

Adolescent Apathy and What Loss of Caring Can Mean ~ Part 1

It is important for parents to take notice when adolescents lose the capacity to care. Along with “You can’t make me!” another great rallying cry of adolescence is, “I don’t care!” Both expressions are meant to defy parental authority—in the first case, discounting the power of parental command, in the second discounting the impact of any negative consequence the parents might decide to apply. But beyond this common use of “I don’t care!” can be a serious psychological issue that parents must be mindful of—the expression of *apathy* can convey various meanings. This week and next, we will consider just a few examples of apathy commonly encountered along the path of adolescent growth:

Apathy as Pretense

Sometimes statements of apathy are really bravado speaking. Parents need to see the “I don’t care what you think” statement for what it is and avoid strong statements of disapproval at this vulnerable age.

Apathy as Boredom

While parents often are inclined to trivialize boredom in their adolescent, it is a very painful emotion. It is an expression of loneliness. When a young person cannot find a satisfying way to connect with herself, other people, or the world, she feels at loose ends. This is a time when parents need to keep their adolescent adequately busy so impulsive risk-taking to cope with long term boredom is not allowed to rule.

Apathy as Defiance

When a child intends to show the adult world that he no longer wants to be tied to the values of childhood, expressions of defiance can emerge. Not caring about what mattered to the child and what matters to parents feels like an expression of adolescent independence. But for his future sake at this disaffected time, the parents can insist upon compliance with rules and expectations for school performance.

Apathy as a Defense

“I don’t care about this anymore!” declares the high school junior who has been discarded by her best friend of two years. Now she discovers some painful lessons about friendship: it is not guaranteed to be forever; people we care about the most can hurt us the worst; our caring for someone is not always the best measure of their caring for us. Apathy at this juncture does not heal the suffering, but it does defend against becoming involved again anytime soon. Respecting this decision, parents can also help the young person appreciate good aspects of this last relationship that can strengthen the next caring relationship when she feels ready to try again.

Source: Dr. Carl Pickhardt, author of *Surviving Your Child’s Adolescence* and *Who Stole My Child: Parenting through Four Stages of Adolescence*, and many other parenting books.