

INCLUDES  
A Teenager's  
Guide to Parents

The Parenting for Life Series Presents:

# Straight Talk About Teens

Realistic ideas and advice for  
parents of older teenagers



THE PSYCHOLOGY  
FOUNDATION  
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LA FONDATION  
DE PSYCHOLOGIE  
DU CANADA



The Parenting for Life Series Presents:

# Straight Talk About Teens

*Straight Talk About Teens* is the seventh in a series of booklets from the Parenting for Life education program. Parenting for Life (PFL) is an award-winning, non-profit, education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. This unique initiative includes booklets and posters prepared by Canada's top parenting writers in collaboration with The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

*Straight Talk About Teens* was written by John Hoffman and edited by Holly Bennett, incorporating ideas and materials contributed by Dr. Ester Cole, Chair of PFL, and PFL committee members Dr. Robin Alter, Dr. Maria Kokai, Ann McCoy, Bonnie Mok, Suzanne Park and Kerri Richards, along with Cindy Andrew. The author wishes to thank the many teenagers whose ideas and feedback aided the creation of this booklet.

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- Hands-on Dad: A Guide for New Fathers
- Let's Play! A Child's Road to Learning
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# First Words

“What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents...Their morals are decaying.”

This quote could have appeared in yesterday’s newspaper, but it’s actually from the Greek philosopher Plato. In other words, if raising teenagers feels like a struggle at times, you are not alone. Many others, including your own parents, have had similar experiences.

Adolescence is a time when children want more independence and question or challenge authority, some more so than others.

For certain families, the teen stage can be quite difficult because of their children’s social and emotional needs or problems which in some cases are becoming more challenging than in previous generations.

On the other hand, some parents have relatively few difficulties and find the teen years mostly interesting and enjoyable. Parents from different cultures and life experiences can have varying expectations about the independence teenagers should have and the responsibilities they should assume.

Given this diversity, a booklet like this can’t reflect all of the problems, frustrations and joys that all parents experience while raising teenagers. We concentrate primarily on families who need extra support, although other parents may find this booklet reassuring because it shows them they are on the right track.

Overall, the goal is to help you understand your kids better, and to offer some useful ideas about how to talk to them, listen to them and continue to



be a positive influence as they move towards adulthood.

Speaking of listening. We did a lot of listening to young people during the development of this booklet and we looked at the findings of several surveys of teenagers. Some of their ideas displayed a lot of wisdom, and made it into this booklet

We've also included a section addressed to young people themselves. We'd like to help teenagers understand and communicate with their parents a little better too.

# Straight Talk About Teens

Realistic ideas and advice for parents of older teenagers

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# What Makes Teens Tick?

A guide to adolescent development





*Cayley has what grownups call a lot of “attitude.” She fights with her mom, comes home late, “parties” most weekends and has had to go to summer school to make up failed courses. Cayley’s mother is really worried but is thankful that she and her daughter can still talk at times. This gives her hope that she may eventually be able to get Cayley moving in a more positive direction.*



*The parents of Young-Joon’s friends all wish their boys could be more like him. Only 17, this son of Korean immigrants is already determined to become a doctor. He studies hard so he’ll have the marks to get into medical school and he works part-time to save money for university. He drinks with his friends sometimes, but he’s discreet and his family doesn’t know about it. He’s also pretty good about letting his parents know where he is and when he’ll be home.*



*Jordan spends hours skateboarding with his buddies every day. The rest of the time he’s usually playing video or computer games. School is not Jordan’s priority. He attends classes regularly, but puts little effort into school work and barely passes most courses. His parents wonder if he smokes pot, but he denies it and they’re not really sure. They just hope he stays out of big trouble and that he’ll settle down in a few years.*



*Mia studies hard, plays in the school band and has never been in trouble. She doesn’t go to parties or shows because her parents won’t allow it. She’s obedient and polite with her parents, but they have no idea how unhappy she is about their strict rules. She wishes they’d be satisfied with her 77 average and stop demanding that she get 90s.*

These young people are all typical in their own way. And teenagers come in other variations of “normal” as well. But in spite of this diversity, today’s teenagers all have certain things in common.



### **I'm not a child anymore**

Each in their own way, all adolescents are turning their back on childhood and moving towards adulthood. We might like to think that means they are becoming more responsible and cooperative, and making wiser choices. And, to some extent, that's true. But moving towards adulthood and independence also means pushing away from parental control and influence. That leads to the classic adolescent behaviours that challenge us: questioning authority, sneaking around behind parents' backs and getting into risky behaviours.

### **But I'm still a kid**

Even as teenagers inch towards adulthood, they go out of their way to show us that they are still young — that is, not like us. That's why each generation of young people seems driven to have its own culture — new and sometimes provocative music, hair and clothing styles. If adults don't like it, so much the better. Obviously some adolescents take this to greater extremes than others, but alternative youth culture is a normal and fascinating part of human development.

# Your Child's Brain on Adolescence

Teenagers do not behave the way they do just to drive us crazy. (Well, maybe sometimes.) Obviously they are going through important stages of physical and emotional growth. In fact, much of what makes teens tick is directly linked to their brain development.

## **Still a lot of developing to do**

The human brain reaches adult size in early adolescence, but it is still definitely a work in progress, with brain development and maturation continuing until age 30. Much of this maturing takes place in parts of the brain involved in attention, motivation and risk-taking. Interesting, isn't it, that many of the concerns parents have about teenage behaviour fall into these three areas?

## **Attention**

*"How many times do I have to tell you!?"*

The part of the brain that helps us pay attention is called the prefrontal cortex. It is also highly involved in planning and decision-making. Unfortunately for parents and teachers, this is one of the last parts of the brain to mature, with lots of change taking place during the teen years. It's not that 15-year-olds can't pay attention. In fact, they often pay attention very well to things that interest them. But their brains are not so great at helping them pay attention when it's hard to do so, for example, concentrating on homework, or listening to our instructions when they have "really important" text messages to read.

## **Motivation**

*"Can I do it tomorrow?"*

Researchers compared brain activity in adults and teenagers working on tasks that involve getting a reward. The parts of the brain that help people to motivate themselves were much less active in teenagers. The differences were even greater when the reward was a long-term reward. In other words, teen brains can be hard to motivate and they are oriented towards short-term rewards. That may be why the short-term "benefit" of not cleaning up her room is so much more attractive to your daughter than the long-term benefit of being able to find something next week because her room is tidy.

## Risk

*“Don’t worry. I can handle it.”*

Having brains wired to focus on short-term rewards also helps explain risk-taking in teenagers. When faced with a choice between short-term “gain” — the fun of getting drunk or high, for example — and the longer-term, and less certain, risk of getting caught, teens will often go for excitement. For them “the future” is tomorrow, while for parents the future is long term. Young people can also be unrealistically optimistic about their ability to handle risk. Some deal with risk more cautiously and sensibly than others, but the “quest for zest” is normal at this age. We won’t be able to protect our kids from all perils, but can help them develop knowledge and strategies to help them navigate the challenges and risks they will encounter. More about that in Chapter 5.

## Lots of variations

The confusing thing is that brain development, and its effect on behaviour, can vary greatly from one child to the next. Some 16-year-olds display impressive maturity, judgment, problem-solving skills and moral judgment. Others will seem self-centered, with poor judgment and little awareness of the consequences of their actions. Teenagers often show maturity in some areas of their lives and a lack of maturity in others.

## Wait! It’s not all bad!

Between the ages of 14 and 19, young people actually make big advances in their ability to reason, think in abstract terms, assess risks, communicate with adults and manage their emotions.





