

Many individuals enter the paid workforce for the first time when they get summer jobs during their high school years. The world of finance becomes real when a teenager obtains a car and must maintain the vehicle with his or her own money.

Teens explore a variety of interests through elective courses during high school. Special-interest clubs and organizations offer other new territories to explore. Life experiences, academic performance, and innate abilities merge during adolescence to define a career direction.

## THE PUSH-PULL OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence takes dichotomy to new heights. Slogans like “biting the hand that feeds you” and “shooting yourself in the foot” come to mind. Teens rebel against the very things they need. It is the “normal” condition of adolescents—indeed, it is their job. Our job, as helping professionals, is to remember that and to react accordingly.

One of the most helpful interventions I know when a teen is caught in the push-pull of his or her own contradictions is to explain it. It does not take much: “Of course, you hate your mother’s demands to know where you are going; it’s your job in life to hate them. Your mother’s job is to demand to know. Looks to me like you’re both doing your job well.” Or “Tyler, I understand you needed to test the limits in group yesterday; you’re 13 years old, and it’s your job to test limits. It’s my job to set and enforce limits, so that’s why I kicked you out.”

These explanations are empowering. You know how it feels to be lost in a large shopping mall and discover one of those directories that point out “You are here”; your situation becomes much less ominous! Teens are relieved when you tell them their behavior is age appropriate. Of course, most of us work with teens whose behavior is extreme. Point out this difference and remind them that is why they are where they are—hospital, mental health agency, detention center, outpatient clinic, or wherever. Remind them it is possible for them to struggle with the issues that all teens confront without getting themselves into so much trouble. The clearest example for them concerns limits. Most teens will acknowledge that setting and enforcing limits is a sign of caring.

## FIVE POLARITIES OF ADOLESCENCE

### 1. Rebellion against adult control/need for direction:

Good decisions come from experience; experience comes from bad decisions. Adults must be involved when teens make bad decisions and must help them learn from those mistakes. Teens must have enough freedom to be able to make some bad decisions!

### 2. Wish for closeness/fear of intimacy:

Teens would like to have close relationships with others, even adult authority figures, but they are suspicious. Do others really have their best interests at heart? Will they be understood and accepted? What is required of them in a close and personal relationship?

### 3. Push and test limits/see limits as sign of caring:

The “structure” or “system,” meaning family, school, church, inpatient environment, and so forth, must be stronger than the teen who tests it. It is a basic ingredient of security for a developing adult.