

Tips for parents of teenagers

It is difficult for us to realise that children have developed into young adults and to change our behaviour accordingly. Adolescents are coping with a number of conflicting pressures, success at school/exams, finding an adult identity, maintaining peer relationships, developing sexuality. It is normal for adolescents to push against the boundaries that are set, as they want to take control of themselves and their lives. Adolescents have strong emotional needs however, and the conflicting pressures make it even more important that they feel secure in their usual/known environments, e.g. school/home.

Although we can explain difficult adolescent behaviours by looking at external and internal conflicts, this is not a reason for condoning inappropriate behaviours. Adolescents need the boundaries we set for them in order for them to feel safe. It is important however that they are moving towards self-management and setting their own boundaries as well. Negotiation and compromise are therefore important aspects of relationships between adults and adolescents.

Adolescents are very concerned about "fairness" so it is important to be consistent in our responses and to discuss our reasons for the limits we are imposing. Young peoples' feelings of needing to "belong" to a group are very strong at this stage. They will need to belong to a group of friends but also need to feel they belong at home.

Teenagers often give us the impression that their group of friends is more important than their families. This is an outward expression of the conflict of becoming independent whilst still needing emotional support and guidance. It is equally important at this stage that young people know that they are loved and cared for at home.

Teenagers are good at pushing our emotional buttons. If we get upset and over-emotional it is more difficult for us to think effectively and solve problems calmly. Don't be tempted to call names or threaten them with leaving home. Getting angry does not help us solve the problem, or help our relationships, and may lead to punishments that are out of proportion. Young people will learn effective ways of resolving conflicts by example as well as by negotiation.

Living with teenagers can be a difficult and stressful time. We are also having to make the transition from our role as full-time parents to people who have their own lives to lead. This in itself can be a difficult transition time for parents. It is important that we take care of ourselves if we are to be good role models for our children and help them to learn effective ways of expressing their angry feelings.



Do:

- Listen to their point of view
- Value their point of view even when you do not agree with it
- Respond calmly when explaining your point of view
- Have clear rules, rewards and sanctions
- Make boundaries explicit and clear
- Explain the reasons for your rules
- Negotiate rules together where possible and safe – but be clear when negotiation is not an option
- Aim for a win/win solution
- Wait until you are both calm to discuss things
- Avoid disciplining in anger
- Avoid making promises/threats that you cannot carry out
- Aim to enforce rules consistently

Think about:

- Although angry outbursts may be directed at you personally, it is helpful to de-personalise them by understanding that you are being asked to provide a boundary. The conflict is probably not between two people but between the young person and authority
- A major source of conflict between people is poor communication – misunderstanding about intentions, motives, etc., can affect the way we respond. It is important to check that we have understood the young person's point of view and that they have understood ours
- It is very easy to think they must know what you are thinking or feeling, particularly if you know someone well. It is often necessary to be explicit however, and not make the mistake of thinking that they must know what you mean without checking it out.
- It is important to check that there are no extra stresses contributing to their behaviour, e.g. bullying, school work, peer pressure.
- Adolescents are experts at bringing red herrings into an argument! We may find ourselves being taken down an irrelevant track rather than continuing with the request in hand. It may be helpful to employ the broken record technique:

"Would you tidy your room before you go out please?"

"I did it yesterday"

"Would you tidy your room before you go out please?"

"You haven't asked to tidy their room!"

"I am asking you to tidy your room before you go out

It is very tempting for us to get drawn into a discussion about other issues rather than staying on track. When you are being appropriately assertive, most young people will respond, albeit grudgingly!

- Learning to express strong feelings effectively now, will be good grounding for adult life

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GUILDFORD ROAD | CHERTSEY | SURREY KT16 9BN

t: 01932 574900 f: 01932 574901 e: office@swps.org.uk w: www.swps.org.uk

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