



Living with teens

Parenting SA
Parent Easy Guide **38**

Adolescence can be a challenging time for young people and their families. It is a time when they are trying to find their place in the world. Your teenager is going through rapid physical and emotional changes and parents and teenagers must both make changes in their relationships to adjust to this new stage. They are often self-conscious and easily embarrassed. Their bravado appearance and 'know-all' attitude can mask their fragility.

Teenagers go backwards and forwards between wanting freedom and yet still needing the security of the family. Parents want their children to grow to happy independence, yet fear for their safety as they watch them try their wings. Parents have to cope with the fact that the dreams they have had for their children may not come true - for teenagers have their own dreams. Teenagers have to cope with their parents who often don't let them do the things they so much want to do. A good relationship with your teenager will help you both to weather the ups and downs.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your child's sex.*

Living together

Raising teenagers and helping them toward maturity requires more than loving care and limit setting. Teenagers can be very persistent and demanding and parents can feel worn down and uncertain at times. Growing up involves tension and often your teenager may go through periods of emotional ups and downs.

These years require parents to:

- know how to really listen
- tolerate differences
- have a willingness to give opportunities to try again after mistakes.

It makes a difference when parents and teenagers learn to deal with disagreements. While hard to do, try to understand each other's point of view and accept the fact that each has a right to their viewpoint (without necessarily agreeing).

Work out together and be clear about family rules and consequences when things are calm, not in the middle of a crisis. Things such as use of mobile phones, computers, internet, cars, driving with others, are more likely to work if teenagers feel they have some say in the rules and consequences. It is much easier for a parent to say "We agreed on this" when things break down.

Sometimes parents are reluctant to say 'no' for fear their child won't love them or see them as their friend.

Remind yourself you're the 'grown up' and stay confident in your role as a parent.

Often parents feel the imbalance of 'give and take', where they feel they put in all the effort and make all the compromises, while the teenager begrudgingly puts in very little. This is a common experience of parents of teenagers. Trying to put yourself into their shoes may help you to handle these feelings.

Communication

Communication plays such a critical part in these years and makes living together easier or more difficult.

How we talk, how we listen and how we respond has a big impact on our relationship with our teenagers. The words, the tone and the look on our faces can create a feeling of genuine respect or disrespect.

Two questions to ask yourself in every situation:

- *'What is the message my teenager is getting from me right now?'*
- *'How would I feel if another person spoke to me in this way?'*

• Be an approachable parent

It is easy for children to tell parents good news, but difficult and sometimes scary to give parents bad news. It requires great effort from parents to keep emotions under control, not to over-react and to stay 'cool' while hearing the bad news. With this approach you are more likely to know what is happening in your teenager's life.

- **Listen**

Young people need to bounce ideas off others or test their opinions to work out what they really think. Having family and friends who are good listeners and who are non-judgemental helps keep communication open.

When young people talk to parents they often get advice, reassurance or a sermon before they have had a chance to really say what they want to say. This not only breaks down communication, it also stops teenagers finding their own ways to deal with problems...and isn't this what we aim to teach our teenagers?

The most helpful responses are ones that show interest and open the way for them to talk on, such as:

- "How come?"
- "You must have felt..."
- "That sounds exciting or scary..."

Allow for silences - without jumping in to fill the space.

- **Nagging**

Many disagreements with teenagers stem from parents nagging. Most parents feel that one little reminder doesn't hurt - and might be helpful. To most teenagers they get the message that the parent doesn't trust them to remember or wants to control them eg so they dress or behave the way the parent wants. Nagging usually results in sullenness, resistance to obey, or arguments.

Learning to tolerate minor irritations and stand firm on serious issues can improve relationships. Sometimes the temptation to nag is lessened by asking "Is this for my teenager's good or mine?" and "What harm is done if I let it go?".

On important things focus on your feelings and the way you experienced what happened - rather than blaming your teenager. Be clear about what you expect and what you think is fair and work out together about how both of you can make it better.

