

# Living with young people

The teenage years bring many changes as young people grow and develop into independent adults. Many achieve lots of new milestones such as learning to drive, getting their first job or starting a relationship. It can be a rewarding and enjoyable time for parents, and teens can bring new ideas and energy into the family.

Young people also go through rapid physical and emotional changes. Their 'brain wiring' changes and they have a strong need to experience new things and be accepted by their peers. There can be emotional ups and downs and challenges to deal with. Talking with your teen and showing you 'really hear' them can help keep you connected during these years. They still need your love and guidance even if it doesn't seem like it at times.

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### About teenagers

A common view is that teenagers are self-centred, moody and hard to live with. Some parents worry their teen will get involved with the wrong friends, take drugs or come to harm. The truth is most families get through the teen years without too many difficulties. Only a small number of young people end up with big problems or in huge conflict with parents.

During these years teenagers are gaining the skills and experience they need for adulthood. They are:

- working out their own unique identity

- sorting out their values
- practicing making decisions for themselves
- learning new things and finding what they are good at
- working out what they want in their future.

Some can feel unsure of themselves behind their 'grownup' attitude. Their bravado can mask their inexperience in solving problems and coping with change. They want new freedoms but still need the security of their family.



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## You can help your teen by:

- showing your love
- modelling the behaviour you expect
- being dependable
- being relaxed and easy to talk to
- guiding and setting limits
- inspiring and supporting them to achieve their best
- getting help when you need it.

Good communication with your son or daughter will help you both through the teenage years.



## Adolescent development

Adolescence is the stage between childhood and adulthood. It can begin at different ages and progress at different rates.

It is considered to start with puberty, usually around 11–14 years, although it can be as young as eight in some children.

By middle adolescence (15–17 years) the physical changes are usually complete and teens can start to look like adults. Their thinking and emotions may still seem 'childlike' as these take until late adolescence (18–21 years) to mature.

Change can still happen into the late twenties.

### Puberty

During puberty new hormones trigger growth spurts, body changes and sexual development. Adolescents can feel clumsy and awkward as they adjust to their new body and sexual feelings. They may feel self-conscious and worry about developing too fast or too slow, and whether they are 'normal'. Your reassurance and acceptance are important at this time.

### Sleep

Teens need lots of sleep — just over nine hours each night. Not getting enough good quality sleep can affect their mood, impulse control, memory and how they do at school or work. They often don't feel tired until late at

night as the hormone which prompts sleep is now released later. They tend to go to sleep late and wake up late. This can make getting to school or work hard and cause conflict at home.

It can help teens to:

- have a relaxing sleep routine
- go to sleep and get up around the same time each day
- keep TVs, phones and other electronic devices out of bedrooms when they go to bed.

It's OK to sleep in a bit on weekends, but no more than one or two hours so their body clock doesn't get too disrupted.





Be patient with your teen. They are going through changes and working out their own unique identity. You can expect some inconsistent attitudes and behaviours for a while.

### Thinking skills

Changes in a teen's brain have a big effect on how they think. Old neural pathways that are no longer needed are pruned away and new and more complex connections take place over time. This gradual reshaping can lead to them feeling confused sometimes. Often when they shrug and say 'I dunno' — they really don't know!

You can help by asking specific questions rather than broad ones, e.g. 'So what was the best part of your day?', or 'What did your teacher think of your ideas for that project?' rather than 'How was your day?'.

The brain changes that happen during adolescence help teens:

- make decisions, solve problems, identify risks and consequences, and plan ahead
- understand more complex ideas and think in abstracts
- work out their own values, beliefs and views about the world.

The ability to see different points of view takes time to develop. They may want to test their new thinking by questioning ideas, authority and social norms. They may seem argumentative and rebellious at times. Remind yourself they are not attacking you, but testing their thinking with people they feel safe with. You can help by modelling and encouraging respectful ways to question different views and other people.

### Risk taking

The part of the brain dealing with impulse control and consequences matures in late adolescence. Young teens often want to try new things for the fun of it but their brain doesn't yet have the ability to think of all the risks and how to keep safe. New experiences are an important way to learn and build skills and confidence, but teens will need your help for a while to think about safety.

Asking teens how they plan to keep safe and suggesting things they don't think of usually works better than telling.

