

# Parent of a Teenager? Read This

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## TESTING THE WATERS

Suddenly your once charming child is slamming doors, and telling you to "get off my back!" The teenage years have arrived. 'Hormones' and peer pressure reign supreme.

Adolescence can be a frustrating time - bodies changing, insecurity, bravado. One minute they're 14 going on 30, the next they are 3, but before you swap your teenagers for pet turtles, read on.

## PARENTS ARE IMPORTANT

The good news is that parents are extremely important to their teenage children. In fact young people are influenced by parents - what we do and say makes a difference to how they act. For example, research shows that teenagers are 7 times less likely to smoke if their parents disapprove strongly.

Our teenagers need us - we give them standards, limits, security, consistency and love. When they get into difficulties, as most young people do at some time or other, we are there to bail them out, dust them off and let them try again. They'll make mistakes and learn from them.

## PARENTS CAN HELP

The bottom line is that we are parents with rights and responsibilities for our children. We must follow our intuition and use common sense to keep our children safe regardless of what anyone else tells us. Parents seeking advice are sometimes told that their teenagers are now 'grown-up' and that parents can do nothing. This isn't true. Start with a few basic steps - try to:

- find a quiet time to talk with teenagers about how things are going - not after a row or as they are going out or it won't work. Sit down together; give them a chance to talk. Don't make it formal - this isn't the Spanish Inquisition. Do listen. It is worth the effort to find out their viewpoints and concerns.
- encourage your teenager to talk to other trusted adults such as teachers, aunts, uncles.
- grandparents or family friends.

- sometimes kids just don't want to discuss things with parents! That's normal.
- notice when they do something right.
- ensure that they know how to keep safe. Teenagers take risks and think they are invincible but we know they're not. Suggest that they:
  1. know what to do if they miss their lift home. Tell them to ring you (or a friend or neighbour) *no matter what the hour* and you will arrange for them to get home safely. Better that than a walk home in the dark.
  2. know the number of a friend or a local taxi service as a back-up.
  3. carry change for the phone and a phone card or a phone charge card - these are programmed for your number only, but watch out for the bills!
  4. come home with friends at night - never alone. Take a route that is likely to be busy - not isolated.
  5. ring if they are going to be late.
  6. arrange a secret Code with you so they can ring if they need help. For example, they call and say "Has Lisa rung?" That is your cue to ring back in a few minutes and arrange to collect them.
  7. sit on the lower deck of double deck buses late at night or near the guard on the underground.
  8. **never, never** get in a car with a driver who is drunk.
  9. **never, never** hitchhike.
- stand up as a parent and don't be afraid to say No. Let your child use you as an excuse to keep out of trouble
- "My (terrible) parents won't let me" will elicit sympathy from friends and a secret sigh of relief from your child in dangerous situations. Keep your standards - help them set their limits.
- remind yourself that when they blunder, it's probably not your fault. Teenagers will explore, make mistakes and gain their independence. Just think of all the mistakes we made!
- remember that your teenager still loves and needs you, but might not be able to show it just now. Don't take things personally. It *is* a phase. It does get better!
- show an interest in what they do, but don't try to be their best friend - give them space and privacy as long as they aren't being self-destructive.

- be tolerant. Teenage humour seems to include burping loudly, passing wind, screeching in public, telling horrible sick jokes all while listening to a personal stereo. Charming! Try to ignore small things - they'll outgrow most. Save your energy for issues which really matter.
- be understanding and supportive when they feel isolated from the 'in crowd'. It is difficult to be different if they have other interests or if everyone else is smoking or taking drugs.
- explain *in advance* the consequences which will follow if they do something wrong. Then follow-through.
- be flexible. Let's say a teenager comes home drunk and is sick all night. Maybe the consequences of this are a better lesson than anything you could do!
- use humour as much as possible .it will save your sanity. (Burp back at them!)
- find time to eat around the table and to celebrate special occasions as a family. Teenagers will get to know adults on a more equal level. Don't make them talk if they don't want to - they'll listen and learn.
- don't be fooled by the 'everyone else does it' ploy .they probably don't!
- talk about the dangers of unchaperoned parties . gatecrashing is a big problem and can lead to a trashed house or flat. If teenagers get caught up in this, they could use the Code (above) to ring you.
- keep up-to-date about things like drugs. Know how to treat an overdose, *just in case*.
- get advice *and support* from family, friends, GP, teachers and anyone else who might help. Being a parent does not mean we have to do everything on our own.

## WHEN TO TAKE STRONGER ACTION

Some teenagers sail through these years with no difficulties, others cannot handle what's happening and need our intervention. We may be the only ones who care enough to do this. Watch out for warning signs or completely inappropriate behaviour. Take action if they:

- become very secretive beyond a normal need for privacy - could indicate drug or alcohol abuse.
- are always depressed. Everyone gets depressed now and again, but constant depression needs help.
- suddenly change their school performance - could be caused by bullying or a 'bad' crowd.
- are extremely hostile and violent.
- are abusing alcohol, gambling, taking drugs.
- stay out all night, constantly run away, truant or refuse to go to school.
- are under the age of 16 and having a sexual relationship with an older person.

## WHAT TO DO FIRST

- Find out what is causing the problem. Ask direct questions and tell them you want to understand and help. Don't overreact yet - it may be a one-off.
- Be clear about your standards - show that you disapprove of inappropriate behaviour.
- Seek help from your GP - there may be a physical cause or you may request a counselling referral.
- Contact the school or Help Organizations listed below.
- You will usually be able to sort things out by stepping in and taking a strong stand as a parent. Your teenager will be relieved though he or she might not show it.

## MORE SERIOUS?

If the problem seems to be very serious and you feel out of your depth, then you do have some other options:

- Be decisive, take charge and find help.
- Contact the Child and Family Consultation Service, either directly or through your GP, social services, the school.
- Contact the police, social services or your Local Education Authority - see local directory.

- Seek legal advice. You can resort to the courts, but this is rarely necessary.

## REMEMBER

- Parents are legally responsible for their children until they reach the age of 18.
- Parents cannot *fix* everything. We can support our children, but sometimes they need to experience the consequences of their actions.
- Most teenagers experiment. They get drunk, come in late, try smoking and do dumb things. Many of us did the same, had some fun, took a few risks..., and learned. That's why we can give good advice, but in the long run it is the example we set and our ability to communicate that will most help our children.
- Tell your teenagers often that you love them and are proud of them - they may seem to shrug it off, but they need to know it now more than ever. We need to boost their self-esteem, not tear them down. They may appear outwardly to be confident, but inside they still need our approval and love.

## HELP AND ADVICE FOR PARENTS :-

The following organisations may be able to offer additional help. Please visit our web site, [www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk), and go to the *Links* section for further details

Parentline Plus	
Gamblers Anonymous	
Alcoholics Anonymous	
The National Drugs Helpline	0800 776600
Samaritans	08457 909090
Youth Access	020 8772 9900
Children's Legal Centre	01206 873820
Advisory Council for Education	020 7354 8321
Education Otherwise	0870 730 0074

## FREE BOOKLETS

For **free booklets** about child protection, bullying or child abuse, send a large SAE to:  
KIDSCAPE, 2 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0DH,  
tel.: 020 7730 3300.

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