

Healthy Families, Healthy Teens

When you bring up the subject of teenagers in a room full of parents, there's usually a group groan. People roll their eyes and laugh nervously. Almost everyone thinks about this stage with fear and trepidation.

Researchers would tell us to relax— because expecting the worst could be a self -fulfilling prophecy.

What kids do and the choices they make as teens have a big impact on their lives. It seems more dangerous to be a teen today. And—throughout the ages —part of being a teenager is “having issues” with your parents.

Here are some ideas to help you build your relationship with your teen.

Stay involved!

Teens want their parents' guidance. They do not require the same kind of supervision they did when they were younger, but they need to know that parents are paying attention to what they are doing. They want to know that you will be the safety net for them when things go wrong.

Balance is the goal.

As with nearly everything in life, balance is what you are striving for. Parents have to be there for their teens, but not hold on too tightly. Even when kids are ignoring them, parents need to stay involved.

It helps to know the challenges teens are facing. Remember that kids aren't “out to get us.”

Psychologist Ron Taffel summed up the importance of parents: “Even as kids reach adolescence, they need more than ever for us to watch over them....Adolescence is not about letting go. It's about hanging on during a very bumpy ride.”

Avoid power struggles.

Teens think differently than adults. At some stages in their development, it's basically impossible to win an argument with them (because they are always right). They are thinking the best that they can—even if it is far from logical.

As children move through adolescence, they become more capable of thinking abstractly. They become interested in “big” issues—violence, disease, poverty, and environmental pollution. They can put a lot of passion into supporting worthy causes and doing volunteer work. And they can get really frustrated when things don't go the way they want them to.

Remember that you are changing, too.

Seeing kids grow up makes parents take another look at their own lives. Some of us have a midlife crisis—thinking



through our own goals and re-thinking what we want to accomplish in life.

You are an invaluable resource to your child.

Parents are the very best resource kids have for learning values, confidence, and how to be successful in school and in life. Home is our “comfort zone”—where we can feel secure, calm and confident.

A joke in Reader’s Digest quotes the teen who said, “Mom, I hate you and wish you would die—after you drive Cheryl and me to the mall.”

Teens are pretty good at demonstrating that you can love and hate a person at the same time.

Help teens find and keep friends.

Friends help teens learn to make decisions, to lead and follow, to become considerate and loyal. Good friends can also help teens learn how to recover from mistakes. Parents can help teens develop good friendships. Here are some tips:

- **De-emphasize popularity.** Help kids sort through the values in the “popular” group. Are those values important to them? Help your children learn to not go blindly along with “the crowd.” The more confidence they have in themselves, the more likely they will be to resist negative peer pressure.
- **Encourage quality over quantity.** The number of friends your child has is less important than having one or two good friends.
- **Don’t interfere without good reason.** Resist meddling in their friendships unless your children’s friends are leading them into dangerous situations. If you suspect that risky behavior is going on, remind your children about your clear, firm rules. The most important one is: Safety is non-negotiable in this family.

Kids need time among themselves to learn how to develop their own rules, to share and take turns, to play fair and square, and to recover from bruised egos.

- **Listen, listen, listen!** Pay attention when your children are having trouble with friends. Don’t jump in with ready-made solutions or criticism. Listen. Invite your children to tell you what happened before you over-react. Listen. They’re not likely to open up if you go through the roof.
- **Encourage individuality.** Help kids see that they are “one-of-a-kind.” They will have different tastes and opinions than other people. Respect, and help them learn to value the ways they are special.
- **Encourage children to stick up for themselves.** Help them practice this skill by allowing them to disagree with you in reasonable ways. Don’t tolerate sassy back talk or outright defiance, but support their ideas. You don’t have to agree, but you do need to show respect for their opinions. You might say, “Well, I’m ready to listen. Try to convince me.” Or, “Let me hear your point of view.” By allowing your children to voice and defend their opinions, you help them practice a skill that they can use with their peers. They will become more confident about saying no the next time friends try to lead them toward misbehavior or values that do not mesh with those in your family.



Family Rituals – Adapting for the Teen Years

Family rituals can play a powerful role in organizing family life and can make members feel secure and stable.

- Rituals seem especially important during times of transition and change—such as when a family moves into a new neighborhood, or when a member of the family is added or subtracted.

Family rituals help us reinforce family beliefs and values.

- They help us set aside quality time to relate to one another, make progress in healing losses and wounds and perhaps adapt to change in the family structure.

Healthy rituals take into consideration the ages of the family members.

- The early years offer the strongest times for family rituals to flourish, since children thrive on routines. As children grow older, however, families often find they may need to change or drop rituals that teenagers may find hollow or meaningless. New rituals can be started at any time to adapt to a change in the family structure— like a new blended family or because of the loss of a loved one.



A good topic for a family discussion might be: What rituals are most important for us to keep as a family? Ask each person to share what is special about your family. Share favorite memories and what they enjoy most about the family celebrations and what they don't enjoy. How can we adapt our family rituals so it's not too much stress on any one person?

When you do have full-blown family celebrations, have everyone help. Give each family member a role in making your family time the best it can be. Someone might be in charge of getting out the photo albums to encourage conversations between children and grandparents. Another family member may be assigned to organize a sing-along with songs that everyone knows.

Even though teens may protest that they would rather get together with their friends than their family, they almost certainly will be disappointed and saddened if regular family celebrations and rituals are omitted. Encourage your teen to help you rethink your family rituals, so you can focus on doing those things that will help everyone want to be involved — in ways they will feel enriched and renewed.

Have a good month!

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