### Feelings

Puberty brings new intense feelings that can change quickly. This can be a challenge for teens and their families. Some teens are quick to get offended or hurt and have a strong sense of justice, e.g. 'That's not fair!' Sometimes they just need space and time to calm down. As they get older they usually get better at identifying and expressing their feelings and respecting the feelings of others.

### Social groups

Being accepted by peers and social groups is very important to young people.

- They have a strong need to 'be the same' and 'fit in'.
- They often want to spend more time with friends than family. Having friends helps them gain social skills, share ideas and work out who they are.

You can help by getting to know their friends and making them welcome in your home. If you are worried about any friends, don't criticise them. Ask questions that help your teen think about the friend's actions, e.g. 'Why do you think Nathan gets into so much trouble? What might happen to his apprenticeship plans if he keeps missing a lot of school?'





## What parents can do

It can take time to get used to the fact that your child is changing and you will eventually be ‘letting go’ as a parent. Your child will progress to living by their own choices and your role will be more of a loving mentor than a manager of their lives.

These years will be easier if both parents work together in their parenting.

- Whether you live together or not, talk with the other parent about how you will do things and the values and behaviours that are important for your child and you.
- If you are in a blended family agree the role each adult will have (see ParentLink guide *Blended families*).
- If you are a single parent think about the support networks you can draw on (see ParentLink guide *Single parenting*).

Here are some of the ways parents can support their child.

### Show your love

Teenagers need to know they are loved, just as they did in childhood. We know we are loved when we hear and see it often. You could:

- tell them often that you love them. Hug your teen when the time seems right but respect their personal boundaries. They may not like affection in public when they want others to see them as ‘grown up’
- enjoy spending time together. Turn phones and devices off so you can really connect
- be interested. Young people feel valued when you show interest in things that are important to them, e.g. their friends, activities, passions
- have fun, laugh and be silly together.

### Model the behaviour you expect

Young people learn from seeing what you do so it is important to behave in ways you expect of them. They are very quick to notice a double standard.

Try to:

- stay calm even when you are upset — take ‘time out’ if you need to
- show respect in how you speak — don’t name-call or yell. Expect them to respect you in return
- model self-discipline, self-care and healthy, safe behaviours
- be balanced in your use of screen technology
- be prepared to admit your mistakes without making excuses — it shows you don’t see yourself as perfect.

### Be dependable

Parents, home and family provide a secure base for teens. It helps when parents:

- are dependable and consistent so teens know what to expect
- provide structure and routine around things like school, homework, sleep and activity. Family meals and sharing chores maintain a strong connection with home and family life



- encourage teens to be involved with the broader family. A strong network can help them feel they 'belong' and provide a safety net of caring adults to talk to.

Regular family mealtimes without TV or electronic devices build family closeness.

### Be easy to talk to

Good communication is key to your relationship. Your words, tone of voice, the look on your face and your body language all affect communication. When your teen feels safe and able to talk openly, you are more likely to have meaningful conversations about what is going on for them and how they see the world.

- Try to be relaxed and at ease when you talk.
- Take everyday opportunities to talk often, e.g. when driving in the car.
- Be open to talking about sensitive topics such as relationships and sex. Teens will learn it's OK to talk

with you about these things and that they can come to you if they have a problem (see ParentLink guides *Talking sex with young people* and *Children and learning about sexuality*).

If your teen doesn't want to talk, or finds it hard to talk about some issues, don't push them. Let them know they can come to you about anything.

If you don't know how to help, support them to find good information or other trusted adults they can talk with.

Young people often get information from their peers or online and it may not be accurate.

### Be a good listener

Teens often get advice, 'words of wisdom' or a lecture before they get to say what's on their mind. This breaks down communication. Parents miss the chance to understand their teen's thinking and ideas. It stops young people finding their own way to deal with things.

It can help if you:

- listen more than you speak
- don't try to fix things or push your ideas
- allow for silences without jumping in
- ask questions to get a better picture, not to interrogate
- hear the meaning, not just the words. Listen for the thinking behind their ideas.

### Acknowledge their feelings

Show you understand how your teen is feeling and what they are going through. Put yourself in their shoes and:

- think how they might feel — but resist focussing on yourself, e.g. 'When I was your age...'
- avoid the urge to dismiss their concerns by telling them not to worry or that this will pass. Say something like 'I can see you are really upset about that', or 'That must be really tough', or 'I'm sorry you are finding things so hard', and leave space for them to say more.