# The Teen Sleep Cycle

Having trouble getting your teen out of bed in the morning? Not only is this normal, it's biologically "correct." The adolescent internal "sleep/awake clock" actually encourages teenagers to stay up late and get up late. This, of course, is out of synch with school schedules. Thus, most teenagers are chronically short of sleep on school days.

The problem is that teens need lots of sleep. Experts say that 16-year-olds actually need more sleep than 12-year-olds. But according to two surveys of Ontario teenagers, about three out of five get less than the 8.5 - 9 hours per night of sleep

they need. Four out of five teens say they are "really sleepy" between 9 and 10 a.m. most days. Ironically, only two out of five say they are really sleepy at midnight.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers for parents. Limiting caffeine and late evening use of "video screen entertainment" like TV and computer gaming (which tend to be over-stimulating) may help a little. But until school schedules change, which some experts advocate (don't hold your breath), the best thing parents can do is let teenagers sleep in on weekends and holidays. They really need that morning sleep.

So if that 15-year-old with his pants halfway down his butt seems scattered and disorganized at times, it gets better. However, brain development is a very gradual process that includes backward as well as forward steps. Your job as a parent is not to make that brain development happen but to work with it, and to support your child's natural development with your guidance, love and protection.

If you want to read more about adolescent brain development, check out <http://teenmentalhealth.org/index.php/understanding/the-teen-brain/>.

# What Matters To Teens

Friends and freedom



Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has been surveying Canadian youth since the 1980s. Every time he asks teenagers what is most important to them, friendship and freedom top the list.

### What's very important to today's teenagers



Friendship 86%



Freedom 85%



*What your parents think of you 48%*



Money 44%



Spirituality 27%

However, don't jump to the conclusion that you are irrelevant to your child (apart from being a handy source of food, shelter, computers, money, help with projects and transportation!).



- Three-quarters of teens rate their parents as a source of enjoyment in their lives (Mind you, parents rate lower than friends, music, the Internet and iPods).



- A whopping 92% said that how they were brought up is a big influence in their life.

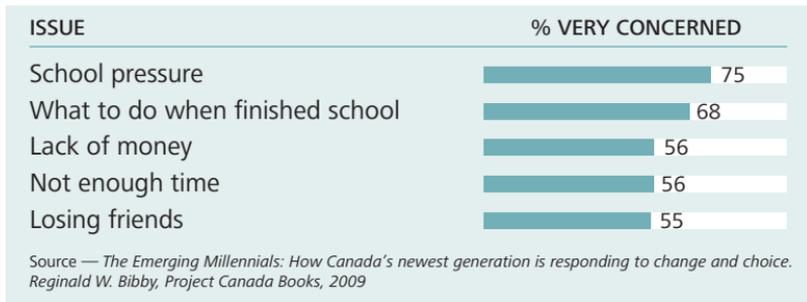


- Less than 7% say family is not important.

So parents are actually important to teenagers. But, given the very high value they place on freedom, it's no wonder that one day you're thinking, "This kid needs a lot of my guidance and support," and the next day you realize, "There are whole aspects of her life I know almost nothing about."

## What teenagers worry about

Like adults, teenagers have various personal concerns — fitting in, how they look, not having enough money. But as the following table shows, the two biggest concerns expressed by teens in Dr. Bibby’s national survey both have to do with education.



## Other issues

The 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey found:



- 14% of teenagers report not being heterosexual or being uncertain about their sexual orientation



- 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys say they had deliberately self-harmed (e.g. cut themselves) at least once



- 18% of 17 and 18-year-old teens say they experience “extreme stress” (12% of 14-year-olds report extreme stress)



### **Who do they turn to?**

We might like to think that our kids will come to us with their problems. However, peers are often an important source of support when teens are troubled. Dr. Bibby reports that 35% of teenagers say they turn to family first for help with serious problems. Almost as many (31%) say they rely on friends first and foremost.

One concern is that a troubling minority of youth (25%) said they could not seek support from adults in their family and about 12% said they had been in need of mental health services at had some point but had not attempted to access these services (BC Adolescent Health Survey).

This tells us that we cannot assume teens will tell us or seek help when they are having serious problems. Some problems may be hidden for awhile before we become aware of them. And we may have to work hard at staying in touch with teens so we can detect the changes in mood or daily habits which can be the first clues that something is wrong.

## Most teens feel good about themselves

In spite of the problems and challenges they face, three-quarters of Canadian teens score very high (53%) or high (22%) on Dr. Bibby's "Self-Image Index." Over 90% of teenagers see themselves as well-liked, good people, with a number of positive qualities. That optimism and positive energy helps them to be resilient as they go through the tumultuous teen years. (For more information on resilience, check out Kids Can Cope, from our Parenting for Life series, available via: [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org))

## What does this all mean for parents?

Let's start with two quotes from teens interviewed for this booklet. They sum up the feelings of many teenagers the author spoke with.



*"Have confidence in the foundation you laid when your kids were younger."* Tyler, aged 16



*"You have to be confident in the way you raised your child, that you raised them to be sensible enough to not do something stupid like get smashed and wind up in a ditch somewhere."*  
Madison, grade 11 student

They seem to be saying, "Lay off, your job is done (at least until I need a ride to Ashley's house)." And they make a good point. Some of the most important parts of raising a teen actually happen during early childhood. We do have to let adolescents go "out in the world" to manage on their own. But they still need us. The challenge is that it's hard to figure out how to provide parental guidance and support when it seems like our control and influence are slipping away.

## Control? Or influence?

*Marcus heard the car pull up in the driveway. "Crap!" He dashed to the kitchen and started loading the dishwasher. Marcus had been told to have the kitchen cleaned up and a load of dishes done when his parents arrived home. His father came in. "Marcus! I can't make dinner when the kitchen is a mess!" Marcus made excuses. "I meant to do it earlier, honest, but then Gabby called..." Dad cut Marcus off. "You had two hours to do this!" The lecture began.*

We all sympathize with this father. Marcus could have and should have done his chore much earlier. But should Dad assume that Marcus was disregarding his instructions? Maybe not. Even if he didn't do the clean up exactly when his father wanted him to, Marcus did eventually get it done. The fact that he scrambled to get going when he heard the car in the driveway shows that Marcus was trying to do what his parents had asked. So even though Dad can't exert the full control he might like, he is still getting through to his son.



In some ways this is the essence of parenting teenagers — learning how to have influence when you have less. The two biggest mistakes we can make are, on one hand, trying to control them in ways that are either impossible or will just push them away, or on the other hand, giving up and saying, "Well, he's 17 now. He's going to do what he's going to do whether I want him to or not." Our job is to find a way to navigate teenagers' quest for freedom and less adult control while still finding ways to provide the support and guidance they often still need.

## How Teenagers Affect Parents

Children enter their older teen years at about the same time when adults feel like their lives should be getting more stable. We've gotten through sleepless nights, the terrible twos," kindergarten and letting kids walk down the street by themselves. We think we know what we're doing. Then wham!

Along comes this teenager who makes you question what you really know about raising children. What's more, the child we thought we knew so well for so long may have changed radically.

*When Kyla was little she was Daddy's girl. She loved to ride on her father's shoulders, and loved it when he tickled her. As Kyla approached puberty, Jim wasn't sure if he should be playing tickling games anymore. Then Kyla became less affectionate and more argumentative. She started having social problems at school and often seemed sullen and irritable at home. When Jim and Kyla did talk the words were often angry. "I want my little girl back," he said.*

You know what? That little girl is not coming back. Kyla has changed. But she still needs her dad's love and support, even if it seems like she doesn't seem to want it and even if he finds her hard to like at times. If Jim wants to be a positive influence in his daughter's life he needs to say goodbye to his "little girl" and get to know the young woman she is becoming.

Further challenges to our adult thinking come when our child's experience of adolescence is very different from our own.