Conflict

A very normal part of preparing for 'breaking away' and moving into adulthood is to challenge. Conflict arises over such things as freedom, time limits, friends, sexual freedom, activities and having their own point of view (which is always right!). Usually the response is an emotional one (by both teenagers and parents) which takes away from the real dilemma. Shouting matches and exchanges of ridicule only hurt and drain us of energy.

When things are quieter is the best time to rethink the 'rules' and see if they are still appropriate as your teenager grows older and more responsible.

- Temper your reactions to negative comments. Weigh up the issue - "Is it really important to 'win' this battle?" Sometimes it is wiser to let teenagers 'win' the small issues because you have to stand firm on the big ones.
- It is important to say you are hurt when your teenager says or does something that is hurtful to you, (but don't become defensive or attack back).
- It is just as important for parents to admit when they are wrong, without fuss or excuse. This also sets a good example and sends the message that you don't see yourself as always right or perfect (which is often what teenagers think their parents think!).

Anger

Anger is always a response to another feeling such as feeling hurt, frustrated or frightened.

This very natural and powerful emotion causes many parents to feel uncomfortable and have difficulty when their children become angry. Often parents themselves have difficulty dealing with their own feelings of anger.

From the early years many children are made to feel guilty for expressing anger and grow up convinced that to be angry is to be bad.

Instead of trying to stifle anger, it is important to show children how to manage this very strong emotion without hurting or damaging themselves and those around them. The first step is for parents to model the sort of behaviour they want to see from their children.

A good relationship

A good relationship between you and your teenager is a protective factor against your teenager being manipulated, duped or seduced by outside influences. What are the ingredients of this relationship?

- Respect
- Patience
- Listening and exploring rather than telling
- Negotiation
- Spending time on activities that your teenager likes
- Covering safety issues such as cars, drinking.

Praise and criticism

Praise that looks at your teenager's personality or character can be unhelpful and create anxiety. It can be difficult for a teenager to hear that he is great, clever or generous and puts him under pressure to live up to the impossible "How can I always be that?".

Praise that describes efforts, accomplishments and feelings is much more helpful and safe. For example, a teenager who has done a great job in cleaning up the garden can feel motivated and inspired to do more when he hears his parent say something like *"What a job! It's all cleaned up, the weeds are gone, the lawn's been mowed and fertilized...it looks like a garden now. In one day you've made it look so different – it must have been hard work for you. Thank you."*

This describes his efforts, what he has achieved and how you feel about it.

Criticisms usually spark an outburst and can become so heated that parents and teenager lose sight of each other's point of view. When teenagers get messages about their inadequacies, they usually become defensive and resistant to change.

Making comparisons when we are angry or dissatisfied sends the message *"You are not good enough"*. When parents say *"When I was your age..."* it can give the message *"Why can't you be like me?"* and ends up making teenagers feel angry and hopeless. Express your feelings openly and honestly but avoid comparisons.

Be clear about behaviours that are acceptable in your family, but emphasize the unique talents, abilities and the individuality of your teenager.

What parents can do

Spend time with your teenager

This is often hard to arrange as young people usually want to spend a lot of time with their friends. You may have to be very flexible in order to make sure it happens. Here are some suggestions for special times.

- Mealtimes - if the family eats together, at least on some occasions you can share what happened in your day, what's the latest news, their ideas and interests.
- Drive them when they need to be dropped off. Offering to drive gives you a good opportunity for time together. Teenagers often talk more easily when not looking at you face to face.
- Bedtime. A visit to their bedroom for a casual chat can work for you both.
- Suggest a coffee or milkshake (probably at a cafe where their friends don't usually go - teenagers are often embarrassed if their friends see that they are out with a parent).

It isn't easy to find special times but if you can manage it's worth it.

Respect their privacy

All young people need reasonable privacy and 'space' - and even some secrets from parents. (This is not necessarily bad, however what those secrets are is significant.)