Showing empathy helps them feel 'really listened to'. It is sometimes all they need and can help them find their own answers. It helps teens learn that all feelings are OK, even difficult ones. They also learn the value of talking to someone when things are tough.

### Respect privacy

Young people need some private time and 'space' and even some secrets from parents. It's part of working out their own values and sense of self.

- Give them some space of their own. Ask before you enter their room.
- Don't go through their diary, phone or personal things in their absence.
- Don't pry for information but make sure you know enough to ensure their safety. It's OK to ask where they'll be and who they'll be with when not at home. Before they go out a good question to ask is 'What are you going to do to make sure I don't need to worry about you?'

### Reconnect when things break down

There will always be breakdowns in communication and at times there will be anger or harsh words.

While it is normal to have upsets in any relationship, it is important to work out how to reconnect with your teen. It may not always seem like it, but you are the secure base they need as they work out their place in the adult world.

- You could say 'That didn't work for either of us. Let's start again. What do you think we should do?'
- Listen to their answer without jumping in. Work out a solution together.

Help your teen have a network of trusted people to talk to.

Help them find ways to express their feelings, e.g. music, drama, art, writing or sports.



## Inspire teens to achieve their best

Teens need to believe in themselves and see future possibilities and goals they can aspire to. You can:

- show confidence in them and expect them to do well — they will come to expect this of themselves
- support them to achieve their goals and interests. Help them to find things out, or with transport and other needs — but also help them learn to do things for themselves
- introduce them to new ideas and experiences that stretch their thinking and imagination
- help them see where their interests and passions can take them
- connect them with other trusted adults and mentors who can expand their networks and experiences
- praise their efforts rather than their abilities, e.g. 'I know how hard you worked on that project', rather than 'You are really clever'.

Let your teenager teach you things. It shows you value what they know and you are open to learning too.

### Guide and support

Teens don't have equal power just because they have reached adolescence. You are still the parent and your teen needs your guidance and support in many areas. It is natural for them to want to make decisions about their own life. However, they learn to make good decisions by gradually being given more responsibility for themselves and learning from the experience.



### Limits and boundaries

Parents need to set limits and boundaries that keep young people safe and are in line with family values. You may have rules about:

- keeping safe as they go out more on their own or with friends
- the use of mobile phones and other screens, and being safe online (see ParentLink guide *Cyber safety*)
- whether girlfriends or boyfriends are allowed to sleep over (see ParentLink guide *Talking sex with young people*)
- the use of alcohol and drugs (see ParentLink guide *Young people, alcohol and drugs*)
- attending or hosting parties (see ParentLink guide *Young people and parties*).

The rules should be agreed with your teen when things are calm, rather than in a crisis. Agree what is negotiable and what is not. You may have different priorities. Listen to your teen's perspective and come to a compromise. Agree what the

