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A Parent's Guide to Surviving the Teen Years

You've lived through 2 a.m. feedings, toddler temper tantrums, and the back-to-school blues. So why is the word "teenager" causing you so much worry?

When you consider that the teen years are a period of intense growth, not only physically but emotionally and intellectually, it's understandable that it's a time of confusion and upheaval for many families.

Despite some adults' negative perceptions about teens, they are often energetic, thoughtful, and idealistic, with a deep interest in what's fair and right. So, although it can be a period of conflict between parent and child, the teen years are also a time to help kids grow into the distinct individuals they will become.

Understanding the Teen Years

So when does adolescence start? Everybody's different — there are early bloomers, late arrivers, speedy developers, and slow-but-steady growers. In other words, there's a wide range of what's considered normal.

But it's important to make a (somewhat artificial) distinction between puberty and adolescence. Most of us think of puberty as the development of adult sexual characteristics: breasts, menstrual periods, pubic hair, and facial hair. These are certainly the most visible signs of puberty and impending adulthood, but kids who are showing physical changes (between the ages of 8 and 14 or so) also can be going through a bunch of changes that aren't readily seen from the outside. These are the changes of adolescence.

Many kids announce the onset of adolescence with a dramatic change in behavior around their parents. They're starting to separate from mom and dad and become more independent. At the same time, kids this age are increasingly aware of how others, especially their peers, see them and are desperately trying to fit in. Their peers often become much more important than parents as far as making decisions.

Kids often start "trying on" different looks and identities, and they become very aware of how they differ from their peers, which can result in episodes of distress and conflict with parents.

Butting Heads

One of the common stereotypes of adolescence is the rebellious, wild teen continually at odds with mom and dad. Although it may be the case for some kids and this *is* a time of emotional ups and downs, that stereotype certainly is *not* representative of most teens.

But the primary goal of the teen years is to achieve independence. To do this, teens must start pulling away from their parents — especially the parent whom they're the closest to. This can feel like teens are always at odds with parents or don't want to be around them the way they used to.

As teens mature, they start to think more abstractly and rationally. They're forming their moral code. And parents of teens may find that kids who previously had been willing to conform to please them will suddenly begin asserting themselves — and their opinions — strongly and rebelling against parental control.

You may need to look closely at how much room you give your teen to be an individual and ask yourself questions such as: "Am I a controlling parent?," "Do I listen to my child?," and "Do I allow my teen's opinions and tastes to differ from my own?"

Tips for Parenting During the Teen Years

Looking for a roadmap to find your way through these years? Here are some tips:

Educate Yourself

Read books about teenagers. Think back on your own teen years. Remember your struggles with acne or your embarrassment at developing early — or late. Expect some mood changes in your typically sunny child, and be prepared for more conflict as he or she matures as an individual. Parents who know what's coming can cope with it better. And the more you know, the better you can prepare.

Talk to Kids Early and Often

Starting to talk about menstruation or wet dreams after they've already begun is starting too late. Answer the early questions kids have about bodies, such as the differences between boys and girls and where babies come from. But don't overload them with information — just answer their questions. If you don't know the answers, get them from someone who does, like a trusted friend or your pediatrician.

You know your kids. You can hear when your child's starting to tell jokes about sex or when attention to personal appearance is increasing. This is a good time to jump in with your own questions such as:

- Are you noticing any changes in your body?
- Are you having any strange feelings?
- Are you sad sometimes and don't know why?

A yearly physical exam is a great time to talk about this. A doctor can tell your preadolescent — and you — what to expect in the next few years. An exam can be a jumping-off point for a good parent/child discussion. The later you wait to have these talks, the more likely your child will be to form misconceptions or become embarrassed about or afraid of physical and emotional changes.

And the earlier you open the lines of communication, the better your chances of keeping them open through the teen years. Give your child books on puberty written for kids going through it. Share memories of your own adolescence. There's nothing like knowing that mom or dad went through it, too, to put kids more at ease.

Put Yourself in Your Child's Place

Practice empathy by helping your child understand that it's normal to be a bit concerned or self-conscious, and that it's OK to feel grown-up one minute and like a kid the next.

