

Supporting Teenagers - Helping Parents & Professionals to Understand the Early Teenage Years

Living with young teenagers

Living with teenagers can be one of the most exciting periods in a parent's life. It's great to see your children growing into young people with separate views, hopes and ambitions. But, for many parents it's very challenging to live with stormy or silent adolescents. Some people simply put the difficulties of adolescence down to 'hormones' and see the 'bad times' as normal. However, it can be useful to notice when relationships start suffering and think about what else might be going on.



Being a teenager:

The experience of puberty

When children reach puberty, they experience quite rapid sexual, physical and emotional changes which they can't control. Images on social media emphasize every little detail of how they look. Boys and girls reach puberty at different ages. They worry about questions such as: 'Am I normal?', 'How do I look?', and 'What do people think about me?'

It's not simply self-consciousness they feel, but often real anxiety and distress at how things which they can't stop just race ahead. The safety, security and certainties of childhood feel like they've disappeared. With new-found physical and sexual capabilities, feelings of confidence and independence fluctuate with being overwhelmed and worried.

The Teenage Brain

Key to understanding adolescence is that the adolescent brain works in quite a different way to that of an adult.

The part of the brain that enables adults to weigh a situation up and to make rational decisions is not fully developed in adolescence. Similarly the part that drives emotional impulses and reactions is very active.

This can be really confusing for parents and their teenage children alike. It often results in quite a few arguments; so it requires adults to work out new ways of parenting.

Things young teens are struggling with:

Who am I?

During their early and middle teens, young people develop emotionally by making important choices about how they see themselves and their own unique identities. Young people can feel under pressure to feel certain about who they are, including making decisions about sexual orientation. Being allowed to experiment with different lifestyles and personalities – just as they try out different clothes and hairstyles – is absolutely what adolescence is all about.

But these adventures can be full of scary, embarrassing and painful moments, as teenagers are so keenly aware of what other people think of them. Even though they may look confident, it's helpful to remember how fragile things actually are and how feelings can change from day to the next. In reality, it can take some years to feel surer about what choices to make.

Part of what's on their minds might be what kind of body are they're in as well as sexual feelings. It really helps if the adults around them are ready to listen without being overly alarmed or dismissive.

Who do I want to be with?

Relationships outside the family, particularly with same sex friends, become increasingly important. Very intense friendship groups and loyalties get formed, but these tend to shift and change as teenagers try to sort out who they are and where they belong. The constant checking of messages and media posts on smartphones are now an essential part of sorting all this out. As parents it's worth gently staying in touch with how your teenager's friendship groups are going. Remember that online groups can quickly exclude or criticize resulting in a very unhappy teenager

in the house.

Questions from teenage girls:

Do people really accept me?

Young teenage girls are often drawn towards intense friendships which, when they work, can be the source of confidence and self-esteem. When the 'best friend' situation changes girls can be vulnerable to painful feelings of self-doubt. Depending on personality, this can lead to low mood and withdrawal or increased extrovert and even risky behaviour to compensate.

All of this, as before, gets played out through social media which is largely hidden from adult view.

Of course, girls' bodies are developing. Periods and the development of breasts can start early or late, and sexual feelings and their new bodies are not always in tune with how old they feel. It's crucial to be available to talk about these things as it can easily feel overwhelming.

Questions from teenage boys:

Who do I want to be?

Boys can express their sensitivities and what they're grappling with in different ways. They can come across as grumpy, frustrated and hostile, or start to play the clown. There will be wider family views on what it means to be male but this won't always match up with how it feels inside for your child.

Increased sexual arousal can be difficult to know how to manage. Boys can feel out of control and guilty about erections and masturbation. It can be really difficult for boys to know how to act in front of others. They are also susceptible to self-doubt and criticism, and it's important they have access to support and opportunities to talk things through.

Helping parents get through the early teen years

It is important to realize children will want to distance themselves from their family at times. This can make parents feel powerless and inadequate. It can help if you know that pulling away, and gaining independence is right on target at this age. If your children get your support now, they will come back to you later.

Parents can get stirred up by their teenage children which puts them back in touch with strong memories and unfulfilled longings of their own. It's important to try to stand back and see what your children need from you.

Teenagers will push boundaries with their behaviour. This can be infuriating to parents unless you can step back and think about what's being communicated.

Passing the 'Packet of Feelings'

When teenagers feel overwhelmed by feelings, often they simply don't know what to do with them

or how to feel better. It's as if they have a 'packet of feelings' which they pass on to another person. For example, feelings of helplessness can be stirred in their parents making them feel ineffectual. The parent feels hurt, baffled and useless and there goes the packet in a very effective way – away from the teenager, successfully delivered to the adult! If parents can understand this process, they are likely to be more tolerant and less likely to fall into the trap of fighting back, or feeling endlessly demoralized.

