

Family Pack – Parenting Adolescents

“As I drove into the shopping centre car park I saw one of the boys from my daughter’s new Year 8 class. I gave him a cheery big wave out the window and turned to my daughter enthusiastically. My daughter was crouched on the floor, crammed beneath the dash. It was then that I realised I had become an embarrassment”
- Barry (Parent of Jessica)

Many parents worry when their children become teenagers and go into high school that they won’t want to spend as much time with the family as they did when they were younger.

It is normal for teenagers to begin to want to spend more time with their friends during the adolescent years, but it shouldn’t mean that they ignore their families. Parents and teenagers need to take action to stay connected or to reconnect during these changing times.

Although teenagers will want to make their own choices, a good home life can increase the odds that your teenagers will avoid many of the pitfalls of adolescence. A kind, warm and solid relationship with parents, who demonstrate respect for their teenagers, interest in their teenager’s activities, and set firm boundaries for those activities, helps in creating this environment.

The major task of adolescence is to become 'your own person'. Teenagers learn to make choices and commitments, to follow through with them and to stand up independently. However, teenagers swing back and forth between dependence and independence as they work on these tasks. It's easy for parents to get frustrated. False starts, mistakes, poor judgment or impulsive action are part of growing up.

“I feel like one day I am talking to a 12 year old, the next day an 18 year old and sometimes I am sure it is a 4 year old. It makes my head spin”
- Sherin (Parent of Jermain)

Parenting Adolescents

- Changing bodies
- Independence and Staying Connected
- Monitoring and Control
- Managing Conflict



Changing Bodies

Puberty

The age at which biological changes due to puberty begin varies between 9-14 for boys and 8-13 for girls. Pubertal changes can occur at different times and at different rates for students in the same year level at school.

Individual differences in maturation rates, temperaments and adult social influences mean that age does not give a firm indication of where a particular child is along this developmental path. At puberty the body grows at a faster rate than at any time since infancy. This growth spurt is often accompanied by increased irritability and conflict as testosterone affects both boys and girls.

Hormones, the struggle for independence, [peer pressure](#) and an emerging [identity](#) wreak havoc in the mind of the teenager. The issues of how much freedom to give them, how much "attitude" to take from them, what kind of discipline is effective and how to communicate with your teenager, are the major issues for parents.

“Warning – wide mood swings can occur without warning”

Body Image and Teasing

Bullying and teasing about appearance and sexuality can become a problem at this age if teenagers are not made aware of their attitudes, behaviours and how they can affect others.

It seems that it is also the early-developing girls and the late-developing boys who may be most at risk of bullying during this developmental stage. Boys who are still developing are generally smaller in stature and appear more vulnerable to ridicule and bullying. Early developing girls are very prone to teasing and unwanted comments about their appearance. Issues about body image and appearance are very sensitive topics, particularly to girls, at this stage of development.

Parents need to be aware that what might have been meant as a light-hearted comment about a teenager's body shape or size can be very hurtful and create much anxiety. Comments like "She is carrying a bit of puppy fat" or "He is so small compared to his classmates" can be cause for great concern for your child. This is time of increased sensitivity about body growth and shape.

Independence and Staying Connected

Benefits of parents/adolescent connection

If the parent-child connection is consistent, positive and characterised by warmth, kindness, love, and stability, teenagers are more likely to flourish socially.

Teenagers who describe their relationship with their parents as warm, kind and consistent are more likely to be involved in positive social contact with other teenagers as well as with other adults. They are also more likely to respond to others positively and with greater empathy and understanding.

Teenagers with these kinds of positive relationships with their parents struggle less with depression, have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be bullied or bully others.

Moving apart but staying together

Independent teenagers still need to be connected to their parents and family in order to feel positive about themselves. Family connectedness gives teenagers a strong sense of belonging and emotional stability.

The parents' task is to help teenagers through this stage by supporting them to make their own decisions as well as their own mistakes - to let them slowly take greater responsibility for their lives. The parents' responsibility is to be more in touch with their teenager, to listen to their teenager and support their attempts to fit in and feel comfortable with themselves as they head towards the adult world.

While it is true that one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence is to separate from parents and that friends take on greater importance during adolescent years, there is still no substitute for the parent-adolescent relationship.

Top tips to help you develop a stronger connection with your teenager

Being close to your teenagers means knowing how they feel about things, such as who their friends are, what activities and sports they like doing, what they are doing at school and how they feel about school. It is about making them feel you enjoy being involved in, and knowing about their life.

Taking a deep interest in your teenager will build a relationship that will consist of good open communication, mutual trust and respect.

School:

1. Attend assemblies.
2. Attend special event days (sport carnivals, parent days etc).
3. Ask your teenagers about their progress in different areas at school (what subjects they like, what they do at lunch time etc).
4. Read your teenagers school newsletter and discuss any events or issues raised in the newsletter.
5. Support your teenager with their homework and organisation for school events.

Activities outside of school help teenagers make friends from different groups. Multiple friendship groups are very important for their social development. Take the time to show an interest in these activities.

Activities:

1. Attend sports matches, recitals, or performances. Stay and watch rehearsals and trainings when you can.
2. Ask your teenagers about their chosen activity, find out what they like about it.
3. Support your teenager to practice or prepare for the activity.
4. Participate in activities with your teenager such as going to the movies or getting involved in activities as a family.
 - Enjoying leisure activities such as sports, crafts, music or other social activities together is seen as one of the best ways for parents to enhance their connection with their teenage children. Families not only spend time together, but these activities also allow for adult role modelling of appropriate social behaviours and attitudes and the chance to practice these with one another.

