rate of drunken driving in the country. Car accidents are the leading cause of death among teens. There are cigarettes. You wonder about a society that sells something more addictive than heroin in vending machines. You worry about drugs. Are they really available in schoolyards? You worry about food. How can anyone

more public affair.

Your friends see your teens downtown in black, playing cool with cigarettes. Your coworkers report on your teens' driving prowess. Other parents form alliances to report teen drug and alcohol transgressions. Your daughter's friend's mother calls in the middle of the night to say that someone you thought you knew very well has just climbed out of her window. The authorities arrest teens for shoplifting just to give them a taste of jail. Therapist friends suggest addiction counseling for things you suspect may just be normal experimentation. You wonder if in

live long on Hershey's Kisses, orange soda, and potato chips? Why don't they remember to take their vitamins? No wonder they're coughing.

I talked recently to a woman whose name you would know. She spoke in hushed tones about her marriage and her teens. The whole thing was going to hell in a handbasket, but she was not specific. I'm sure she was afraid to tell me, Ms. Perfect Parent, what was really happening. I was dying to tell her what was really happening here. Like in the early days of parenting, we keep our pain and confusion to ourselves, fearing that confiding in others will confirm our fears of our own inadequacy.

It helps me to talk to other parents of teens, and especially to talk to parents of grown children. I cried with relief over an article by Eda LeShan about little monsters who grow up to be rabbis and attorneys. I was ecstatic when my neighbor told me about the five foreign cars his grown daughter had wrecked when she was a teen. And I laughed uproariously when this same neighbor described the time he came upon his teenage son smoking and playing pinball in a local convenience store. My neighbor calmly walked over to him and had a casual conversation while his son hid the burning cigarette in his pocket. I feel comforted when I hear that passive-aggressive and manic-depressive are normal in the teen years. My favorite reassurance is that the closer you've been with your child, the harder the teen years are. I wouldn't have believed that earlier, when I could still control their behavior, but it makes sense now.

It makes sense now because I understand what is happening. The teen years are like a weaning. Although we still love these children as we did when we held them in our arms, *they must leave us*. And for them to leave us with their self-esteem intact, they must sometimes fight their way out. At eight or nine, they assure us that they will live with us forever—or at most, build their own house right next door to ours. We are all relieved. This, however, is not what is best for them. They must sometimes fight their way out.

This summer I will have three teenagers. Send money, flowers, condolences. Pray that I don't take to drink. I've taught them excellent

boundaries and now they are using them against me. They've caught me at my game. They are better at it than I am. They challenge me to trust them. And trust is, after all, all that I have.

I have raised my children to have certain values, and now it is time for them to test and make them their own. I have tried to shield them from society; they want to jump in feetfirst. And yet, I hold on tight. Unlike some parents who seem to abandon their children once they become teens and attribute to them more worldly experience than they could have, I do not. I am only the bumper rails, though. They are now in the driver's seat, and the air is low in the tires, and they have little experience with snow and ice, and they are in the hands of God.

These are the same teens who sometimes still want to get in bed with me after a bad illness or a stressful week. The same teens who demonstrate against the war in the Middle East and in support of higher teacher salaries. The same teens who work weekly with the homeless. The same teens who have intense loyalty to their friends and compassionate tolerance of intolerant adults. The same teens who hold a baby with the tenderness of Mother Teresa.

I am on a roller coaster of my own creation. I have no choice but to hold on. I am a parent of teens, and I do not know the way. They bring out the worst in me and have seen my best. All else that has come before in our relationship—the sleepless nights, the hospital stays, the tantrums, and the rocking chair—has prepared me for this trusting. For no one else would I hang on so tightly with one hand while I loosen the grip of my longing with the other.

Love,  
Cass