

# Claremont Main Road Masjid

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## ADOLESCENCE

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### In The Name Of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful

We Beseech Allah to Bestow His Choicest Blessings, Peace, and Salutations Upon His Beloved Rasul, Our Leader and Master, Muhammad [ S.A.W.]

#### Introduction

All thanks and praises are due to Allah S.W.T., for granting us this Blessed opportunity to gather here for His Remembrance, Worship and reflection on His Creation.

My topic for consideration today deals with adolescence and the very important role we as parents, teachers, caregivers, counsellors and others play in their development and maturation into responsible adults one day.

#### *Rabbul 'Alamin*

One of the very first attributes we learn about our Creator, is that He is *Rabbul 'alamin*, the Lord of *all* the worlds. One of the understandings of the word *rabb* is that Allah is not a Being who brings creation into existence and then leaves it to its own devices. *Al-Rabb* is someone who **continuously** nurtures what he has Created, and brings it, through various stages of development, to a state of perfection and harmony.

#### Adolescence Defined

Adolescence, as we will gather, is a unique phase in the development of a human being; it is a **transition phase** which lies between the innocence of childhood and the responsibility of adulthood. It is a fluid, dynamic phase, characterized by

- intense neural development,
- acquisition of specific mental capacities and the
- maturation of social skills, all of which are essential for the normal healthy functioning of a responsible adult.

Adolescence is not the same as puberty. Puberty is a unique set of biologically determined physical processes occurring during adolescence which result in the maturation of organs of procreation with accompanying bodily changes.

- Adolescence, on the other hand is a much more inclusive process, influencing how an individual behaves in a way that is acceptable to society (**socialization**),
- whilst cultivating acceptance of its norms, ethics and values. (**enculturation**)

Allah, The Sublime lays down a template for the development of the adolescent and invites us as parents and significant elders, to develop the **latent potential** he has Blessed them with. It is this dual process of **Divine Creation** and **Human Nurturing** and its impact upon the developing Adolescent brain that I want to explore during this pre-Khutbah presentation.

I take my *inspiration* for this presentation from our Fundamental Sources of Divine Guidance, our own experiences as adolescents of a bygone era, as well some of the inspiring newer insights which have enriched our understanding of adolescence in the fields of neuroscience, cognitive science, social psychology and other related learning disciplines.

## **Breakthroughs in Neurocognitive Science**

Until two decades ago, it was assumed that *all* brain development in a child takes place in the first few years of life. It is well known that all healthy newborn infants have a hole on their skulls to accommodate this rapid increase in brain growth in the first few months of post-natal existence. A less known fact is the intense phase of cerebral re-organization which takes place in the adolescent brain. The extent of this re-wiring, is so intense that it would not be out of place to regard adolescent brain development as undergoing a re-birth, or entering a second childhood, which surprisingly, reaches its full adult maturation only by the time an individual reaches the age of 24!

These newer insights have become possible with the availability of sophisticated tools such as functional and structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging technology which allow neuroscientists to “look” inside the living human brain as it were. If your brain engages in any form of mental activity such *solving* a math problem, *storing* a thought away in its memory bank, or *processsing* a facial expression, a neuro scientist can pinpoint exactly which particular areas of our brains are engaged; this helps to create a map or a representation of the cognitive landscape of the human brain.

## **Synaptic Pruning**

A predominant part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, composed of cerebral grey matter, so-called, because it largely contains nerve cell bodies increases in volume during childhood, peaks in early adolescence and starts to decrease in late adolescence. This decline in grey matter is part of a neurodevelopmental process which prunes away unnecessary brain cell connections or *synapses* whilst preserving those that are essential and beneficial for the cognitive development of the individual.

This synaptic pruning or sculpting of the human brain is strongly influenced by various environmental factors, both toxic and beneficial to the brain, resulting in connections which are *activated* or used being *preserved* and connections falling into *disuse* being *eliminated*.