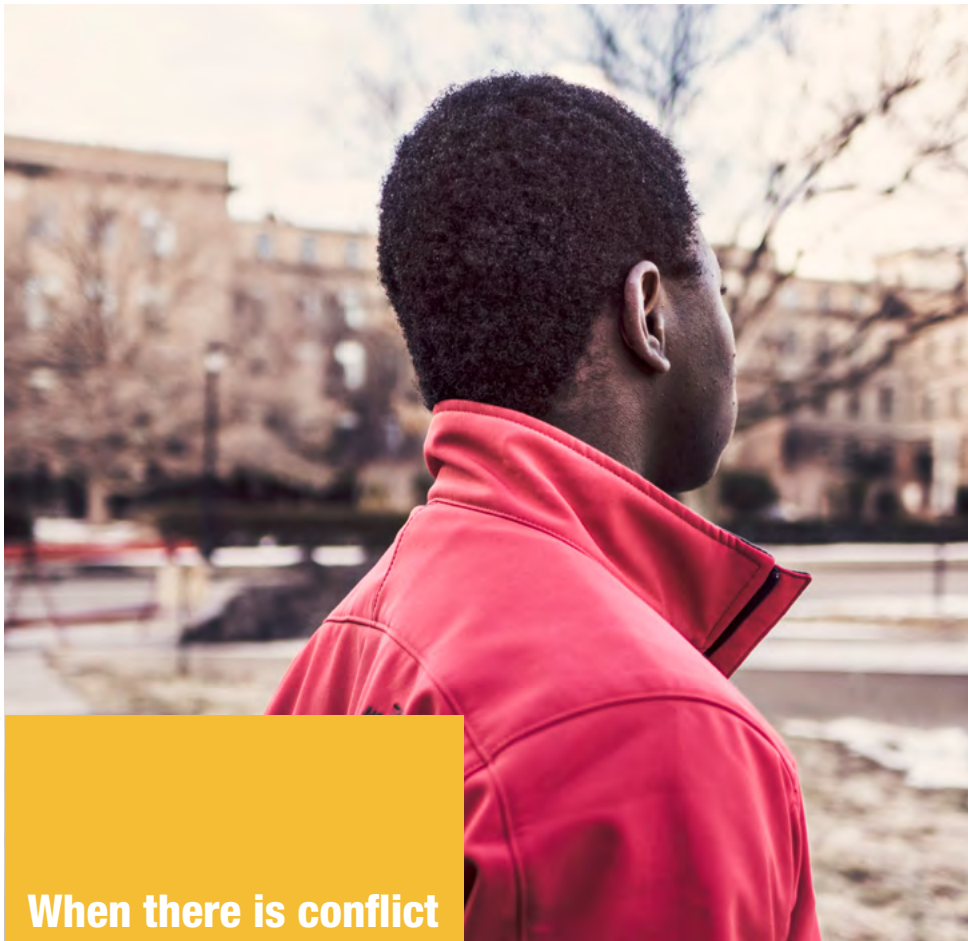
consequences will be if rules are broken. It is easier to say 'We agreed on this' when things break down.

Limits and boundaries can be relaxed as young people get better at making good decisions.

### When rules are broken

Even when consequences have been agreed, your teen may push limits. How you handle broken rules and follow through with agreed consequences is important. If you don't follow through it will be harder next time.

- Be loving, firm and consistent.
- Avoid long lectures.
- Try not to 'lose your cool'. If you do, you can be sure they will lose theirs.
- See this as something to learn from and give them a chance to try again. Mistakes are how we all learn.



## When there is conflict

Most families have conflict.

It can happen when young people start to express their own views and challenge limits and authority. Even if you feel angry, make an effort to stay calm.

Shouting and angry comments are not helpful — they hurt and create distance.

Agree about respectful ways to question things before any problems arise.

- Look for the cause before you react — listen to what your teenager says.
- Keep calm and try to not react to negative comments.
- Focus on the current issues — don't bring up old ones.
- Admit when you're wrong without making excuses.
- Take a break if needed and agree to speak when you both are calmer.

## Power struggles

If you find yourself in a struggle with your teen, think about whether control has become your goal rather than helping them learn responsibility.

You can improve things by:

- being a good communicator — listen as well as talk
- being clear about your values and why certain things are important to you, e.g. being honest, treating each other with respect, caring for each other by sharing the chores
- not trying to 'win' or be right all the time.

Avoid arguing over small things so you can stand firm on the big issues. Don't get into a power struggle — nobody wins!

## Get help with difficult issues

Sometimes young people can act in ways that worry parents. Some may get involved with risky things that can cause harm, e.g. alcohol, drugs or unsafe sexual behaviour. Others might struggle with their emotions and feel anxious or low a lot of the time. Some might withdraw from family and friends.

If you are concerned, it is important to act early and get help for your teen and for yourself.

Don't wait until things get worse. You could:

- talk with them if you feel OK to do so. Make sure they have access to good information
- encourage them to talk with a school counsellor, mentor or other trusted adult
- seek help from a youth service, doctor or counsellor. Offer to go with them if they would like you to.

## If there is violence

Some teens are violent towards parents, siblings or others in the family. It can be physical, verbal, emotional or financial. There may be sexual violence towards other children, e.g. siblings. If this is happening in your family:

- take steps to keep yourself and others safe
- make it clear that violence is never OK
- seek help straight away — it is rare for violence and abuse to stop without help.

## Living with young people



### Looking after yourself

Parenting a teenager can be stressful at times and parents can feel upset and worn out. Looking after your health and doing things you enjoy can help you feel more positive. Your teen learns that you respect and value yourself.

Hang in there! Your young person needs to know you are there for them, even when things are tough. The best resource they have is you.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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