

PARENTING TIPS TO MANAGE YOUR TEENS

By Leonard Szymczak, MSW, LCSW

The onset of adolescence can often feel like a ride on an upside down roller coaster. This is a time when teens seek more freedom and continually challenge parental decisions. The result can be ongoing family conflict over a wide range of issues such as curfew, chores, privileges, drug/alcohol use, and respect. Since the adolescent roller coaster has many ups and downs, parents may need to fasten their seat belts.

Consider the fact that a teenager must deal with a multitude of changes: coping with a developing body and increased hormones, gaining acceptance with their peer group, rethinking values, facing career choices, learning about responsibility, and redefining relationships with parents. It's no wonder that mood swings and the desire for independence will test even the best of family relationships.

To add to the mix, adolescence occurs at a time when parents are often going through their own mid-life transitions. Parents may be coping with an aging body, dealing with dissatisfaction in the marriage or career, reviewing unfulfilled dreams, and facing the fact their children will soon be leaving the nest empty.

It stands to reason that with all the dramatic changes in the family, dealing with adolescents can be quite harrowing. The following tips can help you manage your teens and make that roller coaster ride less turbulent.

- **STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS.** Relationships, not material possessions, keep the lines of communication open. Take time to listen to your teenager and encourage open discussion. This will make it easier to talk about and resolve problems when they do arise. When appropriate, revise rules according to your teen's age and ability to accept responsibility. Continue to plan family activities that promote fun and enjoyment even if your teenager says he/she's too old to participate.
- **ENCOURAGE GOOD DECISION-MAKING.** Affirm your teenagers when they make good judgments and help them learn from poor decisions. Positive interactions and affirming statements contribute to healthy self-esteem and should far outweigh the negatives. While teenagers may not be as comfortable receiving positives from parents as younger children, they still like to hear them. Use incentives and added privileges to reinforce appropriate behaviors.
- **INTRODUCE CHOICES.** Teens often respond better if they are involved in the decision-making or in making choices, i.e. "Would you rather mow the lawn this morning or this afternoon?" Choices offer teens the experience of making decisions and give them some control over their lives. You could even consider asking your adolescent to choose the punishment for an infraction. Obviously, you have to agree with the decision, but surprisingly, teenagers can be particularly harsh on themselves.

- **ESTABLISH FIRM GUIDELINES AND CONSEQUENCES.** Even though your teenager may challenge your authority, he/she needs guidelines and limits to learn about responsibility and make good choices. Know what is negotiable and non-negotiable and state them clearly. Avoid global consequences like “being grounded for the rest of the year.” Consequences should be more immediate and fit the infraction. Obviously, if your teen arrives home ten minutes late, the consequence would be different than if it was two hours later. Consequences for misbehavior could involve adding extra chores/responsibilities or taking away privileges, i.e. the car, television, phone, or grounding. “Since you chose to stay out past curfew, you won’t be able to go out tomorrow evening, as we agreed.”
- **BE CONSISTENT.** Stability and consistency are important qualities when establishing guidelines. Therefore, be prepared to follow through with your decisions. Continually reinforce good behaviors and administer the consequences you’ve already established. As it takes many years for a child to mature, so does it take ongoing consistency to promote responsible behaviors.
- **CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES.** Rebellions normally occur during adolescence. At times it may feel like your teenager’s job is to assassinate all your ideas. Your job is to insure that the really important values and ideas don’t get assassinated. Avoid the small skirmishes such as your child’s hairstyle and focus on those issues that are particularly important, i.e. “No drugs or alcohol,” and hold firm.
- **REMAIN CALM.** If you’re about to be thrown from the roller coaster, remain calm. Emotionally detaching yourself not only defuses a conflictual situation but also conveys to your teenager that you are in control. If a heated argument does ensue, take a time-out. It can provide a cooling down period for both teenager and parent. Returning to the problem with cooler heads provides everyone with a better chance at resolving the issue.
- **MOTIVATE WITH CONTRACTS.** A written contract establishes an agreement about what is expected, what won’t be tolerated, and what incentives and consequences have been established. Involving your teenager in writing these down can help clarify expectations and defuse conflicts later should there be any disagreements about what was previously agreed.
- **BE A ROLE MODEL.** Your role as a parent provides the foundation for your children. How you communicate and resolve conflict, how you make life decisions and express your values, and how you convey your attitude about issues all make lasting impressions on your children. Teenagers are more prone to incorporate your standards and values when they witness you actually living them.

- **TALK WITH OTHER PARENTS.** Knowing you are not alone during this unsteady time can be invaluable. By establishing and maintaining relationships with other parents, you can resource with one another and share information, establish guidelines for your children, share fears and successes, and offer support. Teenagers have a strong network of friends; parents need one too.
- **GET HELP FOR YOUR CHILDREN IF THEY NEED IT.** If there is a problem, tell your teenager what you observed, express your concerns, and state the behaviors that need to be changed and how you might help. Clearly state the consequences if their behavior doesn't change. If they do need counseling, consult with a professional.

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