One source compares this synaptic pruning to that of pruning a rose bush. You prune the weaker branches in order for the remaining branches to bloom more fully producing a better harvest of flowers.

Let us just reflect for a moment here on the Prophetic teaching of instructing a child at 7 to perform the salah and to reprimand him/her at 10 if they fail to do so. Regular performance of an activity helps to create a dedicated neural pathway or circuitry which facilitates its future performance. Failure to do so, will expose the individual's clumsiness and inexperience as it never had the opportunity to embed such behaviors within its developing cerebral structures.

## Cerebral control centers

Whilst it is being pruned it is not making matters easier for the adolescent brain when it is under the control of **two** centers, the one in front or the pre-frontal cortex and the other embedded deeper within the substance of the brain, the limbic system, which are in many respects polar opposites of each other.

The rapidly transforming, adolescent **pre-frontal cortex** evolves to exert control over a wide variety of **high-level cognitive functions** such as

- Decisive planning
- inhibiting inappropriate behavior
- risk sensitization
- generating self-awareness and
- enhancing social interaction.

These are all features of a successful transition from adolescent to independent adult thinking.

The limbic system on the other hand is the more primitive, **self-centered** command and control center which has an **inability** to

- incorporate the other or non-self in decision making
- delay gratification
- avoid risk taking or thrill-seeking behavior
- avoid acting on impulse

The limbic system thrives by the feeling of a reward or **"hit"** it gets whenever it engages in these behaviors and is still the dominant center in the adolescent brain.

## Brain Plasticity

The adolescent brain is a **malleable organ** and this has implications for education and training. The **plasticity** of the adolescent brain primes it for acquiring new skills such as learning a foreign language, mastering a musical instrument or developing a prowess in a specific sports code. It is

a challenge to enhance their adolescent curiosity, risk-taking and imagination for learning and creativity rather than let it be a source of impulsive, uninhibited and undirected activity.

Adolescents are more excitable, volatile and exploratory than they will ever be. It signals the beginning of a journey that will lead them to independence from adults. Adolescents become more self-aware, capable of appreciating **abstract concepts**, interested in new ideas and become **passionate leaders** of causes they believe in.

It is also a time when they are at their **healthiest and strongest**; paradoxically, they can also be at their **weakest and at greatest risk by being impulsive, reckless and stubborn** at the same time.

### **Adolescence in modern and post-modern contexts**

All of the above has huge implications how we as adults fulfill our role in assuring our adolescents develop appropriate social skills, are sufficiently equipped with knowledge of their faith tradition and do not become **culturally and religiously adrift** in a highly secularized post-modern world characterized by a slavish obsession with liberty and freedom.

Before it was assumed that the primary sources of socialization for our children was the **home and schools** they attended. Today they are raised in an environment where there is an intense competition for their **attention from social media**, they are exposed to the toxic effects of alcohol, and drugs, and exposed to sexual experiences, both online and off line, which puts them at risk for serious physical and mental illnesses.

These pathologies of modern life, including a sense of rootlessness, alienation and moral drift are the end products of an **absence** of any **guidance** from authority figures and lack of **restraints** which only a moral tradition can provide; both of which are necessary for giving life a sense of meaning and significance.

### **Salient Question**

I believe it is time to take a step back and ask ourselves one very salient question;

***What is the most important value we need to impart to our adolescents such that they can grow up resilient in the face of the multiple risks and challenges they have to face these days?***

There are many popular resources available offering advice on how to raise adolescents; they have one significant drawback. Precious few of them are written from a religious or moral point of view.

### **Reality Check**

- Our adolescents are more than just a mixture of *neurons, hormones, genes* and *neuro-transmitters*.
- They too are blessed with a spiritual faculty or *ruh*, or *soul*.
- They are more than just cerebrally developed animals; they too have faculties of perception, of emotions and affect, such as a heart (*qalb*), and its opposite the ego (*nafs*).

