Your Teenager's Strengths and Weaknesses

In studying the qualities of successful business people, researchers have come across a few unexpected discoveries. The top one on my list is that successful people tend to focus on building their strengths and avoiding their weaknesses, which is different from what many of us were taught as children. The idea then was to improve your weaknesses for better performance. But business leaders do the opposite, and with great success. In essence, they know themselves well enough to make sure they surround themselves with coworkers of different skill sets, which gives them even more freedom to run with their strengths.

To a large degree, the same is true for parents, at least in a couple of key areas: your natural strengths and the stages of parenting. We all know the areas in which we shine with our kids. For some, it is as the enthusiastic supporter who shows up to cheer on her kids at all sorts of events and performances. For others, it is as the comedic-teaser, giving one another good-natured ribbings. Some parents may be the quintessential listeners who let children speak their minds fully and then wait to let the next layer unfold. For yet others, it is in the doing of things together: cooking, hiking, swimming, drawing, reading. Or maybe a parent's strength is in the fine art of hanging out together, in the car, at the grocery store, late at night eating popcorn in front of the television. Or a parent may be effective as a teacher, helping him to learn how to sound out his first words, instructing her in how to change the car oil, showing her how to strike the nail with a hammer, without injuring yourself.

In your daily life with your teenagers, it's important to find those moments for yourself, because when you are your most comfortable the likelihood that you'll connect with your teenager rises.

You also know where and when you are at your best outside the home. Part of what every parent wants to do is to incorporate, whenever possible, these areas into their parenting duties; this deepens the connection between the you and your teenager. Your teenager sees you at your best and is able to discover parts of you that might not normally reveal themselves otherwise. In short, you need to find places and times in your family life where you naturally shine.

From the time I was a little kid, my dad used to drag me to his basketball practices—he was a coach at the local state college—and when I was a teenager I used to insist that he still take me. It was fun for me, in part because I loved to play basketball and in larger part because I got to see my dad in his world. He was a great coach. It was even cool to see how all these older guys—college players—respected him, and as a result they treated me well, too. His shine seemed to rub off onto me, at least in their eyes.

This is why, no matter what you might think about the safety issues involved, I loved what Dusty Baker did in the 2002 World Series when he invited all the players to have
their kids in the dugout, where they acted as batboys and wore San Francisco Giant uniforms. It's also why "Take Your Kids to Work Day" of all types are great ideas—your kids see parts of you that are normally just off to the side of their everyday lives with you.

This is a dynamic with which all parents are familiar. When our strengths overlap—and our weaknesses, too—this is what leads to flipping a coin to see who loses. *It's your turn to be the limit setter—get him bathed, in his pajamas, teeth brushed, and read to. Call me when you're ready for hugs and kisses.* At other times, these similarities lead to sparks between us. *You are too hard on her. Give her a break. She needs tenderness now, not tough love.* This is the grist for the mill of everyday parenting.

The other area in which to consider your natural strengths and weaknesses has to do with the different stages of parenting. Simply put, everyone is better with kids at certain ages than they are with kids at other ages. Some of you shine with infants and smash into brick walls with teenagers. Others never learn to decipher the meanings behind your infant's different ways of crying but instantaneously discern the difference in a fifteen-year-old's gait and its implicit meanings. Some of you shine with young school-age children, others with middle schoolers. This is natural. And because it's natural, you need to work with it, which means playing to your strengths and away from your weaknesses, though this isn't always possible.

I was a whiz with my kids when they began school. I was patient and great with them while they learned to read. I was a good baseball coach. Parenting came easily to me. But once they hit middle school, it seemed that everything I was so good at not only didn't work anymore but now made things worse. Telling my thirteen-year-old to choke up on the bat gets me the eye roll, but five years ago it got me the eyes like saucers that hung onto my every word.

All kids require the same general qualities from their parents: unconditional love, values that make sense, respect, listening. But how these translate through the different ages is another matter entirely. So although parenting a seven-year-old may feel like second nature to you, it's important to know that down the road somewhere will come a time when you feel lost in the woods. This understanding gives you compassion for other parents as well as for yourself. More than that, it gives you hope whenever you are in one of your weaker periods.

This also means that we have hidden resources for how to connect with our teenagers: our pasts with them, and in particular, those times when parenting was most natural to us. If we look back at those times, we'll easily remember what we did to connect with our kids. Then, with just a little imagination, we can update that method and bring it forward in time to the present so that we can make use of it with our teenagers.

I loved it when my daughter just began to read. We spent hours together reading and talking about what we read because it was fun and something we shared in common. We both looked forward to that time together. I was thinking about that a few weeks ago when trying to decide what to do with my oldest son's room—he's in his third semester of college now so I feel that it's safe to reclaim his de facto shrine for the family—when it struck me. Why not turn his room into a
reading room? And that's exactly what I did. I even outfitted the room with comfortable chairs, good lighting, and all our books. Now, even though my daughter is fifteen and we don't seem to have much in common or to talk about, we're back to reading together again.

And:

My son and I used to make each other laugh like crazy when he was in preschool. No matter what we did, it included laughter: getting him dressed in the morning, feeding him, taking him to the park. We shared the same sense of humor. But now as a teenager, it all seems so serious, and I miss the laughter. So on a whim, I began renting all these funny movies and turning up the volume really loud on the television. They're some of my favorites and they always crack me up. Well, to my surprise, not long into my Fun Fest my son began to join me. And together, we sit on that old sofa and crack up together. Right now, it's my best time with him.

Make sure to give yourself a healthy dose of compassion if upon reading this you've realized that your most natural and easiest stages of parenting are behind you. Then take a deep breath and see whether you can imagine once again some of those old ways you used to connect with your teenager, when he was a child. You may surprise both of you.

This information was compiled by 