When Ram was growing up in India in the 1970s, young people did not have a lot of choices. Almost all the courses they took in school were compulsory, and many teenagers spent non-school hours at part-time jobs, working in the family business or doing housework and looking after younger siblings at home.

He feels that his son has too much free time and it seems like it's far too easy for Canadian teenagers to get drugs and alcohol. Ram is not comfortable with his daughter going on overnight school trips, even though most of the other kids attend these events.



Ram may have to work harder than some parents to relate to his children's experience of adolescence and to understand why they want so badly to do these things that he is so uncomfortable with.

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One way or another, parenting teenagers forces us to learn, grow, and see our children differently. Exactly how parents deal with these challenges will vary depending on their values, how they themselves were raised and what sort of person their teenager is.

Perhaps the ideal way to handle the teen years is to approach them with curiosity. Who is this person my child is becoming? How can I get to know her better so I can continue to be part of her life?

# Keep Talking

## Communicating with Teenagers



No matter what you might have heard, talking with young people is not always a struggle. Sometimes it's interesting and fun. But yes, effective communication with adolescents can be challenging, and getting it right is important. If we want to influence our teenaged children, we have to be able to talk to them, hear them and get them to talk to us. Here's a guide to what helps — and what doesn't.

## What doesn't help

### » BEING NEGATIVE

Here's the short list of communication stoppers, direct from the mouths of teenagers: yelling, lecturing, anger, judgment and insults. As one grade 11 student said, "If you insult and yell at your kids, it just drives them away."

No surprises there. You might be thinking, "Of course, I don't call my kids names!" Perhaps, but when we tell teenagers they are lazy and irresponsible or say things like, "You're going to be flipping burgers when you're 40 if you don't start studying," they often hear it as name-calling. Some of our "constructive criticism" feels like judgment to them. We think we're giving them detailed information. They call it a lecture.

Yelling is a little different. It is at least as much about expressing anger as it is about conveying information. Parents get angry at their kids. That's OK. Family life can be frustrating and anger is a real and significant human emotion that kids need to learn to deal with as they grow up. Who better to learn from than parents? But anger as an habitual tactic, as opposed to an honest expression of emotion, can get in the way of good back-and-forth communication with teens. It makes them focus on defending themselves (often by dishing our anger right back to us), or escaping from our anger, rather than listening to what we are trying to tell them.

Lecturing, yelling and judgment also have something else in common. They are all types of communicating we try to avoid using with other adults and respond to poorly ourselves. They also model the very behaviours we'd like our teenagers to stop doing.

### » DON'T GET DISTRACTED BY "ATTITUDE"

"Tisha! When are you going to start looking for a part-time job? If you want to go on that school trip, you've got to make some money!"

"Later, Mom!"

"Tisha, I've been trying to talk to you about this for two weeks.

And you always say later. We need to talk right now!"

"Omgod! Get out of my face. I've got things to do!"

"Don't you speak to me like that!"

"Well, don't you talk to me like that!"

"All I did was ask when we could talk!"

"Oh yeah, right!!"



*"I hate it when my parents come at me with all this attitude and then say, 'Don't give me that attitude.'" — Sam, Grade 11 student*

Now the conversation has shifted in a direction Mom didn't really want. It is about Tisha's attitude, rather than looking for a part-time job. If we constantly get dragged into side arguments about tone of voice and backtalk, we allow teens to distract us from the real issue at hand.

Sure, there are times when young people are so verbally aggressive we can't ignore it. But usually it's better to stay focused on your original point. Talk about backtalk another time.

## Communication Helpers

### » FOSTER A GOOD RELATIONSHIP

Almost any positive influence you want to have on your child, including good communication, depends on a good relationship.

Hopefully you built and nurtured this relationship when your children were younger, more dependent, and really looked up to you. Once kids get to be teenagers, maintaining parent-child relationships may become more challenging because teens are pushing us away and spending less time with us.

So try to grab as many of the small opportunities to spend time



together as possible. If there are sports or activities you both enjoy, either as participants or fans, do them together. Eat meals as a family. Take your son or daughter out for a lunch or coffee date. Some parents have great talks with their teens while driving in the car.

Dev's job takes him away from home a lot, and his son Josh has a busy schedule. Some weeks they hardly see each other. That's why Dev usually says yes when Josh wants a ride somewhere. Some of the best conversations they have take place in the car, when it's just the two of them. Their talks aren't always deep. Sometimes they just "shoot the breeze." Car talks help them stay in touch.

### » LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGMENT

As parents we feel it is our job to tell children when they are wrong or when their logic or moral reasoning are faulty. And sure, sometimes we need to challenge teenagers' thoughts or actions.

But who wants to talk to someone who usually responds with criticism? Remember how you felt as a teenager when adults didn't listen to you? It is not always necessary to correct or express an opinion on what teenagers say and do. Reserving judgment some of the time can make them more willing to open up to us.

### » ASK WHAT THEY THINK

Kids hear what we think all the time. Asking teens for their opinions, ideas and advice gives them a clear message that we value and respect their ideas. They may not always respond at great length. But at least they know we're interested.

"I've been seeing a lot of news stories about cyber bullying lately. Do you think that's a problem in your school?"

### » ASK IF THEY WANT ADVICE

Young people are not always receptive to parental wisdom, even when they should be. At other times they just want to work things out on their own, like adults often do. So it can be wise to ask teenagers if they would like our advice before offering it.

"I don't know how I'm going to get all these assignments done," said Yoshi.

"What assignments? When are they due?" said his father.

"Never mind, I'll figure it out," replied the boy.

"OK," said Dad. "But if you want some help making a plan for how to get them all done, I think I could help you."

### » SHOW INTEREST IN THEIR INTERESTS

"I love the new Kanye West song," Michelle beams as she takes off her headphones. Her mother hates rap music.

"So you call that a song, do you?" Mom says. Michelle rolls her eyes and stomps off to her room.

We don't have to share or approve of young people's passionate interests. But we can try to understand them. Even though she dislikes rap, Michelle's mother could have said, "What makes you like Kanye West more than other rappers?" or "He's been a big star for a long time now. How many recordings does he have out?" That might have gotten Michelle talking.

### » BE READY TO LISTEN WHEN THEY ARE READY TO TALK

Don't you find that there are many times when you'd really like to get your teen to open up about something, but he won't say more than a word or two? It happens.

Therefore, when teenagers actually do come to us with something, we'd better make darn sure that we're ready to listen. We need to be open to these opportunities whenever they come up and be willing to focus on what teens want to talk about, rather than their faults or things we want them to do. So watch for signs that your teen is ready to talk and be ready to "open your ears." Who knows when your next chance will come?

Finally, remember you're the adult and your teen is still the kid. As parents, we are still the ones setting the example. That means we have a responsibility to model good communication skills, to try harder, to be more patient, flexible and forgiving and to never give up, no matter how hard it gets.



*"I think my parents might be surprised to know that sometimes I actually do want their help or advice. It's just that I don't always want it." — Anya Grade 11 student*

# Who's The Boss?

Fair and effective discipline with teenagers



Parents from different backgrounds will have varying ideas about how to handle teen discipline issues like curfews, house rules and acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. And some families are dealing with much tougher discipline challenges than others. For one family the big problems might be backtalk and getting Tyler out of bed in the morning, while others are dealing with kids who skip school, stay out until 4 a.m. or get in trouble with the police.

We can't possibly cover all types of discipline problems in this chapter. Our goal is to introduce some key ideas that will help you think about how to respond to the typical, but not extreme, discipline challenges parents face with teenagers.