## Defining Values

Thus, the single most important value or teaching we could impart to them is what their relationship has to be with their **Creator** or **Rabb**. As an **'abd** or servant of Allah it follows that whatever gives them meaning, significance, contentment, joy and ultimate happiness flows from aligning their behaviors and actions in accordance with what **Rabb** or **Allah** desires or wishes for them. As a servant of Allah, the most important attitude of heart and mind an **'abd** should display is one of **Gratitude** to the Divine.

## Salah, Symbol of Faith

Nowhere do we give our children a better opportunity to develop a deeply satisfying relationship with their **Rabb** than by instilling in them the practice of the greatest **symbol** of our faith, the **salah**. **Salah** is the most tangible expression of **'ubdiyyah** (servanthood) of our submission to Allah.

Significantly, every posture of **salah** from **qiyam** to **sujud**, accentuates the name **Rabb**, as if to emphasize its **total** importance for our existence. Every posture of **salah** becomes a reminder for us of the **unceasing** presence of our **Rabb** in our lives as He **constantly** Creates us and Sustains us!

When we finish the **salah**, we make **salam**, extending our peace to all of creation to the right and left of us. We surrender at that moment all negativities towards others, all angers, animosities, hatreds and self-acclaimed sense of superiority over others.

**Salah** is thus a life-sustaining and meaning-creating instrument which guarantees our mental and spiritual health. It is from this deeper understanding and appreciation of our very **existence** and how **salah** sustains us it that it follows naturally for a believing person always to be in a state of **gratitude** before His Creator!

## Shukr or Gratitude

This gratitude to Allah Almighty finds a poignant expression when parents lovingly cuddle their newborn children. My understanding is that this gratitude or **shukr** serves two very significant purposes.

- Firstly, parents appreciate their offspring have been endowed the gift of coming into being and existence, and thus are blessed with the **same potential** as themselves to experience joy and happiness in their lives one day. They also realize their
- Children are innately endowed to **bring joy and happiness** to them.

A well-known tradition of the Prophet of Allah states that evens a **smile** qualifies as act of **sadaqa** between two Muslims. I tell myself, if a little infant or child smiles with me, I feel blessed to be the recipient of their **sadaqa**.

I would not like to think of **sadaqa** only as charity. It does not do justice to translate **sadaqa** as charity. It has a more nuanced meaning of something done truthfully, sincerely, with compassion, as an act of benevolence, with love, kindness and generosity. When children smile they draw you into their world of understanding, they accept you trustingly. They are telling you they are comfortable with you and that you matter to them.

No matter what the world throws at us, no matter how hard and trying the day might have been, it is that hug and that smile which has the capacity to wipe away all those toxic influences which have been throwing us off course during the day. It is a humbling experience to realize how much we depend on **them** for our **own** emotional well-being.

A well-known incident recorded in the **Seerah** of the Prophet of Allah illustrates his impeccable understanding of the impulsive, impressionable and immature nature of adolescent thinking. As the Muslim army was preparing for battle, a young boy steps forward to volunteer his services saying that he left his mother crying in his enthusiasm to join the **Jihad**.

The Prophet of Allah advises him to return to his mother and **make her laugh** as much as he made her cry. There are several important lessons from this encounter, suffice it for our purpose to acknowledge the positive role the child plays in the emotional state of the mother.

It is in perhaps one of the most sublime supplications in the Qur'an expressed in **verse 74, chapter 25, of the Qur'an** that best captures this human yearning for the companionship that spouses and children provide yet it does not fail to emphasize the **resourceful leadership required** to achieve the "**pleasure of one's eyes** ", ( **qurratul 'ain** ). This supplication sums up not only our gratitude for the past joys we experienced but also the future responsibility we need to take cognizance of.

## Leadership

As our adolescents go through this process of re-birth or change in their mental architecture they need our patient support and understanding for the strange behaviors they display is beyond their control.

