Teenagers

willing to listen; talk to them



Present-day teenagers have the courage of conviction to call a spade a spade and the heart to accept graciously all that is worth accepting. But for them to act that way, we, the parents and elders, have to talk to them face to face.

■ by Wg Cdr (Retd) D.P. Sabharwal

Children and watches must not be wound continuously; you must let them run," he said. Then, looking at me, he added, "Let me clarify, uncle, it is not me who says this. It is the thought of the famous German writer Jean Paul. However, I would like to know what your opinion is about this quote."

"Yes, what is your opinion, uncle?" asked almost everyone in unison.

I looked at the six youngsters looking at me earnestly, expecting a favourable answer. All of them were in their early teens and were friends of my 15-year-old son studying in class 10. His friends included three boys and the two girls, who were frequent visitors to our home and quite informal with me.

It was my son's birthday. After the cake-cutting, refreshments and party-games, I inquired about their school and education. It literally opened up a Pandora's Box. Almost each of them started talking about the endless orders, instructions and strictures

that were imposed on them. It was in this context that one of them had asked me the question.

I replied, "Even if what you say is 100 per cent correct, let me tell you that your times are still better. Imagine my times, when we were administered strictly on dictatorial lines and the rod of the teacher was supreme."

"But, uncle, you must have had only one or two teachers to deal with whereas we have so many of them; and they are less of teachers and more of preachers! And what is more, a majority of them are not teachers at heart; teaching for them is either a pastime or..."

They were speaking one after another, when I interrupted and said, "Look, kids, we are not here to discuss the class and calibre of present-day teachers. In every walk of life, there are different shades of people — good, bad and indifferent. Teachers are no exception. Even in our times, we had teachers, who were not good. But we never said so and never uttered a word of disrespect for them."

Preaching children

"There is a reason for that, papa. Those days, you never had the freedom to say what you felt even if you were certain that you were right," said my son and that set me thinking.

What he said was not untrue but it was not the whole truth either. Thus, to set the matter right, I said, "Those times did exist when one did not have the liberty of expression. And all those who dared to speak the truth, were punished heavily.

"You must know the torture Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno had to undergo on account of their urge to explore the truth. Socrates was given a cup of hemlock to drink because he would not give up the path of truth and righteousness. Joan of Arc was declared a heretic and was burnt alive. But all that was centuries ago and the world has changed since.

"During my childhood, we never made such utterances as you youngsters do. Not because we were not allowed to or we were afraid to say so. Well, it was purely as a mark of respect for our elders."

Looking at the young faces around, I could make out that they were not in agreement with me. It was at my prodding that one of them asked, "Does it mean that, when we speak the truth that is unpalatable and concerns the elders, we are disrespectful to them?"

"Truly speaking, no. But then, that is what we were taught those days and that is what was expected of us. We never gave our opinions about matters that were elders' business," I said.

"You mean, all matters connected with children's upbringing and education is purely the elders' concern?" asked one of them.

When I answered in the affirmative, one of them said, "What you did was right at that time. But why do you expect the same behaviour from us? Times have changed. Education has changed. Method of living and way of thinking has changed. And, if I am permitted to use my father's cliche, there is a generation gap. Thus, in view of all this, should not elders change accordingly?"

"I will come to that later. First, let me come to your father's cliche. We have been listening to and using this quite often but I would like to know how many of you really understand the meaning of the phrase 'generation gap'?"

Seeing everyone quiet, I said, "Literally speaking, generation gap means a lack of communication and understanding between one generation and the next. Well, it existed even during my childhood. In fact, in those days, it was more acute and severe because we never had the ears and attention of our elders. I must say you kids are lucky to have us around and available, listening to your cribs and all that kid-stuff."

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"But that is only one side of the coin, uncle," said one of them. "No doubt, parents listen to us but they give us a lot of sermons and *bhashans* (speeches) about what we should do and not do. And they do not even hesitate to twist our ears, as if they were winding a clock."

Set them right

That brought out instantaneous and almost simultaneous laughter from all of us and it was then, that one of them had come out with that quote of Jean Paul: Children and watches must not be wound continuously, you must let them run.

The kids obviously wanted to hear a straight and simple answer that, 'Yes, I agree with the statement'. However, I realised that such an answer would have given them a wrong notion and if I just said, 'No, I do not agree', it might break the cord of dialogue.

Deliberating carefully, I said, "Do you realise that the quote speaks about children and not you, the almost grown-up youngsters?"

Seeing a droop on their faces and trying to cheer them up, I added, "Don't worry. I am willing to consider you teenagers as children for the sake of argument. But tell me, how many of you have noticed the word 'continuously' in the quote?"

Then, without giving them a chance to answer, I said, "Yes, I agree that children and watches must not be wound continuously. But periodic winding is necessary. What do you say?"

Nobody took the initiative to answer, yet I did not want to continue as I was aware of the fact that 'children love to learn, but hate to be taught'. So,