### **Am I losing my authority?**

Canadian parent educator Judy Arnall advises that since teenagers are in the home stretch to adulthood, parents need to start looking at discipline more in terms of the adult-to-adult way of solving problems: discussion and negotiation, as opposed to power and authority.

However, making more use of discussion and negotiation does not mean that you surrender all parental authority when your child turns 15 or 16. The key to effective discipline with teenagers is finding the right balance between exerting authority when you need to, and discussing and negotiating when it's appropriate and possible.

### **You're still the parent**

Teenagers need to know what we expect of them and they still need parents to set and enforce limits. And some limits are not negotiable. It's not OK, for example, to steal, hurt or mistreat people, drive when impaired, or cheat on an exam. It's important to be firm about these "bottom line" issues and respond when their behaviour is unacceptable.

This is easy to say, but often hard to do. Teenagers can be very good at making our rules and decisions sound unreasonable or making us feel guilty because "all the other parents let their kids do it."

Here are some tips about how to be firm with limits when you need to:

» IF THE ISSUE IS NOT NEGOTIABLE, DON'T NEGOTIATE

State your case in a brief but firm way: "No, you're not going to that party, because I'm not comfortable with the situation and it's my job to make sure you stay safe." If your child argues, listen and respond to legitimate questions, then state your decision again and end the conversation. Don't get trapped into a prolonged argument. The longer your teen keeps you arguing, the more likely you are to second guess yourself.

» ACCEPT THAT YOUR CHILD WILL BE UNHAPPY AND ANGRY WITH YOU SOMETIMES

It's not your job to persuade your teen that you are right, or make sure she is happy with all your decisions. Teens will often do their best to make you feel guilty. They may act as though you've ruined their life. Sympathize with their frustration but be firm. They won't stay mad at you forever.

» DON'T ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO ABUSE OR BROWBEAT YOU

If he becomes abusive, say, "I know you're upset, but I will not be talked to that way." Then walk away. He might not stop immediately, but you've made your point, and provided a good model of how to stand up for your own rights. Big confrontations or attempts to control an angry teen's response often make the situation worse. Wait until you *both* can talk without anger.

### **The trouble with over-control**

There are two problems with over-relying on power-based discipline strategies. First, many teens don't respond well. The older they get, the more young people want to be treated like adults, so overuse of power by parents often increases rebellion, conflict and deception and can damage parent-child relationships.

Second, when discipline is based primarily on power, teenagers don't get the experience they need in using skills like negotiating, problem-solving and making judgments. These are crucial skills that will help them learn to govern their own behaviour.

What's more, discussion and negotiation, when used thoughtfully and consistently by parents who have good relationships with their adolescents, can actually result in more cooperation and better behaviour than power-based discipline strategies.



*"From what I've seen, controlling parents usually push kids away, and most of the time the control doesn't work. So controlling parents actually have less influence over teenagers." — Jesse, age 23*



*"The kids I've known whose parents are the most restrictive usually care less about what their parents think about them. They seem to feel their parents will be angry with them almost no matter what they do, so they may as well do what they want." — Aaron, age 19*



## Talk to other parents!

As our kids get older we tend to have less interaction with the parents of their friends. That's too bad, because talking to other parents helps us understand what "normal" discipline challenges look like and how other families deal with them. It also helps us feel less alone in our struggles. So if another parent happens to call looking for their son or daughter, introduce yourself and chat for a few minutes. Don't be afraid to call another parent to share information and ideas: "What do you know about that party the kids are going to on Saturday night?"

## Positive Discipline Strategies

Discussion and negotiation are important tools to engage your teen's cooperation and help him develop important life skills. Here are some tips:

### » GET THEIR INPUT

Raising teenagers involves ongoing judgments and adjustments as parents encounter new situations. Should I let her go to the weekend sleepover? How can I get her to put her dirty clothes in the laundry basket? He came in two hours late last night! Should I ground him? Is my curfew too early?

Try getting your child's input on issues you feel comfortable discussing. You won't always agree, and as the parent, you still make the final decision. But getting teens' input on limits and discipline issues helps them feel like they have a voice and it also gives you insight into how they are thinking. Sometimes it might help you reach a compromise.

Here's how Chantal and her dad worked out a disagreement:

*"All my friends are allowed to go the all-ages punk show."*

*"I'm really uncomfortable with a 16-year-old going to a bar where people will be drinking."*

*"Dad! You can't drink alcohol unless you have a bracelet and you can't get a bracelet without photo ID."*

*"Somebody older could buy you a drink."*

*"The bar would lose its license if they let that happen. Besides almost everybody is, like, 16 or less."*

*"How late does this show go?"*

*"It goes pretty late, but can I stay until midnight?"*

*"No. I'll pick you up at 11:30. Final offer. If you're not there within ten minutes or if I can't reach you on your cell phone, there will be no more all-ages shows."*



*"Kids need to know that their parents' rules are at least somewhat reasonable, even when the kid doesn't like them." — A.J., age 19*

## » HELP THEM LEARN THE IMPACTS OF THEIR BEHAVIOUR

One of the most important discipline lessons for young people is understand how their actions affect other people. We should start talking about this when children are young. However, understanding the impact of one's poor behaviour choices becomes even more important during the older teen years.

*"I really need you to stop teasing your little sister," said Suraya.*

*"She's such a little pest," replied Safi.*

*"I don't think you understand how your teasing affects Monica," said Suraya. "Even though she bugs you sometimes, she really looks up to you. So your teasing hurts her even more than it would if one of her friends did it. Your teasing has been causing her a lot of stress lately."*

This may not stop the teasing right away. Suraya may still have to say, "Safi! Leave your sister alone!". But conversations like this will help to gradually shape teenagers' behaviour as they mature.

## » TELL THEM HOW YOU FEEL

It is not a teenager's job to make her parents happy. However, sometimes they need to know when we are worried, frustrated, angry or disappointed about their behaviour.

*"I was very worried last night when you didn't call after school."*

*"I'm really frustrated about the way you dump your coat and backpack at the bottom of the stairs."*

Two important points. Talk about how "I feel," not "how you made me feel." That's less likely to make your teen defensive. And try not to give the message, "You have to behave better so I can be happy." The idea is to help kids understand how we feel about specific behaviours and actions.

Sharing feelings is not a quick fix for discipline problems, but it does show teenagers that we care about their behaviour and safety. And if we have a good relationship with them, kids will care about how we feel and that will have some influence on how they think about their behaviour.

### » CATCH THEM BEING GOOD

We often think of discipline as responding to “bad” behaviour. But it’s also important to recognize good behaviour.

“I know it meant a lot to your grandmother to be able to have a long chat with you yesterday.”

“I appreciate the way you left the kitchen so clean after your snack last night.”

Not only does this reward teenagers for doing the right thing, it also shows that we are fair-minded because we pay attention to and appreciate their good qualities, not just the ones we are unhappy with.

## Lying to parents

Guess what? Teenagers lie to their parents. Psychologist, author and newspaper columnist, Dr. Anthony E. Wolf, says they lie for various reasons:

- to avoid getting into trouble
- to get out of doing what they don’t want to do
- to hide from us that they are going to do what we’ve told them they can’t do
- to keep us from knowing “too much” about their lives

However, Dr. Wolf also points out that most of these lying teens grow up to be good citizens.

It’s not that we should accept lying. Kids need to know that we want and expect honesty. Just don’t be too horrified or offended when they lie, because most teens do at times.

Also think about how you can help your child lie less often. For example, think about how you respond to uncomfortable honesty. If your child tells you the truth about what he did or plans to do, and you yell at him, will he be less likely, or more likely, to lie in the future?

## Dealing with serious misbehaviour

When teens do something seriously wrong like cheat on an exam, steal, or vandalize, how parents respond is very important. It might seem like a strong response or consequence is necessary right away.