What they need is **leadership**, understanding of the **context** in which they are growing up, a **safe environment**, Compassionate setting of **boundaries**, and **Values** taught, practiced and communicated unceasingly.

This **leadership** needed implies amongst other things,

- the need to take **responsibility** for those under our care,
- an ability to make the **tough choices** needed,
- consciously instilling in them a sense of **self-respect**,
- instilling in them **core values** we have come to cherish
- It is about **being there** for them in times of joy and sadness.
- Being a **role model**, leading by example,
- displaying utmost **generosity** of heart and mind wishing they will excel far beyond what we had achieved.

## Changing Contexts

I have no illusion about the **vastly different times** we live in these days. It goes without saying that the first steps in helping them is to get to know them.

- What are their attitudes, ideas, inclinations, fears, hopes, approvals, and hatreds like?
- What makes them feel good about themselves,
- What sucks their resilience?
- Just how do they view us?
- How do they respond to any request by us?
- What earns their respect and what turns them off?

Without information about them we are going into **uncharted waters** and that is inviting disaster. We would be talking over their heads and simply tiring ourselves in the process.

I want to refer you to some excellent sources, both locally and from abroad that have been tracking changes in adolescent thinking, attitudes and behaviors and I would strongly recommend that we all familiarize with some of these findings.

## Present Day Adolescents

If we just concentrate on our **current** cohort of adolescents in the 12-19 year age group it would make for some interesting observations.

- First generation to be borne fully into the Internet age.
- First generation to have Internet in the palm of their hand thanks to Smart phone technology.

- Average adolescent checks her or his phone more than 80 times a day!
- Comments, Trolls. Disregard for social norms. No consequences for their actions.
- Spending more time on iPhones than on people
- Spending more time alone than with people, both give them poor interpersonal and social skills
- Have less time for engaging in spiritual, Transcending activities
- Insulated, isolated; little civic or political involvement etc.

Some of these emerging trends should be a cause for alarm.

Are our teens and adolescents happier these days? Once again, the trends are worrying.

- They are prone to feelings of low self-esteem and depressive ideation.
- They are more prone to severe mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression.
- They are more isolated and prone to suffer seriously from rejection by heartless peers.
- They are more likely to be bullied and abused.
- They are more prone to suicide!

**Conclusion: They are not a picture of health and resilience!**

**Just what can we do to help our Adolescents?**

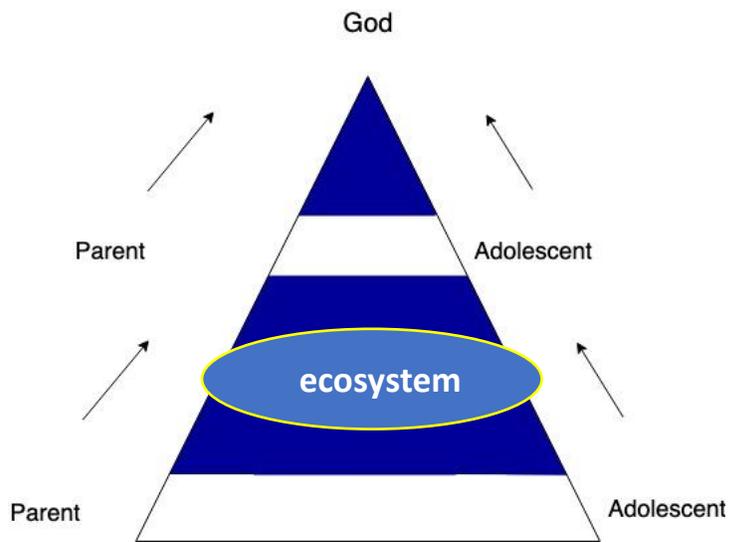
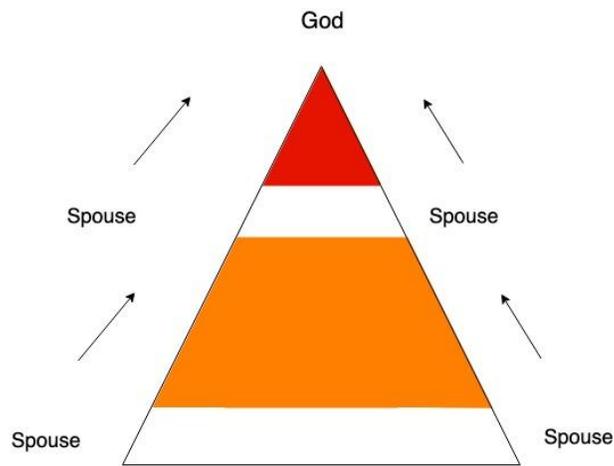
Adolescence is a hot topic of discussion everywhere these days. Adolescent health has featured prominently as a key topic at UN/WHO programs, in advocacy documents and in prominent journals. Several UN initiatives have recently focused on Adolescence issues and all of this has given rise to a healthy discourse on how to treat, protect, and support youth.

