

The Owners' Manual For Teens

Adolescence forces change upon the entire family

Adolescence is a hinge in time. It is a period of great development for teens and in turn for their families. In order to allow teens to grow their families must grow as well. Parents can work on being flexible and open to trying new things to accommodate teen growth.

Realize the growth tasks for teens

There are biological, social, and cultural forces at play in adolescent development. Recent discoveries describe the adolescent brain as a well-developed accelerator but only a partly developed brake. Teens are developing their own identity, more advanced cognitive skills, learning to identify and manage emotions, responding to emerging sexuality and renegotiating relationships with adults. All of this is necessary for teens to emerge as independent adults.

Know what is typical and when to be concerned

The pace of adolescence can be quite different from teen to teen. On the whole, it is common for teens to be self-conscious, egocentric, feel invincible, and overestimate their abilities. To gain perspective, talk to other parents to about what they are facing. Ask yourself : How confident are you with your teens' peer choices, how is your child doing in school, and how cooperative are they with home rules? If you have significant concerns in any of those areas it might be time for professional consultation.

Adolescent behavior does not occur in a vacuum. What role do we play?

Teenagers and their families are in a tug of war to seize independence and guide growth. A parents' ability to stay calm and not take things personally will reduce the intensity of conflict. Focus on the process of calm negotiation more than the details of the end result. Figure out what you are doing that seems to escalate conflict and work on reducing that behavior. For many families this means less lecturing and more listening.

Work to develop healthy detachment

So much of what is difficult about parenting comes from the fears and hopes we have entwined in our teens. These cloud our ability to stay objective and often lead to nagging. When parents nag it leads to predictable conflicts. Try writing down your teens' chores on a whiteboard and have them read the board for reminders so you don't have to constantly remind. Teens will learn self-control and responsibility only when parents relinquish control. Parenting teenagers requires robust self-care to develop healthy detachment.

Set appropriate limits and monitor progress

Parents must set appropriate levels of freedom. When the reins are too tight it can lead to frustration and anger; too loose and teens lack boundaries for behavior. If you are parenting with a partner, work to get on the same page in terms of allowed behavior. Choose your battles. Once fair limits are set watch for signs of your teens' progress. Keep track of whereabouts and monitor electronic communication. Network with other parents. Work to know your teens' friends.

Let your teens know that you believe in them

How parents understand and accept their adolescents is the strongest influence on how adolescents accept themselves. Find something in your teen that helps you to feel confident. Tell them and show them that you believe in their ability to make good choices and grow into a successful adult.

Maintain connections

Maintaining a good connection with your teen is essential for their health and well-being. How you communicate with them changes as they get older. Parents move from the all knowing adult to more of a consultant role. Ask questions that elicit your teens' values and points of view. Know your child's conversational preference. Some teens are more comfortable talking while doing an activity or driving in a car. Find ways to enjoy one on one time with your teen. Help your child to connect with other adults. Be that adult for other teens.

Have the conversations

Talk to your child about risky situations before they encounter them. Be prepared and clear about what you want them to know. Reconcile your own history. Discuss refusal skills and a realistic portrayal of peer influences rather than scare tactics. Share a little, ask a lot, and listen.

Climb back

How your teen and family recovers from bad choices is at least as important as preventing them. Help your child get back on track after a bad decision. Reestablish your limits and monitor your teens progress. Recognize the types of behavior you want your teen to grow. Be tenacious. Tenacity may be the most important virtue in parenting.

Parents matter!

Even though your teens may not express this directly, know that you continue to be the most protective factor in their life. Keep doing the things that are healthy like family dinners and family trips.