

Life with a Teenager



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Introduction

This leaflet offers some ideas and information to help you to parent your teenager. Also featured are some of the warning signs and tips to deal with particularly difficult situations, as well as some useful contacts to follow up when you are deciding how to deal with any concerns.

Sometimes teenagers are raring to go, other times deflated and moody; they may at times be full of ideals, but other times totally self-centred.

With teenagers, it can seem your child has suddenly become a demanding even disruptive family member wanting to challenge authority at every turn and rebel against longstanding family rules and practices.

Being seen with their parents in public can be 'uncool', while their newly emergent sexuality can make them seem like strangers. And of course, they consider themselves bullet-proof as they engage in all sorts of risky behaviour.

The teenage years, in short, can be an exasperating and worrying time for the parent. But teenagers can also be

fun, loyal, and caring family members and friends. Take time to look at the world through their eyes, and instead of focusing on the wild behaviour, the moodiness or the rebelliousness, see the growth of self-confidence and assertiveness in them.

Every adolescent is different and while some have given the age group a bad name, others cause their parents no problems at all. So relate to your teen as an individual, don't typecast them, focus on their good points, be loving, patient and supportive.

Take the time to chat with them in a mature way recognising the adult they are becoming. Listen to their ideas and respect them - even when they are opposing your most dear beliefs. After all challenging authority is a part of growing into adulthood.

Puberty and Adolescence

Adolescence starts with puberty - physical changes to the child's body which are triggered by the production of the sex hormones, oestrogen and testosterone.

Boys' voices deepen, facial and body hair appears, sex organs grow, as does bone and muscle. Girls' breasts develop, their hips and pelvis change, body hair appears and they start to menstruate.

It can be frightening and exciting for both boys and girls, and it is important that they understand what is happening to them and why. Adolescence is much more than those physical changes. It is a time when young people begin to work out their own beliefs, values, standards and ways of behaving.

New pressures for example goading from friends to do things they may not feel comfortable with, can affect their sense of well-being and confidence. They will be having new sexual feelings that are difficult to cope with, and may be worried about their looks. As they develop their self-esteem and try to work out who they are they may

experiment with different clothes and make-up, or become fixated with celebrity 'role-models'.

On top of all this, they also have to cope with school or college work that can make them worried and stressed.

As young people deal with all these changes, mood swings and tantrums are quite common and they will take it out on those closest to them, usually family members.

Be supportive

- Bargaining with your teenager works better than making demands.
- Talking with your teenager about what's going on in their life will help you understand them and help build up their confidence.
- You will probably have to answer lots of questions about puberty. Don't be embarrassed and be well prepared with simple facts.
- Listen to their ideas and try to understand their thoughts and feelings.
- Respect your teenagers' privacy - remember you were a teenager once.
- Be open-minded and do not judge your teenager, so they feel they can trust you and turn to you when they need help.

General Tips

- Keep an open mind and listen to their point of view.
- Change the way you talk to them. If they only ever hear nagging they will stop listening. A chat before they go out, or disappear to their room can make a real difference.
- Decide when to stand firm, when to negotiate and when to let go. Your concerns about drugs and sex are more important than your feelings about the clothes they choose to wear. Your children need to know this.
- Agree a bottom line with your partner or other carers and stick to it.
- Understand why they may be behaving badly. They may be moody, angry or aggressive because they can't put their feelings into words.
- Don't take it personally. Teenagers often hit out at the people they most love and trust. This isn't because they hate you, but because they feel confused, stressed and uncertain.
- Remember what it was like to be a teenager. Did you fight, argue with your parents about staying out late and what you wore? It is all part of developing a separate identity, they need to show the world that they are growing up and are not an extension of you.
- Teenagers need love. Despite the cool and distant image, they are still in need of care and attention. Most things about their world are changing; don't let your love be one of them.
- Teenagers need privacy. They constantly worry about their looks, their bodies and the strange feelings and thoughts they are experiencing, and need time to sort things out for themselves. Build up trust and show you respect their privacy and they will tell you more.
- Keep up to date. If you know what they are dealing with you could earn their respect.

Teens in trouble

Many parents fear their children going off the rails. This is unlikely but it's wise to be prepared. The following section looks at some common parental concerns.

Issue: School attendance

Truancy can occur in all families and may begin as early as primary school or when children start secondary school. Whether your child is truanting or has been excluded, it will help if you can find out why your child may be unhappy at school, it may be they are being bullied or may be finding it difficult to keep up with the work.

What can happen?