Sometime ago someone shared a useful piece of advice with me.

**Convergence of Actualized Values**

It expressed the relationship between 2 spouses and a Creator or Supreme, Transcendent Being in the form of a ***triangle or a pyramid***: the partners occupying the base corners of the triangle, whilst God occupies the apex. The closer both spouses move towards God, the shorter or closer, the distance becomes between them! Their own search or ***struggle to actualize their highest shared values*** in their lives, brings about a ***convergence***, rather than ***divergence*** of hopes and aspirations leading to greater harmony.

I tried to apply this model to the parent-adolescent dyad.



## Eco System

With our values and aspirations, we incline or slope towards one another. We aim for similar goals in our lives. At the Apex is our highest Goals or Aspiration. For a Muslim this can only be Our Creator. He is the source of our ethics, morality, values, hope and meaning. The closer we both move towards our goal the closer we get to one another. A good effective parent ensures, as a leader, that they will continue to impart the right training and knowledge and understanding and experience to their off spring such that there is no wide divergence between their values and those of their children.

This pyramidal or triangular relationship presupposes that we are not simply interested in our own self-actualization or success, but we draw others along with us up the slopes of the pyramid, ensuring that we provide the ideal ecosystem in which they will thrive.

This self-actualization process finds an echo in the work of Maslow [ see later ].

Adolescents need a **safe space** in which to thrive. For lack of a better name, I call this space my ecosystem. It is a space

- where the **individuality** and growing **autonomy** of the adolescent is respected
- where adolescents are taken through the **consequences** of their **decisions**
- where it is a **safe to fail** and learn greater lessons from failures
- where they are taught to **name the emotions** they are experiencing and how to express them without being **shamed** or being **belittled** in the process.
- where they are **acknowledged** for undertaking increasing **responsibilities** and executing them successfully.

Where do we draw our inspiring values for our self-actualization from?

### **Luqman 31; 12-19 and value construction**

If we turn our gaze once again to our Foundational source, we can draw valuable lessons from the story of **Luqman** [ especially verses 12-19].

Thus, **Luqman** instructs his son:

- The wisdom Luqman is taught is **gratitude** to God Almighty for all that he is blessed with. [12]  
This the beginning of the road that leads to his ultimate success.
- How does he display his gratitude to God? He commits no **Shirk**. He acknowledges the Creative Power and Majesty of God and affirms no one shares in that Divinity. [13]
- His son's path to acquiring Gratitude as a key value is informed by the latter's appreciation of how helpless he was and how lovingly he was nurtured. This induces **humility** and **gratitude**. [14]
- Even's if parents resort to denying the **Oneness of God**, it gives the child no reason to disregard his or her parents. Rather the Qur'an admonishes the child to live or consort with them with kindness. The judgement over the parent's beliefs is **deferred**. The Qur'an wants a healthy emotionally satisfying relationship between parents and child at all costs. The consequences otherwise would be too ghastly to contemplate.
- All deeds are accountable before God. This teaches him to take responsibility for what he does. [ 16].

