

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH YOUR TEENAGER

For many adults the teenage years seem puzzling and difficult. Adolescent behaviour can appear contradictory or just plain irritating, and family life at this time can be hard work. But these years can also be immensely enjoyable and rewarding.

It is true that the stereotypical “adolescent-from-hell” would be pretty terrifying - sullen, green-haired, wild-eyed with drunk or drugs, obsessed with sex and determined to avoid schoolwork at all costs! Fortunately, such a monster probably only exists in the imagination or particularly pessimistic parents. Most adults who have a teenager at home will have found that they are often perfectly reasonable human beings - albeit ones who are less predictable than grown-ups, and who enjoy testing the limits.

Some hassle and disagreement are inevitable during these years, and parents will often feel confused and downright hurt.

But remember, life is often fraught and unpredictable for young people too.

There are lots of pressures on teenagers:

- ⇒ Their bodies are growing. Their size and shape is changing, and so is the way they view themselves.
- ⇒ Young people at this age instinctively want to experiment, to try out new identities and to move towards more adult roles and behaviour.
- ⇒ There are outside pressures from friends, as well as from advertising and TV, which encourage young people to grow up at a faster and faster rate.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for teenagers is that they feel unsure about whether they are grown up or not. Even their legal status is confusing. For example, a 16 year old can get married and have children, but cannot get a mortgage or drive a car. He or she can join the army and fight in wars, but cannot vote or drink alcohol in pubs. They are neither children nor adults, but a mixture of both.

Parents feel this confusion too. Many mothers and fathers want to hold the young person back from becoming fully independent. They may fear that their son or daughter is not mature enough to cope with the real world.

Of course, young people will also have doubts about how soon they want to reach adulthood. Your teenager may be torn between what seems like the excitement and freedom of adulthood, and a fear of giving up the safety of childhood.

Remember, it's hard for teenagers to know who they are:

- ⇒ Are they children or are they adults?
- ⇒ Are they dependent or are they independent?

There is no simple answer to these questions. Things shift and change throughout the adolescent years. This uncertainty lies behind much of the puzzling behaviour which can drive parents round the bend.

DEVELOPMENT OF TEENAGERS

Here are some points about how teenagers grow:

- Boys start to grow a lot around 13 years old, the most growth often occurring about 14 years.
- Girls start growing a bit earlier - around 11 years, with a peak of growth around 12 years.
- For boys who are slow to grow, there are risks - they are less relaxed in themselves, may be more dependent and may be less popular or less attractive with their friends or even adults. They can be reassured that they will grow as long as their physical and genital changes are incomplete. Younger teenagers are very concerned with their physical appearance, while older teenagers are more concerned with what kind of person they are.
- For girls they may be worried they are growing such a lot. If they have started their periods, their growth spurt is nearly over and they can be reassured. Early maturing girls may be less popular with their friends.
- In general, late maturing boys or early maturing girls may have problems in adjusting to growing up. All teenagers experience problems because of their growth spurt. They may not be very co-ordinated and be rather clumsy. They will often be very sensitive to criticism and be critical of themselves. This may affect their self-esteem.
- In their thinking and ability to think, teenagers become more able to make theories and think logically. They become more able to think about their own ideas and also to compare their ideas with those of other people. However, quite often they can think that what they think is the same for other people - they sometimes cannot see the other person's point of view. They often act as though they were "playing to an audience". Also they may have extreme ideas about themselves - "I'm completely awful as a person" or "I'm wonderful".
- Teenagers worry about the reactions of others, so they can get shy, like to have privacy or look at themselves in the mirror.

SO, to summarise: Teenagers are growing in their bodies and their minds. They need quite a lot of reassurance because it is a lot of changes.

While most teenagers are OK about themselves, some have low self-esteem. They may think they are no good at making relationships, or feel isolated, misunderstood or not respected, or trusted.

To Repeat:

1. A teenager's body is changing and growing fast, and this affects their own ideas of themselves.
2. Their brain is also growing and is more able to consider a lot more ideas.
3. This means that they will be developing ideas about friends, sex and relationships, what is right and wrong in what they and other people do, and in how society should be, as opposed to how it really is. This is a lot to take on, and can feel stressful for a teenager.
4. If we add in all the ups and down of relationships with friends, the pressure at school and worries about whether they will get a job, we can see that teenagers are under a lot of pressure.
5. Basically, teenagers are trying to get an idea of who they are - develop a sense of their own identity.