However, the immediate aftermath of a serious incident is seldom the best time to make decisions about what the consequence should be. As a 17-year-old boy put it, "If your kid does something really wrong, you don't have to have the 'big talk' right away. Wait until the next day, when you're both less upset."

That's good advice, because whatever consequence you might decide to impose, it is very important to have a really good talk about what happened. That needs to be a two-way talk where you do a lot of listening. Conversations like that go better if you wait until you are both calm and able to control your strong feelings. A good way to start? "Tell me what happened."

Most teenagers who have committed serious misbehaviours already know they've done wrong, even if they make excuses or act like it's not a big deal. Often there will be a significant external consequence: a fine, probation, school suspension, humiliation, having to pay damages (common in shoplifting cases). If that's the case, support your child through the process. If there is something she can do to help make things right — apologize, repair damage, do community service — insist that she do it. Holding teens accountable for their behaviour, encouraging them to see how their actions affect others and helping them to feel empathy for people they have wronged, is more important than expressing your disappointment or anger or finding a punishment that shows you really mean it.

### » DON'T GIVE UP!

This is the single most important piece of discipline advice for parents of teenagers. Sometimes it will seem like you're not getting anywhere. But don't give up. Keep telling your children what you expect of them (be realistic) and keep pointing out unacceptable behaviour (hopefully without constant nagging). Your efforts will have some impact in the long run, even if you can't always see it on a day-to-day basis.

# Risky Business

Drinking, drugs, sex and teenagers



Some experts like to say that teenagers “experiment” with alcohol, drugs and sex. But in truth, it’s more than experimentation for many of them as the following statistics show.

## » DRINKING AND DRUGS



- 61% of grade 10 students drank alcohol in the past year; about 30% consumed 5 or more drinks on one occasion at least once in the past month.\*



- 82% of grade 12 students drank alcohol in the past year; almost 50% consumed 5 or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past month.\*



- 23% of parents of 17 year-olds believe their own child drinks alcohol. (C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health)



- About one in three grade 10 students have smoked marijuana or hash in the past year.\*

\* Source: Cross-Canada Report on Student Alcohol and Drug Use (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse)

If these statistics and the above quote sound alarming, it might surprise you to know that more adolescents were actually drinking when you were a teen. In Ontario, for example, 30% fewer teens reported using alcohol in 2009 than in 1977. Tobacco use has also dropped. In 2008, 23% of teens 15 to 19 reported smoking cigarettes, down from 38% in 1984. (Project Teen Canada Survey) However, marijuana use is twice as common as it was in the 1980s. The use of other drugs has stayed about the same.



*“I think it’s good to go out and party and learn what your boundaries are. And as long as you’re not drinking so much that you throw up every Saturday, and you’re just doing it to have fun with your friends, I think it’s OK.”*  
— André, Grade 11 student

## » SEX



- 43% of 15- to 19-year-olds (65% of 18- 19-year-olds) say they have had sexual intercourse at least once. (2005 Canadian Community Health Survey)



- 75% of 15- to 19-year-olds reported using a condom last time they had sex. Interestingly, 18 and 19 year-olds are somewhat less likely to use condoms than teens 15 to 17. (2005 Canadian Community Health Survey)

1996 - 2006  
**-37%**

- The number of teen pregnancies in Canada dropped by 37% between 1996 and 2006. (Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality)

### **The dilemma for parents**

The high proportion of kids drinking and having sex tells us that, whether we approve or not, these are typical activities for many teenagers from all kinds of families. And parents are right to be concerned: Research shows that substance use is linked to school failure, lack of commitment to school, childhood mental health problems and easy access to alcohol and drugs.

## » GIVEN THE FACTS, WHAT IS A PARENT TO DO?

First of all, it's important to talk to your partner (or for single parents, a trusted parent friend) to make sure you are clear about your own beliefs and concerns about substance use and, if you drink, to model responsible, moderate drinking.

We can't tell you exactly how your family should handle drinking, drugs and sex, but here is the central question (some would say dilemma) for parents:

Should I put my energy in trying to stop my teen from ever engaging in these activities? Or should I focus on harm reduction (that is, taking steps to help my son or daughter avoid the serious negative consequences that can result from drinking, drugs and sex)?



## » PREVENTION

Eli is going to a party at his friend's house. His father stops him at the door.

*"Eli, you know that your mother and I have strong feelings about alcohol and drugs. They cause serious problems for many kids your age. So, if other kids are drinking and taking drugs at the party tonight, we expect you to not join in. If there's ever a point where you are uncomfortable with what is going on you can call us and we'll come and get you. You can tell your friends that we made you come home. If we find out that you have been drinking or taking drugs, there will be no more parties."*



*"My parents wouldn't give me any leeway to start with. I'd say, 'Can I go to this party?' They'd say no and I'd ask why not. Then they'd say, 'Because I don't trust you to go to that party.'" And I'd say "But you've never given me a chance to earn the trust. If you let me go to the party I can prove to you that I will be responsible for myself and won't do anything idiotic."*  
— Abby, Grade 11 student

Statistics suggest that many parents are not able to prevent their teens from engaging in sex or substance use by the age of 17. Whether your kids do these things is probably highly influenced by what their friends are doing and the opportunities they have. Personality also plays a role. Kids who are more cautious by nature are less likely to drink or take drugs (or at least, more likely to start at a later age). Those who are bold and adventure-seeking will tend to start earlier.

However, research also shows that parental disapproval and advice can sometimes reduce and delay teen involvement in drinking, sex and drugs. Help your teen develop "refusal skills," like the strategy Eli's father suggested, and other ways to resist peer pressure to try drugs and alcohol.

Another way parents may be able to prevent or delay alcohol and drug use is to encourage and support teenagers' involvement in various activities, sports or youth groups which give them something fun to do besides partying.

## » WHAT ABOUT WARNING KIDS ABOUT THE RISKS?

### WON'T THAT DETER THEM?

In some cases, yes. It is a good idea to inform children about the long term risks associated with drinking, drugs and sex. But really, those conversations should start taking place during the preteen years and even earlier, long before children reach the age where participation in risky behaviours is commonplace.

Even if you think your child may be drinking or smoking pot, it's still wise to talk about risks and how they can be minimized. Given what we know about adolescent brain development, it's best with older teens to emphasize the short-term rather than long-term risks. For example, instead of declaring "You'll become an addict living on the street!" talk about risks like getting hurt due to poor coordination and judgment while drunk or high, getting into trouble with the police, passing out, doing something you won't remember the next day or (with girls) the risk of someone slipping a date rape drug into their drink.

## » HARM REDUCTION

Laura and her daughter Jessie are discussing Jessie's plans for the evening.

*"Where are you going tonight?"*

*"Out with my friends."*

*"I need to know where you're going to be."*

*"We'll be at Nadia's."*

*"Is it a party?"*

*"I don't know. Not exactly."*

*"It's a party, isn't it?"*

*"No, it's a get-together."*

*"Will Nadia's parents be home?"*

*"I'm not sure. Maybe."*

*Laura pauses while she considers the night ahead.*

*"I need to know your plan for getting home."*

*"Melissa's father is picking us up at 1 am."*

*"Really? Mind if I call him to confirm that?"*

*"Mo-om! OK, fine."*

*"If you drink tonight, be sensible. You know that some kids drink far too much and make themselves really sick. Some even end up in the hospital. Remember that."*

*"Mom! You think I'm an idiot?"*



*"No, but even smart kids can lose their judgment when they drink too much."*

*"Mom. I'm not going to do anything crazy. OK?"*

*"Good! And I'm trying to help you with that. That's my job."*

Parents who take the harm reduction approach are usually those who have realized that their child is, or is quite likely to be, engaged in sex, alcohol or drug use. These parents talk openly with their teen about the risks involved in drug use and underage drinking and how to reduce them. For example, they might suggest drinking slowly or alternating alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks. They point out that, while there are risks, many adults enjoy wine with dinner or drinks with friends and have sex in ways that are enjoyable and safe. If they suspect their child is going out partying, they will refuse to let him have the car. They may give their child money for a taxi or pick their child up late at night.

