

PARENTING TEENAGERS

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NORMAL ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS THAT BOTHER PARENTS

- **Arguing** Teens will argue just for the sake of arguing. They will often go off on tangents and argue side issues for no apparent reason. Keep in mind that, for adolescents, exercising their new reasoning capabilities can be exhilarating, and they need the opportunity to experiment with these new skills.
- **Self-Centered** Teens are often very “me-centered.” It takes time to learn to take others’ perspectives into account. This is a skill that is usually learned over time.
- **Fault Finding** With their newfound ability to think critically, teens often look for discrepancies, contradictions, or exceptions to what adults say or do. Sometimes they are particularly critical of those to whom they feel the closest and those who were most idealized in the past.
- **Overly Dramatic** Everything seems to be a “big deal” to teens. Sometimes being overly dramatic, exaggerating opinions, and expressing extreme ideas is just part of this phase of life. There is usually little relationship between their style of expression and actual extreme behaviors.
- **Searching for Uniqueness** As teens grapple with their personal identity, they often seek novel ways of self-expression through their dress and style. It is often important for them to feel different from their parents in some ways. As long as their choices involve reversible decisions, this is usually not predictive of a serious problem.

COMMON ADOLESCENT ISSUES

- **Conflict with parents** A certain amount of rebellion and resistance is par for the course in raising teenagers. Sometimes, this becomes a more serious and regular problem.
- **Mood disruptions** Teens express their feelings in more volatile and extreme ways. They are prone to brief periods of distress and depression. More enduring mood disturbance is a cause for concern.
- **Risk-taking behaviors** Teens have maturing physical, emotional, and intellectual skills, but they also have limited judgment and a present moment focus. This sometimes leads to poor decision-making.

IMPROVING PARENTING OF TEENAGERS

- **Find something to admire about your teen.** Build legends around some positive quality of your child. It may be their fastidious hygiene or their loyalty to their friends. Even negative qualities can sometimes be reframed into something positive. Stubbornness is determination in disguise; oppositional behavior is the ability to think for oneself at all costs.
- **Do not be a know-it-all.** Understand that everyone's life experience is unique. Do not assume that you have the easy answer to all your teen's problems. And often, not having the answers will teach your teen to find creative solutions to their problems. Try saying, "I really don't know."
- **Listen more than talk.** Remember that sound bites and two sentence lectures are preferable to long-winded sermons. Keep your questions brief and open-ended.
- **Be "askable."** Make yourself as approachable as possible. Allow any question to be asked without giving a rapid, judgmental response.
- **Avoid power struggles.** Pick your spots when asserting authority. Science has failed to find a significant link between keeping a messy room and becoming an incompetent adult. Give enforceable commands and choices.
- **Don't give answers to every dilemma.** The goal is to make your teenager think and solve problems, and allowing them to struggle with confusion can help them learn these skills.
- **Use yourself as a model.** It is really true that actions speak louder than words. Adolescents have an acute awareness of hypocrisy and will devalue messages sent by those who live inconsistent with the values they espouse.
- **Discuss ethical and moral issues.** Encourage the teen to think aloud about moral dilemmas. Have them consider complex issues from others' point of view.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH GOOD OUTCOMES

- **Stable positive relationships with at least one caring adult.** A strong emotional attachment to a parent, teacher, pastor, coach, relative or some other significant adult is extremely helpful for teenagers.
- **Religious and spiritual anchors.** Having a sense of meaning assists teenagers find their way to a constructive future.
- **High, realistic academic expectations and adequate support.** Schools that provide students with a sense of belonging, convey high expectations for participation, and provide individual support are important for adolescent success.
- **Positive family environment.** A warm, nurturing parenting style, with both clear limit setting and respect for the teens need for independence, are key to helping teens set their lives on track.
- **Good coping skills.** It is of great value for adolescents to learn how to cope with the stresses and frustrations of life using constructive problem solving skills.

BOOKS ON PARENTING TEENS

- Parenting Teens with Love and Logic by Foster Cline & Jim Fay.
- How to Deal with Your Acting-Up Teenagers by Robert & Jean Bayard
- You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10-20 by Laurence Steinberg & Ann Levine.
- Get Out of My Life, But Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?: A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager by Anthony Wolf.
- Your Defiant Teen: 10 Steps to Resolve Conflict and Rebuild Your Relationship by Russell A. Barkley, Arthur L. Robin and Christine M. Benton