If truanting or disruptive behaviour continues the school may ask you to sign up to a parenting contract. This is an agreement which offers practical help and support to make sure your child attends school or improves their behaviour.

The next step would be a parenting order. This is a court order which requires that you attend a parenting programme and comply with orders about your child's attendance and behaviour. This support is designed to help you tackle your child's behaviour and to gain the skills and confidence to make a real difference.

There are also a number of fines and penalties which can be imposed and if things are getting serious. It is really important that you find out about these measures and your rights. For more information visit: www.ace-ed.org.uk

What to do

- Listen to your child, it is important to show that you want to understand their problems rather than punishing and blaming them.
- Ask the school for help as soon as you know there's a problem.

Issue: Aggressive behaviour

If the behaviour directed at you feels like aggression, then it is aggression. Be aware that you may feel particularly sensitive to feelings or acts of anger because of experiences you may have had, but you can say what is not acceptable to you.

It is a good idea to look for help if you feel overwhelmed with worry or if your other children are witnessing the abusive behaviour. In asking for help you are recognising your limits, acting responsibly and setting a good example to your children.

What to do

- Be fair and firm. Give yourself time to cool down and think through your response carefully.
- Explain how you feel about what they have done and let them say how they feel about it.
- Talk about ways to improve behaviour and agree appropriate rewards and penalties.
- Think ahead and anticipate problems and conflicts that may arise and how you will manage them.
- For more help start by contacting your child's school; they will be able to identify any concerns at school and may offer a counselling service or an anger management programme, or they may be able to help through a process called the Common Assessment Framework. Other sources of help are Relate for family counselling, your child's GP for a referral to the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health team for counselling or Family Lives helpline on 0808 800 2222.

Issue: Anti-social behaviour

Sometimes bad behaviour can extend beyond the home and be damaging, frightening or anti-social to others.

Anti-social behaviour warning signs

Missing school or being in trouble, stealing, having unexplained amounts of money, mixing with a bad crowd, using drugs and/or alcohol, rudeness or violence towards you or others.

What to do

Talk to your teenager about their behaviour to find out why they do it. Try not to judge, but explain that you want to help and you need to work together - maybe also with outside help - to get them back onto the right path. Explain where this behaviour could lead unless it is stopped now.

Parents Matter

A service for parents of young people aged 10-17 years living in Warwickshire, aimed at preventing offending and anti-social behaviour within and outside the home. Group or one-to-one sessions take place in Leamington, Rugby and Nuneaton.

STEPS

Steps to Excellence for Personal Success (STEPS) is a programme aimed at parents and encourages people to think about themselves and the way they choose to live their lives.

Teen Triple P

A course for parents which promotes effective parenting strategies and provides principles to help deal with almost any situation that might arise.

Visit www.warwickshire.gov.uk/parenting for more information.

Drop in Lunch Club

Informal drop in session where parents can meet and share their experiences.

These programmes are run by Warwickshire Youth Justice Service, for more information contact 01926 682650 or visit: www.warwickshire.gov.uk/yot

Issue: Sex, drugs and alcohol

Unprotected and early sex is often linked to alcohol and drugs, especially if it's for the first time. The number of teenagers trying drink and drugs in their early teens is growing, often influenced by peer pressure and the media. Most who have sex under the influence admit they regret what happened. It is hard to lay down rules about drink and drugs. Your teenager may get angry and refuse to discuss it but keep trying to get the message home that being drunk or drugged can be dangerous. Remember that drink or drug use may be covering up some other problem such as bereavement, bullying and difficulties with school work.

Talking about sex, sexually transmitted infections, staying out late, drinking and trying drugs, may not be easy for parents but research shows that this is what young people want. Young people say that they want to talk about relationships, responsibilities and values, not just biology. They also learn by example, if they see that you are considerate, thoughtful and responsible in the way that you deal with other people they will learn the value of behaving that way too.

What to do

- Keep talking about responsibility and choice. Let them know that if they experiment, they must be responsible and avoid taking undue risks.
- Talk about the risks of pregnancy, catching a sexually transmitted infection, overdose, a bad "trip", having an accident, a fight or unwanted sex while under the influence. The choices they make will help keep them safe and well.
- Talk about safe choices and options like not going out late alone, knowing how they will get home, keeping in touch by their mobile, letting you know where they are going.
- Talk about condoms - they protect against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection.
- Let them know they can call you for help if they need you.
- FIS leaflet 'Talking to your children about sex and relationships' may be useful. Contact the service for a copy (details on the back of this leaflet).

