



NATP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



Centre of Excellence in
CHILD TRAUMA

Breaking up is hard to do...

One of the very strange contradictions about being an adoptive parent is that you spend years keeping a child safe, reassuring them, creating connections, building their self-esteem, loving them and nurturing them and then you have to do something completely alien to this concept of a forever child, and shift perspective and let them go. This involves a change of focus from *“I love you, and I will keep you safe”* to *“I love you, and I will always be there for you”*. Also, this is something that sneaks up on you and takes you unawares...

Our main goal as parents is to nurture our children to a point of independence and emotional maturity where they can take independent and appropriate control of their lives. Unfortunately, they usually start this separation process when we are far from ready to let go, and before (in our opinion) they are ready to do so. This is immensely hard, but we do need to remember that this in fact is what we have been working towards. Just to make things harder, it can be difficult to differentiate the separation issues from the previous phases that have gone before.

Our children have a biological need to separate from us at an appropriate level of maturity (whether we agree with them or not!) This may be accomplished in an “acceptable” way through university, or by the child reinstating controlling behaviours and breaking through boundaries and taking unacceptable risks. Part of separation is refusal – refusal to compromise on clothing, refusing to join in family activities or outings, refusing to listen, refusing to talk. Common issues are to do with hygiene, language, experimentation with sex, alcohol, drugs, hanging around with inappropriate peer models and adopting a lifestyle stance that is completely at odds with your own. This can all feel very self-destructive and can cause us to feel shame at our failure as parents.

One of the ways that we can understand this is to think of teenagers as being bigger toddlers – (indeed it is true to say that from mid-teens onwards the brain is going through a massive reconstruction– eventually, the retuned brain returns to full operational status around early to mid-twenties). Like toddlers, teenagers are learning to explore the world from a secure base – of course, their horizons are much wider this time! Unfortunately, as parents, it is difficult for us to keep up with our teenagers changing needs. We need time to adjust to their changing priorities and new ideas. They are supposed to challenge us – and they do! This is where we start the very hard process of trusting our parenting, and we can do this by trusting our children, and giving appropriate control back to them – so for

example, if our teenage wants to stay out later, we might ask them – “what time would you think would be suitable?” – they will, of course, aim very high, but this can be met with negotiation – “I was really thinking of a little earlier than that?” Also, in early stages of this, I would ask them how they would keep safe, keep in contact etc. Of course, our children will make mistakes – however, it is wise for us as adults to remember mistakes that we made and to remember that generally, children emerge from the horrors of teens into well-developed adults with a sense of values much like our own. To go back to my toddler analogy, I would also point out that there is still a need for that secure base, even if it seems that it is only to have a wall to kick against. Teenagers need to have consistency and know that your boundaries are still secure in the essentials, also to know that you can allow them their independence, try and help them to make good choices, and still be there to mop up the fall out after their mistakes.

Some parents have the much harder situation of a child that either absconds, asks to return to care or has to be returned to care due to extreme situations that make it unsafe for them to remain within the family home. These cases are rare and can be damaging and shaming for both parent and child. However, there are still ways to connect meaningfully from a distance and to keep that consistency that allows a child to know that there is a way back, and that you are still their parent. I do believe that there are several strategies that can be usefully implemented regardless of circumstances:

My Top Tips:

- Maintain parental presence; So, this might entail direct contact with the child in the new situation which is agreed and regular and follows an agreed routine. Other methods of maintaining parental presence are by phoning, sending texts, messaging, ensuring any meetings are attended by you, sending postcards or letters. Messages do not need to be long – just a simple emoticon might do, or a very short “I lovyou”, “I am always here for you”. Remember significant occasions and send cards and gifts.
- Stay consistent. Your rules and values are your rules and values. Even teenage toddlers still need to know where the boundaries are – that is how they know you still care, and that the safety net is in place. The fact they whinge about the restrictions they face to all their mates (who undoubtedly have similar restrictions) is beside the point. Of course, I do know of cases where children moved out as a result of the restrictions and boundaries of their parents, but they did move back in again, even knowing that the restrictions would still be in place.

- It might be necessary to respect their choices (to have a tattoo over their chest or extreme body piercing, for example) at some point. Just remember it does not change who they are. Every generation seems to have their own ways of establishing their individuality.
- Be prepared to negotiate and listen to their suggestions for how they will keep safe, stay in contact, etc.
- Affirm their good choices.
- Give them opportunities to be responsible, and keep to natural consequences if (when) things get de-railed... Failure to get home in time might mean that they get collected next time. Too much alcohol might result in a hangover – and not a lot of sympathy!
- Help them to reflect – *“if it was your son/daughter, what would you want for them”* – this was an excellent tool for one family I know.

And finally – be patient. I have older children, so have the benefit of hindsight and the ability to say truthfully that I have seen my wonderful adult children emerging from their teenage selves and some of their teenage escapades would make your hair curl! My two oldest are parents themselves, and it makes me very proud and humbled to see how good they are at the job.