Limit-setting and saying 'no'

Remember, parents can't actually make teenagers do what they want! It can be really hard to find out what works with adolescents, knowing when and how to hold ground. Parents who simply try to lay down the law – for example, 'Get off your phone or lose it for a month!' - are likely to get a resentful or moody response.

Teens do challenge and break rules, but this is all part of finding out where the limits are. This can make parents feel angry or exasperated, as if they've hit up against a brick wall.

It is important to talk about limits along these lines:

- Say clearly what you want, and what you find unacceptable
- Explain calmly why the limits are there in the first place
- Listen to your teenager's point of view and discuss it
- Be clear on consequences
- Stay fair but follow through when house rules are broken

The breakdown of relationships between parents and young people

The painful reality is that some parents can't bear the pressures that their teenage children put them under. Teenagers sometimes get overlooked and it's easy to think of them as older than they are. This often happens as parents hit their own 'mid-life crises'. Teens can be very alert to feeling that they have to fend for themselves. If parents separate during these years, it can be hard to empathize with adolescents' 'ups and downs', especially when there is a new partner or younger children to think about.

Try to keep the adult conversations between adults. It's helpful to stay in touch with your teen one-to-one. It's also worth remembering there may be other more neutral adults who can be of support when the going gets tough, such as close family or friends.

Awkward questions about sex

It's very embarrassing for teenagers to imagine that any adults, let alone their parents, have sexual lives. But they do need to have help in entering the world of relationships. It really helps the young person's wellbeing and future mental health if parents and carers are thoughtful, sensitive and accepting of a young person's developing sexuality and avoid giving the message that attraction towards the same sex is extraordinary. Young teens have a lot to manage, and may be interested or scared at the prospect of sexual relationships. This might be the time when they consolidate their sexual identity, which can be a relief or a daunting prospect. Of course teens also need access to information about the age of consent, contraception, the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases but most of all they need someone to help them deal with the emotional side of it all.

Sharing something of your own experience, and being honest about the pitfalls and difficulties of making and keeping relationships, is likely to be appreciated.

What schools can do

Many schools try to find ways of offering help to vulnerable pupils. It is important for parents to find out how the pastoral side of your child's school works:

- What systems are in place for personal support for each student?
- What processes are there for when things go wrong?
- What is the school's anti-bullying policy?

Parents may need to persist in finding answers to these questions and mobilizing help. Young people can be hesitant about reaching out for help in a formal way.

The stigma of mental health problems still exists but is improving due to increased openness and debate on social media and through journalism.

Exams

Entering into secondary school brings new pressures about exams and tests. Young teens put this at the top of the list of what stresses them. However, these issues compete with many others which may not be so easy to spot.

Achieving good marks in a test may seem irrelevant to young teenagers struggling to maintain a popular social media profile, or stressing over their body image (including online). The future – with further study or a job - might feel too far ahead to think about.

Recognising how confused and overwhelmed young people can feel, and how many issues they are dealing with at once is key to understanding them. A helpful approach is slowing down, remembering to be sympathetic and keeping an ear out for what's going on. If teenagers feel too alone they may try to solve their problems through the 'buzz' and release they can get from risky behaviours including substance misuse, online pornography and self-harm.

Getting help when things go wrong

One of the hardest things for parents of young people is to have a sense of when to intervene and

when it makes sense to wait and see. Part of being an adolescent involves trying things out, testing your parents, and going a bit too far. Parents need to give their children some leeway, but at the same time recognize that all behaviour means something.

There may be times in your teenager's life when your concerns go beyond the everyday worries and you feel out of your depth. It makes sense for you to get advice and support for yourself, even if you are just checking things out.

Problems to get help with include:

- Sleep - has trouble falling or staying asleep, or complains of restlessness, early waking
- Ongoing moodiness - is tired, grumpy, irritable, tearful or upset most of the time
- Feeling hopeless – like nothing can help
- Restlessness, keyed-up or on edge
- Feeling panicky, or overly anxious all the time
- Feeling flat - losing interest in things they used to enjoy and trouble starting and completing projects
- Lack of concentration - easily distracted
- Becoming withdrawn and avoiding friends
- Refusing to eat or eating a lot, and either losing or gaining weight quickly
- Persistently not wanting to go to school - perhaps physically feeling bad, with unexplained aches and pains.

Five of these for TWO weeks or ongoing

If your child is behaving unsafely or has thoughts of self-harm and/or suicide you should seek professional help immediately.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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