Issue: Eating disorders

Eating disorders develop when food is used as a way of dealing with personal problems and tends to be more prevalent in young people, most often girls. There are two main eating disorders: Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. Anorexia sufferers weigh at least 15 per cent less than they should and the condition can cause life-long problems and bulimics tend to maintain their body weight by binge-eating in secret.

What to do

Warning signs

Anorexia: excessive weight loss; avoiding food while obsessing about it; pretending to have eaten already, hiding body shape, loss of periods, feeling cold, sleep problems, moodiness, not growing, thinning hair growth and dental problems due to being sick.

Bulimia: binge-eating, sore throat and related infections, dental problems from vomiting, missed periods, disappearing after meals, puffy skin, not drinking enough and using laxatives.

Possible causes

- Abuse - physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Bullying
- Family problems
- Parents pushing their child too hard at school - people with Anorexia are often high achievers
- Not being able to express feelings
- Lack of self-esteem, feelings of selfhatred, guilt
- Wanting to look like women in magazines and on TV
- Wanting to be popular - believing being slim will make them more popular

How to help

Let teenagers know that you are there to help them, no matter what and give them the chance to talk to you or someone they trust about their problems.

You should also talk to their doctor as counselling, self-help groups and therapy are all helpful too. It may also help for you to speak to other parents who have gone through similar experiences and support each other.

Contacts

- Beating Eating Disorders 0845 634 1414 (helpline) www.b-eat.co.uk
- YoungMinds 0808 802 5544 www.youngminds.org.uk
- NHS Direct www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Issue: Self-harm

Self-harm can be really hard to understand but it is a lot more common than people think and it affects young people from all walks of life.

Self-harm (also known as self-injury) is causing deliberate harm to your own body through physical abuse, for example cutting, burning, pulling hair, picking skin and deliberate bruising.

People harm themselves for all sorts of reasons. It usually relates to emotions that are difficult for the individual to manage - anger, distress, fear, emotional worry, depression or low self-esteem – and is a way for an individual to cope with these feelings.

Warning signs

If you suspect that your child is self-harming, look out for any of the following signs:

- unexplained cuts, bruises or cigarette burns, usually on their wrists, arms, thighs and chest;

- keeping themselves fully covered at all times, even in hot weather;
- signs of depression, (low mood, tearfulness, lack of motivation/ interest, becoming withdrawn);
- signs of low self-esteem, such as blaming themselves for any problems or thinking they are not good enough for something;
- signs they have been pulling out their hair;
- signs of misuse of alcohol or drugs.

What to do if your child self-harms

- Handle the issue sensitively and without judgment. No one can make a harmer 'get better' and just telling your child to stop won't work. They need your support and understanding.
- Try to stay calm. Seeing you upset can make it even harder for your child and the guilt can push them to harm themselves more.
- Both you and your child need to be prepared to face the underlying issues that may have caused the behaviour in the first place.
- Sometimes just having someone to listen can make a big difference - it's not always important who is listening and don't be upset if they would prefer to talk to someone else. However, it's important to remember that self-harming is a problem that can be difficult to talk about, as sufferers may feel scared, embarrassed or ashamed of their behaviour and they may not be able to put into words how they feel.
- Your child may need professional help, talk to your GP or the school nurse. They can refer your child to psychiatric services.

Further information about self-harm can be found on the following websites:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Self-injury/Pages/Introduction.aspx

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/

www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people/whats_worrying_you/self-harm

Further help

Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) advice line

www.ace-ed.org.uk

Frank

www.talktofrank.com

Tel: 0300 123 6600

Family Lives

www.familylives.org.uk/gotateenager

0808 800 2222

Relate

www.relate.org.uk

Tel: 0300 100 1234

Respect Yourself

www.respectyourself.info

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

Useful websites about feelings and how to feel better and problems and what to do about them.

[www.covworkspt.nhs.uk/camhs/
youngpeople/default.aspx](http://www.covworkspt.nhs.uk/camhs/youngpeople/default.aspx)

[www.covworkspt.nhs.uk/camhs/
moodleton/default.aspx](http://www.covworkspt.nhs.uk/camhs/moodleton/default.aspx)

Contacting the Family Information Service

If you are looking for any further information or advice for your family, the Family Information Service can help you. We offer a free and impartial information and signposting service for parents and carers of children and young people on a range of topics such as: childcare, benefits, health, leisure, disability support and much more. If you don't know who to ask, ask the Family Information Service!

Tel: 0845 090 8044 or 01926 742274

Email: fis@warwickshire.gov.uk

Web: www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis

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**Warwickshire Family
Information Service**

