

THErapy MATTERS: Teenagers and the Family Vacation

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

The glossy brochure promised the perfect family vacation. Photos of smiling children in a variety of activities interspersed with parents who actually looked relaxed. And there were teenagers in these photos! Teen-aged girls were posing with their younger siblings, with no cell phone glued to their texting hands, no ear buds jammed in their ears! Teen-aged boys out for dinner with their parents, sporting freshly combed hair and tucked in shirts! Surely this was the answer for our family! Anything had to be better than last year.....

We hear this often from parents, right about this time of year. Summer is in full swing, and if you're lucky enough to have the means for a family vacation you might also be grappling with the challenge of how to get your teenager to "buy in" and have it be a pleasant experience for all. The same dilemma can arise with local day trips. Teens, after all, can be notorious for ruining family outings. Careful consideration of the principles listed below could help to avert a disastrous experience.

Understand the inherent conflict. Teens are in a developmental stage where they are trying to figure out who they are. In the process of doing so, they "separate" and pull away from the family, often disdainfully rejecting ideas and principles that are important to their parents. This is normal and is part of the process of identity formation. Family vacations, by contrast, are all about togetherness and cohesion and creating pleasurable memories. Understanding this conflict will help parents have some empathy for their teen's experience, particularly when "Darling Daughter" rolls her eyes and mumbles "this is so lame!"

Get them to "buy in". A successful family vacation depends on your teen being excited by the prospect. A weekend at the isolated cabin may sound luxurious to you, but it might be torture to your text-and-facebook-addicted teenager. Teenagers live and die for connections to their friends. Family vacations may be viewed by a teenager as an attempt by parents to ruin their social life. Reassurance that vacation is a time limited period and they will be able to occasionally visit an internet café along the way may reduce their anxiety about not "seeing" their friends. One family we worked with actually allowed their teen to choose the family vacation destination (from a list of pre-approved parental choices, of course). Other families involve their teens in planning specific outings or activities. This strategy also works well for day trips within the Bay Area if a "stay-cation" is in the plans.

Plan for some separate activities. Togetherness doesn't have to mean *ALL* the time, and this mantra is particularly pertinent if your family involves multiple children of varying ages. Splitting up into smaller groups allows for activities that cater to different ages and tastes. We recently worked with a family whose careful planning for an upcoming trip included bringing along a grandma who was particularly close to their teenaged daughter. Suzy and Grandma had plans to hit the malls and indulge in a spa day. Mom and Dad were thus free to cater to the interests of the much younger siblings, without having to endure the incessant yawns and complaints from a bored teenager. Cruises or family resort locations often offer specific activities for teens and younger children, and these can be ideal choices for successful family vacations.

If possible, let them bring a friend. Teenagers crave time with their peers, not parents or younger siblings. If the budget permits, allowing Junior to bring along a friend may go a long way towards keeping him (and the rest of the family) happy. Often the accompanying teen's parents would be happy to pay his way. There may be a secondary gain here as well. We have had many parents confide in us that their teens are actually much better behaved when a friend is present! If you do allow for a friend, just make sure that expectations are clearly defined. We can recall one family who returned from a trip, quite upset that their daughter and friend had isolated themselves for nearly the entire time. Make it clear to your teen that participation in certain family activities is expected. This brings us to....

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. Teens may appear to not be listening and you may fear that your words fall on deaf ears, but everyone tends to do best if they are given information ahead of time and know what to expect. "Tonight will be a family game night" or "tomorrow morning we are going on an excursion but in the afternoon there will be free time" are examples of clear messages. One family who came to see us had a detailed routine for their annual summer day trip to Santa Cruz. Unlimited ride wristbands were purchased and teens were permitted to go off on their own, leaving the younger children

with the parents. But, there were set meeting times for lunch on the beach, and another meeting point in the afternoon for a family game of miniature golf. The schedule allowed for a healthy dose of freedom for the teenagers and just enough togetherness to call it a family outing. The idea is that it is fun for the whole family.

Consider leaving them at home. This is also a viable option in some cases. One family we saw went to Family Camp for many years. This year however there was no teenage friend that could come along and the parents knew that the experience would be miserable for their son. The camp was geared for families with younger children. With no one to hang out with, it just would not be “fair” to expect their teen to enjoy this vacation. These parents opted to look for a Specialty Camp that was of interest to their son. There, he could participate in activities he enjoyed with kids the same age. It was a “win-win” situation. The teenager thoroughly enjoyed **his** camp while the rest of the family enjoyed **their** camp. Of course a camp is not the only option. The teen may enjoy visiting with a grandparent and having their undivided attention or perhaps he could spend the week at a friend’s house where there is trusted supervision.

Have fun. Really, this is the bottom line. By considering your teenager’s needs and the needs of the family as a whole everyone can have a vacation filled with fond memories instead of horror stories. If any of our readers have suggestions to share from their own experiences we would love to hear from you. Happy travels to all!

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