

The Teen's Role in the Family

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There are two key pieces of information when discussing teens. First, the teenage years are not a walk in the park. These are important formative years that will set the course for the rest of their lives. Secondly, family is an integral part of every teenager's life. Although they don't care to admit it, without family, teens would be lost. Family provides a much needed support system that can help teens survive the difficult years of drama, hormones, and technological dependency. The family puts in a lot of effort, but what does the teen do in return?

Teenagers can be very expensive. In America, more than 50% of teenagers work part time or take on a summer job to earn money for spending, savings, and in some cases supporting the family. It's a rite of passage to begin your first job. In surveys conducted at the Lycée Jean Monnet in Crépy-en-Valois, I discovered that less than 1% of French teenagers are employed. French teens tend to spend less than their American counterparts. This is most likely due to the large commercial market in the United States. Some other reasons more American teens have a job is that they can begin driving at a younger age and they get out of school earlier in the day. Why would you have a job if you can't get there or can only work a few hours each day?

I had the unique experience of living with a family who owned a gourmet restaurant, *Au Pot d'Etain*. I interviewed my host sister Tracy on her role in the family business. Like in America, the law states that even though it may be a family business, all workers must be paid for their labor. At their restaurant, they employ two waitresses while her mom and dad cook in the back. With so few employees, there is little point in paying their daughter to help. Instead, Tracy helps with odd

jobs like washing the tablecloths and napkins, designing the menu, and translating the menu into English. To gain an American perspective, I interviewed Austin, the seventeen year old son of the owners of the Orr Family Farm. His family employs upwards of one hundred people. With such a large number of employees, it makes sense to pay their son to help out around the farm. Although Austin has been around the farm his whole life, he didn't start working until he was fourteen. He works a differing number of hours depending on the day and season. In general, American teenagers are more likely to be employed in a family business than French teenagers.

Whether they are called chores or tâches ménagères, the tasks parents require their teens to do are nearly the same in France and America. Parents expect their teenagers to do the dishes, clean their room, set and clear the table, take out the trash, cook, and perform many other household duties. What I found was different was the teenagers' attitudes. In the United States, teenagers are known to grumble and gripe when asked to do a simple task. Complaining is practically an expectation. In France, teens seem to give their parents more respect. While living with my host family, I never once heard a complaint slip out of Tracy's mouth. Granted, I may not have understood it if she had! When we visited her friends' houses, they never complained either. Not only were there few to no complaints about doing chores, French teens would often volunteer without being asked. There was a mutual understanding that the teen respected their parents and therefore their parents granted them greater freedom. I'm not sure if it's French culture that breeds this kind of respect, but given the opportunity, I'm sure many American parents would love to implement this system in their own relationship with their children.

Aside from chores, teenagers have many other responsibilities. In France and America, teenagers and their parents came to the consensus that homework was one of the most important responsibilities of the teen. In America, homework makes up a large percentage of students' grades. In order to keep their grades up, they have to complete their homework every night. In France, students generally have less homework, but the homework they do have is meant to prepare them for their class exams and eventually the baccalaureate. Passing the baccalaureate is a necessity for students preparing to attend university. Most French parents expect their children to attend university. Preparing for the baccalaureate takes a lot of time and effort and therefore is a priority from a very young age.

Another responsibility that many teenagers have is caring for their younger siblings. In America, it mostly consists of driving them to their various activities, making sure they complete their homework, and making sure they do their chores. In general, American teenagers are responsible for babysitting their siblings. Their attitude is either that they're hanging out or that they're their sibling's servant. In France, teenagers tend to take on a more nurturing role. They're almost like another, more lenient, parent. One teen I interviewed while I was in France said that she acted as the messenger or link between her younger siblings and her parents. Most French teens are more willing to take time out of their day to help or play with their siblings than American teens.