With respect to sex, parents practicing harm reduction have open conversations about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, and not engaging in sex that is hurtful or exploitative. They give their teens messages like "Never have unprotected sex" and (especially for boys), "Never pressure someone to have sex with you."

## **Drinking and driving**

However you approach alcohol and drugs, all teenagers need to get very clear, repeated messages that drinking, drug-use and driving is never OK. One way to do that is by telling your teen (and even his or her friends), "Don't ever get into a car with a driver who has been drinking. You can call me any time of the night and no matter where you are, and what you've been doing, I will come and get you, no questions asked." (If you don't own a car you can promise to pay your teen's cab fare.)

This may be one of the most important things a parent can ever say to a teenager. Although many Canadian teens have gotten the message that drinking and driving is not OK, a minority admit to engaging in this highly risky behaviour:



*"My mother knew that I partied sometimes. I think she had confidence in my judgment and we had this sort of unspoken agreement that I wouldn't do anything totally crazy." — Lucinda, age 20*



- 11% to 15% of grade 12 students reporting driving a motor vehicle within an hour of drinking alcohol.\*



- Almost one in five teenagers admits to having gotten into a car with someone who has had “too much to drink.”

\* Source: Cross-Canada Report on Student Alcohol and Drug Use (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse).

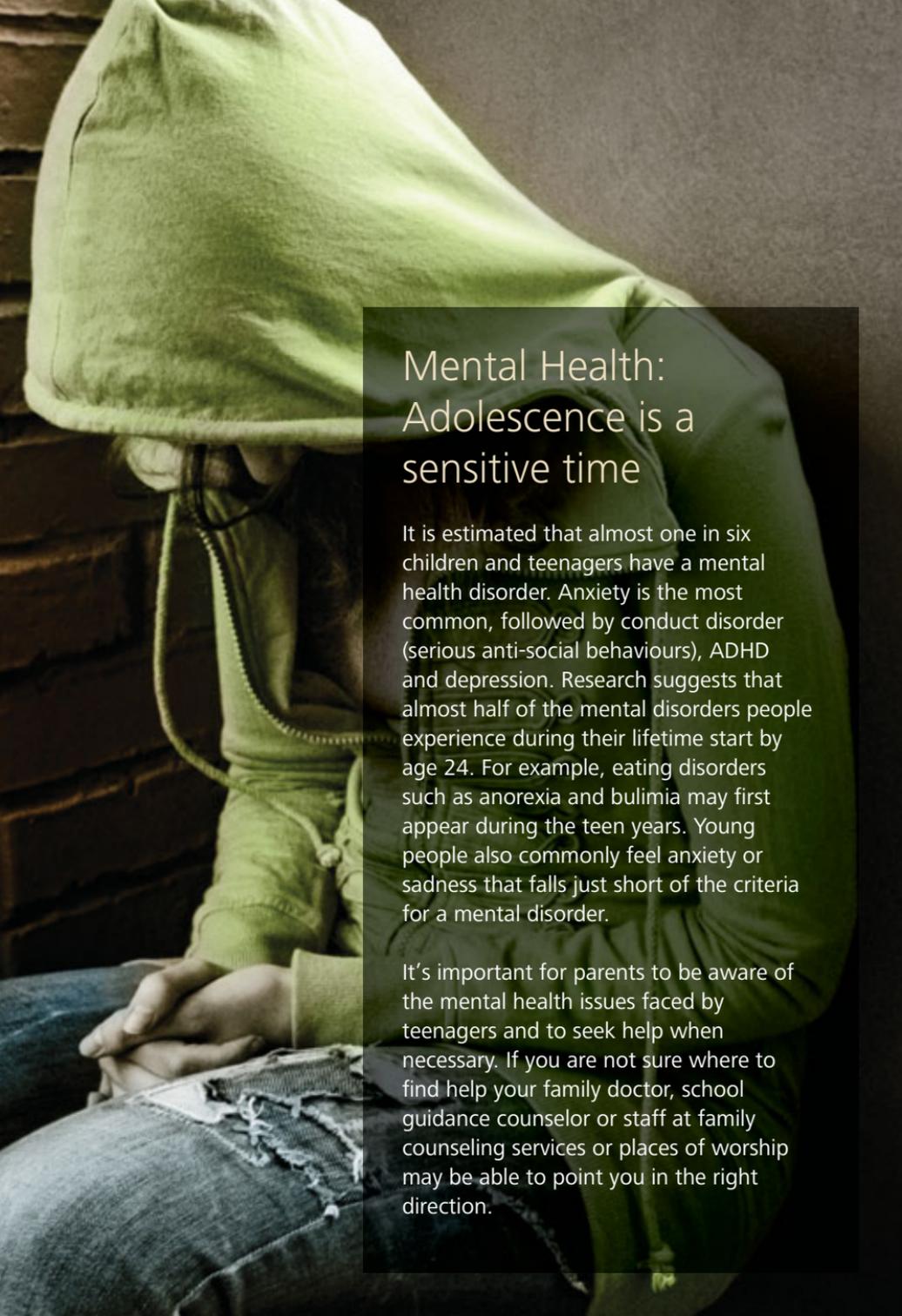
### The bottom line

Prevention or harm reduction? It’s a tough call for parents. But regardless of how you decide to deal with sex, drinking and drugs, it is important to talk about these issues openly. The biggest mistake would be to avoid talking, cross your fingers and hope everything turns out OK. Talking to teens about risky behaviours gives you the chance to have at least some influence over how your child deals with them. It also signals that sex, drugs and alcohol are acceptable issues for a parent-child conversation. This may become very important if your teenager ever needs your help with one of these areas.



*“Parents need to understand that most kids are pretty comfortable with partying and breaking rules. So if there’s something parents are really concerned about, you have to be prepared to have a really serious and probably uncomfortable conversation.”*  
— Riley, age 27

Most teenagers do not get into serious problems with substance abuse. But some do. About half of Canadian teenagers say they know someone with a serious drug or alcohol problem. These are not easy issues for parents to deal with alone. So, if you think your child has a substance abuse problem, get help. Your family doctor, health unit or high school can point you in the right direction.

A person wearing a green hoodie is sitting with their head down, looking distressed. The background is a brick wall. The person's hands are clasped in their lap. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

## Mental Health: Adolescence is a sensitive time

It is estimated that almost one in six children and teenagers have a mental health disorder. Anxiety is the most common, followed by conduct disorder (serious anti-social behaviours), ADHD and depression. Research suggests that almost half of the mental disorders people experience during their lifetime start by age 24. For example, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia may first appear during the teen years. Young people also commonly feel anxiety or sadness that falls just short of the criteria for a mental disorder.

It's important for parents to be aware of the mental health issues faced by teenagers and to seek help when necessary. If you are not sure where to find help your family doctor, school guidance counselor or staff at family counseling services or places of worship may be able to point you in the right direction.

# Learning and Working

High school and transitions to college,  
university and jobs



School is a big part of teenagers' lives, and obviously, getting a good education is one of the keys to a successful future.

There are all kinds of students. Some really like school, want to do well, and are well organized. Others don't work that hard, but manage to achieve decent marks in spite of minimal effort. The teenagers we worry about are those who really underachieve or struggle in school due to social or behaviour problems, learning disabilities, lack of ability or lack of interest, motivation and effort.