Pick Your Battles

If teenagers want to dye their hair, paint their fingernails black, or wear funky clothes, think twice before you object. Teens want to shock their parents and it's a lot better to let them do something temporary and harmless; save your objections for things that really matter, like tobacco, drugs and alcohol, or permanent changes to their appearance.

Ask why your teen wants to dress or look a certain way and try to understand how your teen is feeling. You also might want to discuss how others might perceive them if they look different — help your teen understand how he or she might be viewed.

Set Expectations

Teens might act unhappy about the expectations their parents place on them. Still, they usually understand and need to know that their parents care enough about them to expect certain things such as good grades, acceptable behavior, and sticking to the house rules. If parents have appropriate expectations, teens will likely try to meet them. Without reasonable expectations, your teen may feel you don't care about him or her.

Inform Your Teen — and Stay Informed Yourself

The teen years often are a time of experimentation, and sometimes that experimentation includes risky behaviors. Don't avoid the subjects of sex and drug, alcohol, or tobacco use. Discussing tough topics openly with kids **before** they're exposed to them actually makes it more likely that they'll act responsibly when the time comes. Share your family values with your teen and talk about what you believe is right and wrong, and why.

Know your child's friends — and know their friends' parents. Regular communication between parents can go a long way toward creating a safe environment for all teens in a peer group. Parents can help each other keep track of the

kids' activities without making the kids feel that they're being watched.

Know the Warning Signs

A certain amount of change is normal during the teen years. But too drastic or long-lasting a switch in personality or behavior may signal real trouble — the kind that needs professional help. Watch for these warning signs:

- extreme weight gain or loss
- sleep problems
- rapid, drastic changes in personality
- sudden change in friends
- skipping school often
- falling grades
- talk or even jokes about suicide
- signs of tobacco, alcohol, or drug use
- run-ins with the law

Any other inappropriate behavior that lasts for more than 6 weeks can be a sign of underlying trouble, too. You may expect a glitch or two in your teen's behavior or grades during this time, but your A/B student shouldn't suddenly be failing, and your normally outgoing kid shouldn't suddenly become constantly withdrawn. Your doctor or a local counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist can help you find proper counseling.

Respect Kids' Privacy

Some parents, understandably, have a very hard time with this one. They may feel that anything their kids do is their business. But to help your teen become a young adult, you'll need to grant some privacy. If you notice warning signs of trouble, then you can invade your child's privacy until you get to the heart of the problem. But otherwise, it's a good idea to back off.

In other words, your teenager's room, texts, e-mails, and phone calls should be private. You also shouldn't expect your teen to share all thoughts or activities with you at all times. Of course, for safety reasons, you should always know where teens are going, when they'll be returning, what they're doing, and with whom, but you don't need to know every detail. And you definitely shouldn't expect to be invited along!

Start with trust. Tell your teen that you trust him or her, but if the trust gets broken, he or she will enjoy fewer freedoms until it's rebuilt.

Monitor What Kids See and Read

TV shows, magazines and books, the Internet — kids have access to tons of information. Be aware of what yours watch and read. Don't be afraid to set limits on the amount of time spent in front of the computer or the TV. Know what they're learning from the media and who they may be communicating with online.

Teens shouldn't have unlimited access to TV or the Internet in private — these should be public activities. Access to technology also should be limited after certain hours (for example, 10 p.m. or so) to encourage adequate sleep. It's not unreasonable to have cellphones and computers off limits after a certain time.

Make Appropriate Rules

Bedtime for a teenager should be age appropriate, just as it was when your child was a baby. Teens still need about 8-9 hours of sleep. Encourage your teen to stick to a sleep schedule that will meet those needs.

Reward your teen for being trustworthy. Has he or she kept to a 10 p.m. curfew on weekends? Move it to 10:30 p.m. And does a teen always have to go along on family outings? Encourage a reasonable amount of family time together, but be flexible. Don't be insulted when your growing child doesn't always want to be with you. Think back: You probably felt the same way about *your* mom and dad.

Will This Ever Be Over?

As kids progress through the teen years, you'll notice a slowing of the highs and lows of adolescence. And, eventually, they'll become independent, responsible, communicative young adults.

So remember the motto of many parents with teens: We're going through this together, and we'll come out of it —

together!

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Date reviewed: January 2015

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