Expectations are a big part of a teen's role in their family. They have to know what's expected of them to fulfill their role. The four main expectations of parents

for their teenagers in both France and America are good grades, university, church related responsibilities, and hard work. It's no surprise that good grades are a high expectation considering most parents believe homework to be a teen's main responsibility. Tying into getting good grades is going to university. In America, there are a lot of requirements to get into college. You have to maintain a certain GPA, earn a certain score on your ACT or SAT, and participate in extracurriculars. In France, passing the baccalaureate is the only basic requirement for attending university. University in France is much cheaper than university in the United States thus rendering scholarships largely unnecessary. Scholarships are a must for most American students who plan to attend college. Now not only must students worry about getting accepted into college, they also have to worry about earning scholarships to pay for the college they had to work extremely hard to get into. The expectation for children to attend their parents' alma mater is prevalent in the United States. Many parents in Oklahoma expect their children to attend the University of Oklahoma. There were a few students in France who said their parents were expecting them to attend a specific university. In most cases, these were very intelligent, hardworking students who had an opportunity to attend the University of Paris, one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Expectations regarding university attendance differ in the two countries. In this area of America, the Bible Belt, it's not uncommon for parents to encourage their children to go on mission trips. I see plenty of kids in my high school wearing t-shirts they bought to support their friends who are raising money to go on a mission trip. It's not exactly an expectation, but it is highly encouraged by

some parents. Most parent, whether American or French, just want their children to work hard. They're satisfied as long as their children are doing their best.

One aspect of the teen's role in the family is the consequences when they disobey. One common answer in the United States was the loss of privileges. When teens chose to ignore their parents' requests, they were grounded, had an earlier curfew, or had their phone, TV, computer, or car taken away from them. Disobedience also lead to arguments more often in the United States than in France. In France, the response from students on surveys was largely that they rarely had to receive punishment and when they did it was a discussion or lecture. On top of that, French teenagers rarely have a curfew while most American teenagers do. Grounded is an ordinary term in America. In France, they don't have an equivalent for grounding. Rarely do French teens have to lose all privileges in order to make them behave. American teenagers' punishments are largely material while the French focus more on listening and reasoning.

Relationships are the key to understanding a teenager's role in their family. A family would not be a family without the connections that bring each member together. Most teenagers said that they were closest to their mother. I was curious to find out what teens were willing to share with their parents. In both countries, there was a large mix of responses. There were those who didn't share much at all with their parents besides basic information about their school day. Others refused to speak about their relationships but would tell their parents anything else. Then there were those who shared absolutely everything with their parents. They considered

their parents their closest confidants. As mentioned before, I discovered that in France there was a greater amount of mutual respect between parents and teens. In this case, even if teens didn't consider their parents their confidants, they were still willing to answer any question their parents asked them. The French really cherish the bonds between family members.

How time is spent with family plays a big role in the relationships that develop. Food is an important part of French culture. As such, family dinners are a nightly occurrence. While eating dinner with my host family, everything was discussed from school to friends to politics. The dinner table was a safe place to discuss whatever was on your mind. It was also a safe place to practice my French! It's uncommon for Americans to eat dinner together unless it's in front of the television. It *is* common for Americans to have a show that they watch weekly as a family. Whether this can be considered real family time is up for debate. Playing games as a family was a response from both French and American teens, however American teens seem to play games with their families slightly more often.

I spend quality time with my family every day, and I was curious to know if the same could be said for other teens. French families spend time together either daily or rarely; there was no in between. In America, spending quality time together ran the gamut from daily to weekly to monthly to rarely. The establishment of nightly family dinner in France provides an outlet for quality time together every day. Without a set activity, Americans don't have this luxury. Americans are viewed as

constantly rushing and prioritizing. With that sort of mindset, the priority of family begins to slip.

While interviewing Debbie Orr, the owner of Orr Family Farm. She said, "I feel like teens really need to learn how to work hard. It teaches them so much about what they are capable of and gives them confidence. They realize that sometimes fun stuff has to be postponed until the work is done. Also, seeing the result of your work makes it all worthwhile." In interviewing my host mom, I heard a similar quote. In effect she said that as long as Tracy was working hard and doing her best, she was proud of her. Despite cultural differences, all French and American parents want from their teenagers is hard work. They want their kids to have a better future. The teen's role in their family is to grow into hardworking, responsible adults.

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