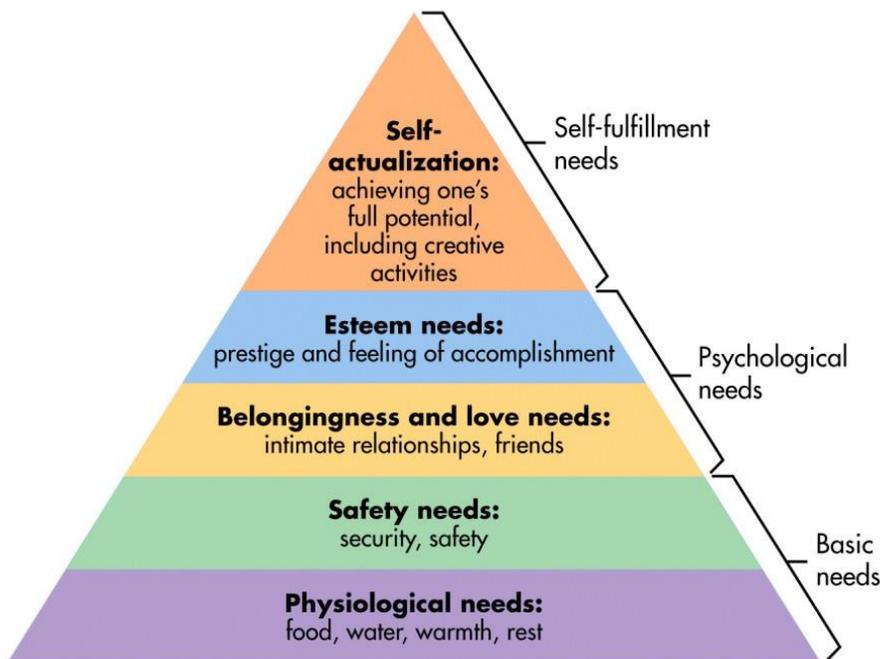
- Establishing regular prayer, enforcing what is right and avoiding evil as well as being resolute in the face of challenges is a worthy state by God. [17].
- Avoid arrogant vainglorious behavior. Do not try to boost your ego at the expense of others. [ 18]
- Avoid harshness in speech and behavior towards others. This is detested by God as something sub-human, [braying of a donkey]. [19]].

This is but one example of a value construct. We too can build up our own set of values based on our Foundational Sources and influenced by the unique social and cultural context we find ourselves in.

We ensure that they espouse values which reflect what we hold dear and which can stand the test of time. These would include values such as liberty, freedom, justice, fairness, order, excellence, preservation of well-being, health, self-care, equality, respect for dignity of all etc.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self Actualization

The highest expression of these values dove-tails neatly onto Maslow's highest category or self-fulfillment needs leading to self-actualization as shown below.



I fully acknowledge all the shortcomings of Maslow's original ideas and whether our progress is necessarily an orderly stepwise function as he proposes. Yet at its core one cannot deny its

universal applicability even if there is widespread concern about the limited empirical data upon which he based his initial research.

It is from these core values that adolescents learn which goals to pursue. Their goals determine which actions and behaviors they will adopt.

## **Values, Goals, Acts, Behaviors**

Expressing values by themselves would be of little use if they are not translated into identifiable goals, actions and behaviors.

If we taught them the **value** of preserving their **health**, they will make sufficient rest an important **goal** and this will cause them not to become sleep deprived. They will realize that for optimal mental functioning and maintaining a good functioning short term memory, it is all dependent on their brains getting sufficient rest. Better sleep guarantees less anxiety, stress or rumination with negative thoughts which lead to depression and increased risk of suicide.

This **value driven path**, allowing them room to explore and take control of their own destiny, respecting their autonomy and capacity to think about solutions we might not have seen forthcoming, will empower them to reach their goal of adult responsibility sooner.