Monitoring and Control

Teenagers whose parents know who their friends are and what they do in their free time are less likely to get into trouble than their peers. Perhaps the most difficult thing about the monitoring process is that it is a delicate balance between too much and too little control and it requires the energy to set firm limits.

Monitoring requires constant awareness on the part of parents, to make sure they know where their teenagers are and what they are doing. It also requires that parents enforce consequences when family rules are broken. Although discipline is genuinely unpleasant for all involved, monitoring your teenager's activities and providing boundaries and praise on a daily basis can head off more serious problems later.

Top tips for monitoring

- Talk with other parents about how much freedom and responsibility they give their teenagers. It is helpful to know what other parents think is okay.
- Ask teenagers for their point of view on decisions that affect the family.
- Be consistent with your teenagers. Let them know the consequences of keeping within the limits and for pushing the limits too far.

As your teenagers search for an identity separate to their family, it is important to be tolerant and accepting of their effort for independence. At the same time, parents should be clear about what behaviour is acceptable and the consequences for pushing the limits too far. Even if teenagers are difficult to get along with, they still need, and want, support from their parents.

Top tips for guiding teenagers (setting rules and disciplining)

- Give teenagers clear rules. They need help in setting limits on their behaviour.
- Involve teenagers in the setting of these rules.
- Don't be afraid to insist on behaviour that reflects your family values. Your teenagers may resent rules and test the limits, but parents should not. Parents can show respect for their teenager's feelings and opinions but should reserve the right to limit some of their actions.
- Be clear and consistent in your expectations and be willing to discuss reasons for your decision. This gains self-respect.
- Give support. Adolescents still need and usually react positively to parental help and encouragement.
- Allow teenagers to take responsibility when you see them handling situations well. Give them praise.

"I have been a successful lawyer for nearly 20 years, but I have never come across a case as difficult as trying to get my adolescent son to make his bed. He has no case, but it doesn't seem to matter. It's like negotiating with a brick wall"

Managing Conflict

Conflict is a normal part of life for teenagers and their parents as they go through the many changes in their lives. All families will experience some conflict and sometimes things can get fairly heated, but there are ways of dealing with conflict that allow teenagers and parents to stay connected.

If your child says "stay out of my life" in the middle of a conflict, it could be that the message really is "This is really hard and I am trying to sort it out myself."

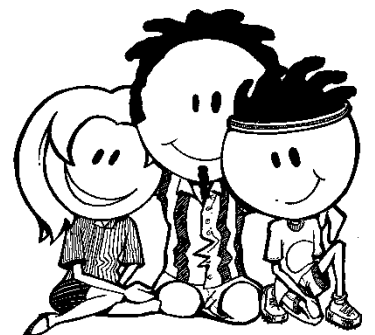
Top tips for managing a conflict with your teenager

As the adult, it is your role to maintain control of your emotions and of the situation. This is a perfect opportunity to role model appropriate and effective communication.

1. **Stay calm.** If you find yourself getting too angry or upset, explain to your teenager that you need to think and go into another room or go for a walk. Wait until you are back in control of yourself before you try to resolve the conflict.
2. **Use a firm but friendly voice** and be aware of your facial expression and body language.
3. **Listen** to what your teenager has to say and **don't interrupt.**
4. **Avoid lecturing.**
5. **Stay focussed on the problem at hand.** Don't bring up other incidents or past mistakes.

Try to remember adolescence is a time of great confusion for teenagers and sometimes they can get very emotional about things in their lives. They may say and do things they don't really mean, but are struggling on the inside to make sense of what is happening. They need you to be the adult in these situations.

Even when there has been conflict between you and your teenager maintain, open communication and move on. Remember while you are communicating there is always a chance of resolution. There is no chance if you are not.



Family Activity Sheet

When both of you have finished the exercises below, discuss them with each other as soon as you are able to sit down together without any interruptions. It is okay to ask each other to explain answers in more detail and to clarify an answer, but it is not okay to argue with them or make them defend their answers. The more parents and adolescents talk, the more they learn.

Parent exercise with teenager

Here is an exercise designed to help parents better understand their adolescent. Parents should read each question carefully and answer as best they can.

Question	Regularly	Sometimes	Not very often
1. Do you regularly spend a block of time alone with your child just listening to his life experiences?			
2. Are you and your child in conflict about expectations, rules or differences of opinions?			
3. Do you discuss personal matters, such as relationships or personal fears with your child?			
4. Do you give the impression you really trust your child to do what he/she thinks is right?			
5. Do you take the time to patiently explain your reason for saying "no" or not letting your child do something?			
6. Do you patiently listen to your child's reasons for wanting to do something?			
7. Do you really support your child's interests and encourage him/her in their accomplishments?			
8. Do you have regular family meetings in which the whole family gets together to talk things over and make decisions?			

Complete these statements:

- What worries me about my child's behaviour is:

- How can we work better as a team:

- I can help my child most by:

Teenager exercise with parent

Here is a communication exercise designed to help adolescents better understand their parents. The adolescent should read each question carefully and answer as best they can.

Question	Regularly	Sometimes	Not very often
1. Do your parents wait until you are finished talking before "having their say?"			
2. Do your parents tend to lecture to you too much?			
3. Do your parents really listen to your needs, frustrations, joys or problems?			
4. Do you discuss personal matters, such as friendships, with either of your parents?			
5. Do your parents seem to trust and respect you and your opinion?			
6. Do your parents explain their reason for not letting you do something?			
7. Do you help your parents to understand you by telling them how you think and feel?			
8. Does your family talk things over with each other regularly through regular family meetings?			
9. Do your parents support you in your interests and encourage you in your activities?			

Complete these statements:

- What worries me most about my future is:

- The most difficult subject to discuss with my parents is:

- How can my parents and I work better as a team?

- My parents can help me most by:
