It’s common to hear parents say, “I just don’t understand my teenager. They listen to strange music, dress strange. Sometimes they are good and listen to you. Other times, they act so different and don’t want to talk. It’s hard to know what they have in mind.” Parents need to know that they cannot control their teenagers in every important area. This also means that parents need to adjust their parenting roles and discipline skills to their children’s age level.

Parenting teenagers is a difficult challenge. They are different from toddlers or preschoolers. They are growing to be larger, taller, more verbal, and able to fight battles more on an adult level. They are not children any more, however they are not completely mature either.

There are three stages of adolescence including pre-adolescence (about age 9-13), middle adolescence (about age 14-16), and late adolescence (about age 17-20). Children in the pre-adolescent stage may feel disorganized since their growth is uneven and rapid. This is the stage between childhood and teen years. Not only do they try to meet their parents’ expectations, but also the expectation of their peers. Their new ways of thinking make them feel that everyone is interested in them and everyone is concerned about the same things they are concerned about. “You just don’t understand,” or “Leave me alone,” or “You always treat me like a child,” are teenagers’ common responses to their parents. The relationship between parents and teenagers may become strained.

When they get into the middle adolescent stage, their self-centered thinking is diminishing. They begin to realize that other people have different interests and concerns and think more like an adult. It’s very important for parents to keep positive and open communication and balance the teenager’s needs to be independent and in charge.

By the time teenagers reach about 16 or 17, they are more capable of taking a calmer approach to life with less moodiness. They are likely to re-establish the warm relationship with parents. In the late adolescent stage, teenagers are beginning to disengage and prepare to leave home. There is also a gradual shift to economic and emotional independence.

Growing up means becoming independent. Parents need to help their teenagers go through the developmental stages. For instance, establish reasonable and consistent limits. It’s very important to involve your teenagers in making some rules, decisions, and consequences. Parents who allow their children to make some decisions appropriate to their age level earlier have fewer problems with their teenagers. Teenagers also want to know why a particular expectation has been set. Be sure to explain to them and respect their need for some negotiation regarding rules for behavior. Listen to their point of view and evaluate their request based on their ability to manage decisions.

In addition, parents need to know their teenagers’ friends. For instance, where their teenagers are, whom they are with, what they are doing, when they will be home, and how they will get home. Parents can ask questions in a friendly and direct conversation. Teenagers need increasing freedom to be independent, but also need guidelines and limits from parents to learn and grow. Being warm, honest, open, supportive and involved can help establish a positive relationship with teenagers.