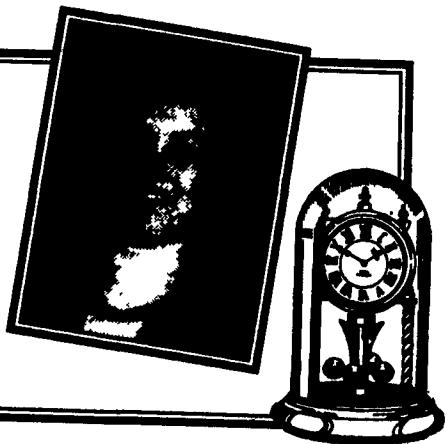


**Taking Time**  
by  
**Rebecca Escott**



**The Risky Business Of Pre-Adolescence**

Children of any age can be challenging to parents, but when children hit their "middle years" or pre-teen years, I see parent anxiety increase. Changes happen rapidly, and parents wonder if the teen years will really be as awful as so many people say. Add to that the concerns about their children making transitions to middle or junior high schools where they may face new peer pressures in-

volving drugs, sex, alcohol, or rebellious or destructive behavior. Anne Petersen, former Dean of the College of Health and Human Development at Penn State writes, "We know that young adolescents are argumentative, sometimes obnoxious. Parents throw in the towel, and that is the worst thing they can do. Adolescents need to know that parental support is there." She goes on to describe how changes in society make it easier for young teens and parents to dis-

connect — crazy work hours, lots of kids having access to cars, divorces and separations. She continued, "Parents need to know that when [researchers] ask adolescents, especially young adolescents, who is most important to them, they say their parents, even if the parents are reporting conflict." Parents are NOT powerless. They don't have to sit back and just watch this roller coaster period pass. They can stay engaged in their kids' lives. Like so many other important parenting tasks it requires being available and offering lots of listening time. Petersen recommends that parents provide, "unconditional love, firm guidelines, and strong expectations." Parents need to be ready to listen and answer questions about lots of topics including sexuality. Over 50 percent of teens feel they can't talk to their parents about sexual matters and also don't think they get the information they need in classes at school. If those sources don't work, they naturally look to friends, media and other sources for their information. As a

parent, is that what you want? How can moms and dads become "askable parents?" First try to be open to questions in general. Why do things like the bombing in Oklahoma City happen? What do you think about the death penalty? What would you do if I dyed my hair purple? By listening and exploring these questions with children, you make it more likely that they'll also ask you about sexuality issues. Second, get the facts. Read. Know everything you can know about teen development. If conversations make you uncomfortable, admit that to your child, but don't use that as an excuse to stop communicating. When your child asks a question, begin by responding, "Tell me what you already know." This allows you to affirm what is correct and correct misinformation. Share your values with your child. Don't force the values on your child, but stand strong in stating what you believe. Third, expect to answer the same question many times. Children need time to think about what you've said and may need to hear

an explanation several times. Also, don't worry about giving too much or too little information. If you give too little, the child will come back with more questions. If you give too much, the child will hear what he can use and discard the rest. Finally, not only can parents be available but they can also encourage their children to develop friendships with positive older teens/adults. I've been spending time with four high school girls recently. One of their mothers stopped me, and thanked me for taking time to care about her daughter. She said, "It's nice to have people who can give my kids something that I, as a mother, can't give." She was right. There are some roles that parents can't fill in their children's lives. Even in those cases, parents can help direct their children to people who can support their development in a healthy way. The pre-teen and teen years can be risky ones. As a parent, you play an important role in supporting your child as she makes adjustments and decisions. Your input matters.

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