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They want to put their feet up, stare mindlessly at the TV, even read a book. What they feel the least like doing is wrapping their overstrained minds around high school algebra or the structure of an academic essay. This is fine. I'm glad we got that out in the open. At least now our imperfect lives will not be overshadowed by paragons of parenting that supposedly find self sacrifice a painless natural instinct. We are, most of us, the same. We want the best for our teens. We love them and we want them to excel it's just that we wish that there was paid leave to pursue parenting duties when we are fresh and enthusiastic.

The French have a saying: with the eating comes the appetite. Yes, I am afraid that is exactly what I am suggesting. We have to do it. That is, we have to switch off the TV, sit upright and put the big light on so we can see the small print in the textbook and our sullen and confused teenager directly behind it. And our exhausted reluctance is often not our only obstacle. We are going to have to find enough energy to convince our offspring that they need our help. (Help is used here with qualifications. Never do the work for a child, help means pointing them in the direction of self-sufficiency.) This is a tough one because teens have perfected the unworkable combination of arrogance and neediness. This results in us wanting to simultaneously hug them and drop them off somewhere on a deserted highway. So this is the scenario. Just when you thought it was safe to come home and collapse in a heap, life requires that you find an elusive measure of maturity, stir in a little intelligence and garnish with love. I said it wasn't going to be easy. So you're sitting there and mutual resentment is clouding the otherwise soft evening air. You don't want to be here doing this and your teen doesn't want to be here doing this either. You think you are doing a good job of hiding this overwhelming fact and your teen doesn't even care to disguise his own disenchantment. He or she doesn't believe in you. You can't blame them because you don't believe in you either.

Ordinarily this would not be a recipe for success. This would not be a clip from *The Little House on the Prairie*. But, I have been there when the chips were down and our backs were against the wall, and I have seen it change. I have seen scowls dissipate and sighs die. I don't know what it is. Perhaps something wonderful and magical supports us in our heroic endeavors to overcome our limitations and reach for excellence. When I have had the sheer willpower to get beyond my own exhaustion I have seen absolute miracles of communication that cannot help but reinforce academic excellence as well as lots of other important stuff.

I have remembered more than I ever thought possible and I have had the absolute pleasure of passing that on to a child that has forgotten to be sullen and thanks me like it comes from the heart. In this stumbling way I have learnt how to make a difference to my children's academic experience. I have learnt to listen to them and found myself forgetting about the program I was missing or the book I was reading. When you sit down with your teenager you realize that school is not a comprehensive educator and that you need to supplement it in significant ways. You need to get involved to do this, and once you're involved it comes naturally. You stop feigning interest and start generating excitement about the material. This enthusiasm of yours is contagious and before you know it your children are experiencing academic success that helps them believe in themselves. And that is all I ever wanted. I knew that if my teens had that, the rest would follow naturally.

Gail Walter , Boulder, Colorado, from parentingteens.

Parenting teenagers

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