

Faculty and Employee Assistance Program NEWSLETTER

Parenting Teens

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This month we'd like to look at the challenges inherent in parenting a teenager. Some of you are saying, "Been there and done that." Other readers are wondering if it always has to be this hard. It's been said that the only thing harder than being a teenager is parenting one.

Changes, changes and more changes

Let's start with a look at the tasks that all teens are challenged by as they enter middle school and adolescence. Adolescence is a stressful developmental period filled with major changes - body changes, changes in thoughts, and changes in feelings. Strong feelings of stress, confusion, fear, and uncertainty, as well as pressure to succeed, and the ability to think about things in new ways influence a teenager's problem-solving and decision making abilities. But where do teens go to find help with these developmental tasks? Are you thinking "their friends"? Actually you are right that they do look to their peers for support and these relationships continue to increase in importance to their successful development as they mature. However, they still do look to their parents for guidance, but our opportunities do dwindle.



We often do think that they aren't listening to us and that we have no control over their behavior. If we have done our job well, they are using our teachings to guide them. Freud called this the superego. It's more commonly known as our conscience, our definition of what is morally wrong. How many times have we heard our parents' words in our thoughts? This was their successful influence on us.

The Kaiser Family foundation studied "Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds". They examined media use among a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 3rd through 12th graders. This study found that over a 7-day week, children spent 6-1/2 hours a day with media (TV, video games, music, and computers), 2 hours with their parents, just over an hour in physical exercise or play, 50 minutes doing homework, and 30 minutes doing chores.

The results of this study are disappointing to some, but not surprising. To look at the glass half full, this means that parents can and do have the opportunity to influence their teens' development for those 2 hours a day. This article will offer you some guidelines to maximize your 2 hour window.

Myths about Teens

It's important to have understanding as well as strategies when trying to parent a teen. According to Practical Parenting Advice there are myths that we should not be threatened by. Some these myths are:

- Teens prefer their friends to their parents.
- Teens are moody, rebellious, and never serious.
- Teens don't care about others.

We already established that friends do increase in importance, but we also must remember that parents still do retain a large influence over their teens' lives. Generally, adolescents do choose friends with similar values and tastes to theirs.

How much should I monitor my teen?

Successful parents need to maintain a monitoring system. Parental monitoring means establishing guidelines and limits for your child in order to keep track of what is going on in his or her social world. This system should be well-established before they reach their teen years. The questions include where your kids are, who they are with, what kinds of activities have been planned and how they will get there and back again. This may sound like the list of questions you were expected to answer when you were a teen.

How can I stay connected without smothering?

Another important strategy is to stay involved and connected. Talk and listen to your children. Know their friends, their school experience, and what their world is like. Parents busy with work and children busy with school activities have very little time to interact. That's why it takes special effort. Here are some suggestions for connecting with your child:

- Be a sounding board. Make it clear that you are willing to listen.
- Use everyday family activities to stay close. Making dinner, running errands, taking a walk can all be turned into quality family time.
- Build in extra time to "check-in" at bedtime. Do not assume your child has outgrown this important bedtime ritual.
- Use notes, bulletin boards, and even e-mail to communicate with each other.
- Get to know your child's friends by inviting them to your home and on family outings.
- Schedule time. Studies show teens want to spend more time-not less-with their families.

Accept this stage by making your expectations known. Pick the biggest arguments and let some things be a part of the teenager's learning process. Take care not to exclude your teen because he/she is becoming independent while younger children are still more dependent. Their needs just differ. They both need attention-but in different ways. The most effective parents set high standards and are demanding but wrap this approach with warmth, love, and involvement. Yes, It can be done.



If you would like to talk with a FEAP Consultant about Parenting Teens or other family issues, please call 434.243.2643 or email dds4e@virginia.edu to schedule an appointment.

Resources:

The Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation website at www.kff.org
 "Raising Successful Teens" at www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/parenting/teens
 Practical Parenting Advice at www.practicalparent.org.uk