## Academic problems

### » NOT ALL STUDENTS ARE TOP ACHIEVERS

Some students struggle with the increased workload and higher expectations of high school. Teenagers who were able to get good marks with little effort in elementary school may see their marks drop or find they have to work much harder just to reach the same achievement level.

These days most parents want their kids to get high marks and go to university. But if your child is one of those who just isn't destined to be a top achiever, it's important to make sure he is in the right level of courses. It's better for a student to work at a level where he can succeed than to become discouraged in a course that is not suited to his academic ability.

### » LEARNING DISABILITIES

If your child has an identified learning disability, the school should be providing various kinds of help through the special education department. A parent's role is to:

- Act as an advocate if a child is not getting the help and support that the school is in a position to provide.
- Communicate with teachers as needed.
- Do what needs to be done to support the child's education at home.

If you're not sure how to support a child with a learning disability, call the guidance office or special education teacher for advice.

## » UNMOTIVATED UNDERACHIEVERS

In some ways this is the toughest group. The first thing to recognize is that you have limited control over your child's motivation or how much she cares about school. Here's what you can do:

- **Continue to talk** to your teen about the importance of a good education for her future prospects. It won't solve the problem immediately, but it may have some impact over the long term as your child matures.
- **Keep informed.** Find out what the assignments and due dates are. Most teenagers are able to take responsibility for their schoolwork, but when they can't or don't, parents may need to communicate directly with teachers to find out what the assignments are and when they are due.
- **Insist that your teen does assigned work.** We can't make underachievers try hard or care about school, but we can make it clear that we expect them to go to class, do their work and study for exams and tests. If your child is not doing this on his own, psychologist and author Anthony Wolf says parents need to step in and supervise. Set aside a regular non-negotiable study/homework time each night and be available (in the same room) to keep your teen on task. You may have to remind yourself not to take over and do the work for him. It's his responsibility.



The way the assignment/marking system is supposed to work is that students who don't hand in an assignment get a zero, learn their lesson and do better the next time. Unfortunately, this doesn't work nearly as well as we'd like. Some students are quite willing to take a zero in exchange for avoiding work. So work together with teachers to try to ensure your teen does the work he is supposed to do. Some underachievers don't "wake up" academically until late adolescence. Fortunately our education systems are set up to help learners of all ages.



*"I know some high school kids who are going to school, but completely disengaged and failing a lot of courses. It is really hard to influence them. One of the things I say to them sometimes is, "Do you really want to spend extra time in high school?"*  
— Alan, age 22

### **School behaviour problems**

One thing to remember about young people getting into trouble at school is that schools have their own ways of dealing with misbehaviour and promoting positive behaviour. So much of the time, the issue is between school and student and parents don't necessarily need to get involved.

What parents can do:

- Make it clear that you expect your children to follow school rules and be respectful with school staff.
- Get to know your child's teachers (attend parent-teacher interview nights) so you are in a better position to work together to solve problems.
- Talk to your child about behaviour issues you hear about so you know what the problems are.
- Get involved if you feel your child has been treated unfairly or if the school asks you to be involved. It's a good idea to consult with your teen before doing this.

# Social difficulties

We have seen how important friends are to teens. But good friends don't come automatically to all kids. The first year of high school is challenging for many teens, as old friends from elementary school drift away and new social groups form. It can take time to find a new group of friends. But for teens who are different in some way or have trouble fitting in, the high school years can be a lonely and stressful time.

It is not easy for parents to help teens with social issues. But if you have any reason to believe your child may be being bullied, physically or emotionally, it is important to take action. Bullying is often well hidden and victims tend to find it hard to ask for help. So adults need to step in. If your child is being harassed at school, call the principal. If you know who the perpetrator is call the parents. Parents of bullies often have no idea what their child is up to. If your child has been assaulted call the police. Bottom line: Children need adult help to deal with bullying.



## **Transition to university or college**

When your child goes away to university or college, all that you've taught her about being responsible and looking after herself really comes into play.

Post-secondary institutions report that some parents now seem to want to be highly involved in their child's studies like they were in high school. But a parent's job is to support teenagers to plan their post-secondary studies, get them to the institution with all the things they need and then back off. Young people may need our help to solve problems, but they have the right to some privacy at this age and they also need to manage college or university with our support, not our

## Transition to work

According to Statistics Canada, over one-third of youth have part-time jobs while attending school. Having a part-time job can be a useful experience (plus teens like having money). However, here are some things to look out for:

- Teens who are starting new jobs may need support learning to structure their time: getting to work on time, juggling work hours with school assignments, studying and other activities.
- Some employers push kids to take on more hours than they can reasonably handle. You may need to take a role in making sure your child still has time for school responsibilities, home, social activities, and “down time.”
- Some teenagers spend time in the full-time workforce, either taking a year or two off from school before moving on to post-secondary studies, or due to dropping out of school. For kids who aren’t sure of their educational goals or for whom school is a struggle, spending some time in a low-wage job can help them figure out why they might want to go back to school.

day-to-day management. Post secondary institutions have on-campus counseling services to assist students having difficulties.

It is still important to communicate regularly so that your child knows you are available if she needs your advice or support with a problem. Fortunately, it’s very easy to keep in touch with students these days via phone, e-mail, text messages, Skype or Facebook.

Some kids mess up their first year and miss getting some credits. Yes, it’s expensive, but not the end of the world. For some teens this seems to be part of the post-secondary learning curve.

# Final Thoughts For Parents

## **Teenagers need us to look after them sometimes**

At times, parenting teenagers may seem to be mainly about keeping them out of trouble, dealing with their rebelliousness and guiding them as they become more independent. That's true, but don't forget that teenagers sometimes need us to simply care for them.

Sure, young people need to learn life skills like washing their own clothes, cooking, cleaning, arranging their own transportation, and being "responsible."

But teenagers are still kids, and sometimes they just need us to help them out or simply look after them like we did when they were younger. That might mean driving your son to school when he could have walked, but perhaps needs a little time with you. It might also mean helping with last minute searches for school items they've misplaced. Obviously we don't want to do everything for our kids, or bail them out every time they get into difficulty. But helping them sometimes is one of the ways we can show them we care.

And let's not forget to be nice. It seems obvious, but sometimes we get so wrapped up in correcting teens' faults that we can forget to just relax and enjoy them as they are. The nice times are every bit as important as all the reminders, corrections, criticisms and directions we will inevitably give them.

So no matter what challenges you may be facing, grab every possible chance to enjoy your teen. Parents who enjoy their children usually do a better job, regardless of their parenting philosophy and approach.

# RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

## **Books on Teen Discipline**

Get out of my life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?  
by Anthony E. Wolf, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Positive Discipline for Teenagers  
by Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott, Three Rivers Press

## **Alcohol and Drug Resources**

The Road Ahead: A guidebook for parents of young teens about alcohol  
and other drugs  
Centre for Addictions Research of BC

Tips for Hosting a Teen Party: How to deal with the alcohol question  
Available online at [www.heretohelp.ca](http://www.heretohelp.ca) (keywords: teen party)

## **Sexuality**

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca)  
A website on sexual health hosted by the Society of Obstetricians and  
Gynaecologists of Canada

## **Mental Health**

[www.teenmentalhealth.org](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org)  
A website developed by Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental  
Health, Dr. Stan Kutcher

[www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)  
Website of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre

Is your relationship with your parents more difficult than it used to be? Even if you got along great all through your childhood, it's normal to experience more frequent conflict and misunderstanding in the teen years.

Teens often feel that adults don't understand them, but you may also have a hard time understanding your parents. This section might give you some insight into how your parents are thinking, and help you communicate with them more effectively.