- Give them some space of their own. Ask their permission to enter their room.
- Don't go through their diaries or drawers in their absence.
- Don't pry for information except where it is important for you to know to make sure they are safe. For example, it is okay to ask teenagers to let you know where they will be when they are not at home. A key question to your teenager going out is - *"What are you going to do to make sure that I don't need to worry about you?"*
- Broadband in a room with a computer without monitoring is not appropriate for most teens, especially boys who are vulnerable to pornography and all teens who tend to time waste.
- Responsibility should increase with age. For example, 14 year olds need monitoring but 18 year olds should have lots more freedom and privacy.

Take an interest in their interests - and share yours

- Try really listening to some of their music and then talk about the words of songs you like best.
- Watch their sport or activities - don't coach them (unless you are the official coach), but be supportive.
- Watch their favourite TV shows with them sometimes - without being too critical.
- Try sharing something about your work or your interests as you would with an adult friend.
- Share something about your own adolescence (without preaching!) and share a laugh with them about how things have changed.
- Take them to a movie that you would both like (or go to one of theirs) and ask what they liked and didn't like about it.
- Get to know their friends - know their names and what they're interested in. Encourage them to bring them home and show some interest in what they have to say.



Show your love for them

Love needs to be continually shown in order to be felt.

- Tell your teenagers often that you love them (when the time seems right).
- Show your love by touching and hugging (teenagers who say they are too old for hugs will often accept a quick hug before they are fully awake in the mornings, or will like to have their aches massaged after sport).
- Buy their favourite food sometimes.
- Buy something on a shopping trip that says *"I was thinking about you"*.
- Go out of your way to help them with special projects.
- Pick them up from outings on the other side of town.
- Leave a note on their pillow telling them that you felt proud of something they have done or that you love them (for no particular reason).

Make special memories

Doing special things together can have lasting effects.

- Take one of your teenager's friends on holiday with you.
- Take the family to a special show you would not usually go to.
- Create traditions that are special to your family, eg a special way that you always celebrate birthdays.
- Make sure that your teenager feels a part of the wider family, eg by sharing family occasions. (Many teenagers groan about these for a while but they are also part of their security).
- Make a wall hanging of photographs of family and friends, over their childhood and growing up years.

Have faith in them

- Let them know they are special.
- Ask their advice about something they know a lot about, eg how to program the video.
- Keep a scrapbook of their special achievements.
- If they make mistakes have faith that they will do better next time.

Be there for them

No matter how independent they are, or may appear, they need always to have a sense that you will be there for them - even when you don't see 'eye to eye'.

Take care of yourself

Giving teenagers a sense of some control in their lives is important for them - and having control of things about safety and health is important to you. Teenagers are often pleased to see parents taking care of their own needs - it sets a good example.

Reminders

- **Investing in time will pay back in terms of your teenager's behaviour and self-esteem and your relationship.**
- **Teenagers need to know that you love them and believe in them, despite how much they might ignore or make fun of your efforts.**
- **They need ongoing attention.**
- **Don't confuse your teenager's 'wanting her own way' or 'testing limits' with 'her rights'.**
- **Don't compare your teenager to others, or to yourself as a teenager.**
- **Remember to keep their confidences (even if they don't always keep yours!).**
- **Take some time out for yourself. Start thinking about your dreams for yourself when your children grow up.**
- **Having a relationship which allows differences to be expressed without fear is a good and healthy one.**
- **Remember that no parent is perfect and that perfect parents would be very hard to live with.**

Want more information?

Parenting SA - www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parenting, child and youth health information - www.cyh.com

Young Media Australia - www.youngmedia.org.au

Australian reports on children and internet
www.aba.gov.au/newspubs/internet/shtml

Parent Easy Guides (PEGs):

What about parents' rights?

Discipline (teens)

Abuse to parents

Teenagers and drugs

Teenage parties

Talking sex with teens

Teenagers and food

The internet

Smoking and your family

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Parent Helpline
1300 364 100



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