This commonality of goals fits in well with our current understanding of self-actualization or successful development of adults.

## **Adolescents: Positive Strengths**

Adolescents must never be seen as purely **problematic** beings. They too are endowed with unique strengths which should incline any parent towards them.

- They have a unique inclination towards matters spiritual.
- They have a sensitivity towards issues of social justice.
- They have a capacity for abstract thinking.
- They have an emotional sensitivity.

These are valuable points of intersection, of commonality, in one's dealing with them.

I strongly believe, whatever our concerns, we will be able to reach through to them provided we have an honest, non-condescending, caring, engaging attitude in our dealings with them.

## **Techno Addiction**

Take for example the very serious concerns regarding excessive smart phone use and the rising tide of depressive illnesses amongst adolescents. Speaking to them, I find it reassuring that they

are able to realize that it is all about a more modern form of enslavement or addiction to technology, no different in its mental impact from that caused by compulsive gambling.

## **Combatting Acquisitiveness**

Similarly, when we sensitize them to the marketing ploys of businesses they realize how they get entrapped with desires which never reach a measure of satisfaction or contentment; hence true happiness becomes an ever-receding goal. Rather making them aware about the plight of those who have less than them creates a sense of gratitude for what they have. This lesson to live with less could be one of the most liberating things we can ever convey to them.

## **Combatting Cyberbullying and Hate Speech**

Daily we are confronted with reports of adolescents on the receiving end of bullying made to feel so insignificant, developing severe depression and in some cases leading to suicide, whilst their perpetrators are allowed to get away with impunity. We as parents have a strong duty to ensure our adolescents do not resort to using such unedifying language, hate speech and using racist and sexist terms. As much as we will never tolerate anyone hurting our children, we must never condone abuse of any of Allah's Creation by our own offspring!

We therefore say an emphatic no to

Any vain, insulting, derogatory, uncouth, uncivil, defamatory, hurtful and vulgar speech as it is a clear violation of the dignity or *karm*, Allah has placed in all human beings.

Life is full of alternatives and we need to empower our adolescents to make **choices** in their actions, words they use and how they behave with others which will enhance their own physical and mental health and dignity, and not be a cause of their destruction.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, and by way of a modest suggestion of how we can protect and enhance the physical, mental and social well-being of our adolescents, I want to propose the following:

- Move Outdoors
- Remain Connected
- Reduce Screen time

More specifically

- Enjoy more sunlight exposure
- Exercise
- Diet richer in Omega-3 fatty acids

- Avoid rumination [ insults, bad experiences, rejection] ...Meditation, Thikrullah
- Get enough sleep [sleep is brain food] [put away the mobile]
- Engage in person to person interaction [infinitely more enriching experience than to sit and text without being in the physical presence of someone. Combat Loneliness.
- Walk and Talk [ bodies and minds are linked, and the part of the brain that tells the body to move is adjacent to the part that is responsible for clear headed thinking].
- All of the above, away from the tiny screen, lessens our chances of developing depressive attitudes and mental illnesses.

In a general sense

- Improve our level of communication with our adolescents, ***first aim to understand before trying to be understood***
- Remain connected. Our most pervasive message should be, ***if you need me, I am available***, and lastly
- Through consistent encouragement and support, ***convey what are our expectations of them!***

***We enjoyed their cuteness and innocence whilst they were young: we dare not leave them alone when they need us the most during their adolescence!***

***Let's not disconnect from them when they need us the most.***

***Their minds might have grown, but their hearts are still small, their feelings are fragile.***

We can never fully prepare for the adolescent phase of our children's development for adolescence itself changes in its expression from one generation to the next. Nor can we be found completely flat-footed, and pull our hair out in despair. Adolescence is not only a risk filled, challenging phase, but also one of profound opportunity. Let us pray that Allah grants us and our adolescents that we build a sound relationship with one another based on values which earns both of us, the Pleasure of The Divine.

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