

TUNNEL VISION

During the years when teenagers are dealing with roller-coaster emotions, bodily changes and new forms of social interaction, letting them know you're there for them is crucial as they make the journey of self-discovery known as "the tunnel"

"I HATE YOU!"

It's a remark heard all too often in households with teenage children.

While no parent enjoys hearing these words from their teenage offspring, motivational speaker Gavin Sharples says they should actually embrace the phrase because it means your kids know you care about them.

The tunnel, Sharples explains, is a metaphor for adolescents going through a rebellious phase. It's like a tunnel full of water where you and your teenager

can physically see one another, but can't hear each other through the gurgle, which leads to a breakdown in communication.

"When kids are young, they accept what we say. We tell them how to act, feel, dress and speak and because they don't know any better, they comply. They become slaves to our way of thinking because we give them everything they need.

"Then they reach the teenage years, when they start reasoning, are no longer children and have to find their own

way. It's a very natural thing that has to happen because they're now standing on their own two feet and not simply accepting what people tell them," Sharples explains.

Karen Murphy, founder of Working Parent Café (a platform where parents can share ideas, experiences and practical tools to manage their work-life balance) and mother of four daughters (three of whom have been through the tunnel and a 16-year-old who's currently in it), says parents shouldn't take offence when their kids start withdrawing from them or find them annoying. Instead, they should view it as their children's "jump" towards independence.

WHEN YOUR TEEN'S IN THE TUNNEL

A good starting point is to take a step back to reflect, put yourself in their shoes and, most importantly, not to stop talking to them. "If a child enters the tunnel, the first rule is to communicate – in fact, even over-communicate, over-talk and over-share. What's important is showing them that you love and support them unconditionally," says Sharples.

As frustrating as it may be to find wet towels lying on the floor or be saddled with a huge cellphone bill, the key to supporting a loved one through the tunnel is to pick your fights. Let the little things slide and rather focus on the big, truly important stuff. (For example, their safety, health and education are far more

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important than whether their bedroom looks like an H-bomb hit it or you detest what they're wearing.)

"Never abandon kids who are in the tunnel – stick with them, or they'll feel as if they have no direction or barriers. It's not going to be easy, but what helps us get through the tunnel is knowing the foundation is right next to us," he adds.

Murphy believes the best way to show support for teens in the tunnel is by providing them with space and boundaries.

"Boundaries include setting expectations for school, friends, manners and behaviour – what's right and what's wrong. Being a consistent role model is the best way to share expectations. Look for teaching moments to express the reason for a boundary.

"Communicate that reason in simple statements, sharing your beliefs and values. Over time the message will sink in," she says.

MANAGING CONFLICT

If you've ever observed drivers passing over a non-barricaded bridge, you'll have noticed how they slow down or straddle the

middle-lane line. However, put those barriers up and you're likely to see their speed pick up or see them recklessly overtaking the slow drivers. Teens, Sharples says, react in much the same way to barriers, so the key to managing conflict is creating the perception that the barriers have been relaxed.

"Kids reach a certain age when they want the training wheels and barriers knocked down. What you have to create is the perception that that's happened," he says.

Say, for instance, your child wants to extend his or her curfew. Instead of denying their request outright, Sharples suggests adjusting the parameters of the barriers, while increasing their responsibility load: for example, allowing them to come home at 11pm instead of 9pm, on condition it only happens on Friday and Saturday nights.

"In this way, you throw the ball back into their court and make them understand that with freedom comes responsibility," says Sharples. "You have to guide your kids to rebel within the parameters you set for them. It's like taking part in a soccer game: you go out and play, but you have to follow the rules. There are always consequences and kids need to realise that."

EXITING THE TUNNEL: KICK-STARTING LOGIC

"Teenagers think in a certain way, but try coming at them from another angle. Ask them: 'If you make this decision, what's the worst thing that can happen? What's the upside or downside?' Get their logical brain going," Sharples says.

Remember, the better the questions you ask them, the better the quality of their answers. "Even if you don't get an answer, the question you've asked will get them thinking. If you've done a good job raising your kids and you're a kind, loving person, logic will eventually prevail," he says.

Being a good role model to your teenagers by upholding your own standards, says Murphy, is central to seeing your kids through the tunnel.

"Take the time to assess your own behaviour. If you've been a 'helicopter parent' who hovers over your children, this is your wake-up call. My children are influenced by how I've lived my whole life, not just my role as a mother.

"I've gone back to university twice to get advanced degrees and so has my husband. The children saw the value we place on education and grew to share it. Each of them has taken school seriously to prepare for a career that fits their talents.

"Perhaps the best thing we can do for our teenagers as they strive for independence is to show how we ourselves live the life we envisage," she says. 

To read more about going into the tunnel during adulthood, visit: www.destinyconnect.com