Teenagers seem to go through stages in deciding what they think is right and wrong - like having a conscience.

Stage 1

- Bad behaviour seen as bad and deserves punishment.
- Children try to behave so they can get rewards/praise.

Stage 2

- Sticking to rules (e.g. of a game) is seen as important.
- Children keen to develop relationships, so they do things that please or help other people.

Stage 3

- Young people start thinking about individual rights which society as a whole agrees on.
- Big ideas on what is right and wrong. They have developed their own ideas for themselves.

Other aspects of teenagers developing a sense of their own identity are

Sex:

- role identity - what boys or girls “are”
- girls worry about failure as well as success
- girls tend to argue more over identity
- boys tend to argue more over their behaviour

Achievements:

e.g. in school. Performance is influenced a lot by teachers and parents expectations. If a boy or girl is seen as intelligent, the teacher will expect more from the child.

Problems for Teenagers can be caused by a lot of things, including:

- Fear of getting too close to people in case they “lose” themselves.
- Sometimes teenagers can be withdrawn.
- On the other hand, they can try to make relationships with all the wrong people.
- Sometimes teenagers find it hard to plan for the future or have a sense of time (always later, for instance).
- Sometimes they think there is no hope in the future.
- Sometimes they will withdraw from doing something - it feels too big a commitment.
- Or they may become interested in one bit of what they need to do and ignore other tasks.
- They may think they have to be the opposite of what their parents would like them to be.
- Stealing or other terms of delinquent behaviour may bring rewards - e.g. excitement, money which become more important than what they know is right and wrong.
- If they are not good socially - getting on with other people, they may be at risk of getting into trouble.
- Fathers are important to boys and girls, If the father is absent, teenage development is affected - e.g. intelligence, social skills, friends, performance at school. This is true for boys. Girls with absent fathers may have problems relating to males.

To Summarise:

Growing up is hard to do! There are risks and dangers, but with good support, listening and being listened to, parents can help our teenagers. **Children seem to grow through stages:**

Stage 1	No real sense of their own identity, and no real ideas on values, beliefs.
Stage 2	Takes on other people's beliefs and does not question them.
Stage 3 identity	Where the young person feels confused about his or her
Stage 4	Develops a sense of identity and the young person feels he\ \ she has a definite role in life, and has ideas on what is right and wrong, what life is about etc.

What seems to help teenagers do this growing up is a variety of things we as parents can do:

- Listen to what our teenagers are saying.
- Try and "listen" to what is not actually being said, but hinted at and the feelings the teenager may be expressing.
- Try and demonstrate acceptance that the teenager has a point of view and has feelings.
- This does not mean you have to agree with their points of view all the time. In fact, certain limits on behaviour (what we as parents consider acceptable or unacceptable) may be reassuring for a teenager. If he/she has to stick to certain rules he/she may resent it on the surface, but deep down may feel reassured and "safer".
- Finally it may help us as parents to remember we were teenagers once! However, we will also have to realise that life for teenagers today may be very different to when we were growing up.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE AND SEPARATION ON CHILDREN

Children, including teenagers, often feel left out of the situation concerning separation. Two-thirds of children get no explanation from the parents as to why the break-up occurred. This leaves children with a lot of uncertainty and they often have their own opinions. So:

- Children are unsure if the separation is permanent or how long the separation might last.
- Children often consider that arguments between the parents are not good enough reasons for separating.
- The children are not usually consulted over contact with the non-custodial parent. They may have opinions as to how much contact they might like to have.
- At the very time when children need clear boundaries as to what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, these boundaries can become very unclear (e.g. if the separated parents do not co-operate in setting clear limits).
- Parents themselves will be feeling stressed and distressed, so that it can be hard for them to really hear how the child is feeling about the separation.
- In addition, the child loses a role model, who may be criticised by the custodial parent. Children can become “middle-men/women”, hearing complaints from each partner about the other.
- The family may lose the support of family and some friends. They might even have to move away from the local area. This might also mean the family becomes poorer. Children might be under pressure to leave school earlier and try and find a job.

It seems that good communication is essential to allow for everyone being able to express their feelings and have their opinion heard, so they can start to come to terms with the new situation.