## Why do your parents act the way they do?

Why do parents put so many demands and expectations on teenagers? Why do they make such a big deal out of so many things?

The short answer is, they're worried. They know the kinds of trouble teenagers can get into. Some of them got into trouble themselves as teens.

They worry that you'll hang out with the wrong crowd, that you'll get (or make somebody) pregnant, that you'll drink too much and pass out in a ditch or get into a car driven by a drunk friend. They worry that you might be sexually or physically assaulted. They worry that if you fall behind in school, you won't get a good enough education.

They also worry because they feel they are running out of time. Parents know their job is to prepare you for adulthood, and by the time you get to be 15 or 16 they might think they have to try even harder to teach you good habits and values.

Above all, they worry because they care about you. So, even if it seems like a pain sometimes to have a parent demand to know where you are going, what you'll be doing, when you'll be home and if your homework is done, try to see the plus side. They care about what happens to you. That's a good thing.



# For Teenagers

A Guide to Your Parents



# Helping your parents worry less

Less worried parents means less hassle for you. Here are a few things you can do to help your parents have confidence in you and feel less of a need to worry about you.

## Stay in touch

Nothing makes parents worry more than not knowing where you are or when they'll hear from you. It's not like you have to keep them informed of your every move. But taking some initiative for staying in touch, rather than always making them hunt you down, will reduce your parents' anxiety and increase their confidence in you. That should get them off your back a little bit. So try letting them know where you are going, if you won't be home for dinner, or how they can get in touch with you (if you don't have a cell phone).

## Show them you have a plan

If you want to do something your parents aren't sure they are comfortable with, showing them what your plan is might increase your chance of getting their permission. For example, if you want to go to an event a fair distance from home, how are you getting there? Where are you staying for the night? Is there a phone number they can reach you at? How are you going to get home?

## Be reliable

Parents worry more when kids don't seem reliable. If you usually call when you're going to be late getting home and follow through when you agree to do something, your parents should develop more confidence and trust in you. On the other hand, if you said you'd spend your Sunday afternoon on your history essay, don't be surprised if they get upset if they find you playing video games at 2pm.





# Talking so parents will listen

Teenagers often say parents don't understand. Meanwhile, parents say kids don't listen or won't talk. Regardless of whose fault it is, you can only control what you do. And any positive step you take in the communication department helps your parents be more positive with you. Here are some things you can try.

## → **Initiate pleasant conversations**

Some parents and teens have no trouble finding things to talk about. But for others conversations are often tense or strained. As a result, the teenager avoids talking to the parent, which frustrates the parent even more. You can see where this is going. If that's your situation, it can help if you start up neutral, positive conversations every once in awhile, when you're both in a reasonably good mood. Try telling Mom or Dad a funny or odd thing that happened at school or ask how their day went. If you have more pleasant, relaxed conversations about everyday things, it might help move you in the direction of better overall communication.



## → **Try not to fan the flames of anger**

You and your parents are going to get mad at each other sometimes. It's normal. The trick is to avoid saying or doing things that make it worse, such as insults, sarcasm and yelling. Remember, angry, upset parents sometimes do unreasonable things — like take away cell phones or computers for a month. Obviously parents have a big responsibility to keep anger from escalating, but you can help too.

→ **Tell them when you'll do the tasks and chores they want you to do**

One common source of parent-teen conflict occurs when the parent asks a teen to do something and the teen says, "I'll do it later." To a parent, later sounds like, "I'll just keep putting it off and then you'll forget about it." That often leads to nagging. You are more likely to get agreement about delaying chores by committing to a time that works for you: "I'll do it right after I finish watching this video, which will be in about an hour."



→ **Ask for their help**

Teenagers are sometimes reluctant to ask for help because they don't want to be lectured about why they should have avoided the problem in the first place. But asking for your parents help in solving everyday problems is a good way to initiate some positive communication and build your relationship. And parents can actually be a big help sometimes.





## Raising difficult topics

Bringing up difficult topics with parents is seldom easy. One good tactic is to start right off by telling your parents that this could be a difficult conversation but that you really want to talk.

*"I don't think you're going to like what I have to say, but you need to know about this and we need to work things out."*

That signals to your parents that this is serious, so they need to be on their "best behaviour." Parents don't like to get bad news, but they do want you to be open with them and seek their help.



### **Tell them what you need from them**

Before you approach your parents, think about what you want out of the conversation and tell them. "I need your advice," or "I'm have a problem and I need help," or "I just need you to listen."

Parents will often respond very well to a direct and sincere statement about what you want from them.

### **Pick a good time**

If possible, try not to start a potentially difficult conversation when your mom or dad is already upset or stressed out (or when you are). Pick a calm moment when you both have time to talk. However, don't delay if it is something really urgent.



## When you're in BIG trouble

If you've done something really wrong, and you know it, the best way to reduce your parent's angry reaction is to take responsibility for what you did right away. "Look, I know I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what I was thinking, but I really regret it." If you feel that you've been unfairly blamed, by all means tell your side of the story. But own up to your mistakes. If you spend most of your time defending yourself, your parents will most likely feel they have to counter that with a strong response to show you that you were wrong.

You may get an upset, angry response at first, but try not to take it too personally. The truth is, much of the anger parents express when teenagers get in big trouble is either about the parents' fear of the even worse things that could have happened, or their anger at themselves for not being able to prevent what did happen.

## What to say when your parents are being unreasonable

Whether or parents are actually being unreasonable depends partly on whether you're the kid or the parent. But most teens feel their parents are unreasonable at times. When that happens to you, here are some tactics you can try.

- **Ask what their concerns are.** Don't tell them they are stupid to be concerned. Find out what's worrying them — maybe you have solutions for some of their concerns.
- **Ask what you could do to help** them be comfortable with the situation.
- **Give them as much information as you can.** Parents often say no simply because they don't feel they have enough information to be able to say yes.

In the end, you may still lose the argument. But even so, these tactics may help you negotiate successfully more often in the future.

## When your parents disapprove of your style

Sometimes a teen's choice of hairstyle, clothing, music, or some other aspect of a teenager's interests, is really upsetting to his or her parents. Honestly, there may not be that much you can do to fix this problem (unless, of course, you're willing to tone down your wardrobe to make your parents happy). All you can do is keep finding little ways to help your parents remember that behind that piercing, tattoo or hairstyle is their child who is a good person.

Sometimes it takes parents a while to get used to teen culture. Relationships may even be strained for a few years. But don't give up. Difficult parent-child relationships often "come back" when the teen years are over.



## If you're having serious problems with your parents

Find someone to talk to about it, perhaps a guidance counselor at your school, a close friend, or an adult you can trust, such as a teacher or relative. If you don't know who to turn to, call Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868. They have trained counselors available 24 hours a day and can connect you with local services if that's what you need.

# PARENTING FOR LIFE

The success of tomorrow's world depends largely on how we live in it today. Building strong, healthy families is key to our future and the right information at the right time can be a vital support for growing families. Education and skills that enable parents, children and adolescents grow together, are the foundation we need to give flight to our future. That's what Parenting for Life is all about.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Today's Parent Group originally joined efforts, with the support of Kodak Canada Inc., to develop Parenting for Life, a non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. The resources, including booklets, a Facilitator's Guide for parent educators and posters are used as a part of many parent education programs in Canada. In 1998, Parenting for Life received the FRP Canada Media Award for the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

Research clearly demonstrates that a strong and healthy parent-child relationship is crucial to raising resilient, productive and mentally healthy individuals. Family by family, we need to strengthen our efforts and create a better world for our children. Please join us in this unique initiative.

Dr. Ester Cole, PhD., C.Psych  
Chair, Parenting for Life Program and Past Chair  
The Psychology Foundation of Canada



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