

# The Parent-Teen Relationship: Life through a Teenager's Eyes

Information from...

## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

"Enjoy them now, they'll soon be teenagers!" Warnings like this from friends and relatives, together with media images of adolescents as irresponsible, rebellious troublemakers, can lead parents to expect trouble as their children enter puberty. It is a rare parent who does not approach a child's adolescence without some misgivings. But family life does not have to be a battleground during the teenage years. Parents and teens can live together more or less harmoniously if parents know what to expect and are willing to make some adjustments in the way they think and act.

The purpose of these fact sheets is to help parents cope more effectively during their children's adolescence. Although this information is intended mainly for parents of teenagers, it is general enough to be useful to parents of younger children as well.

This first fact sheet discusses the way teenagers develop and what parents can do to help them through the transition from childhood to adulthood. The second fact sheet will focus on strategies parents can use to deal with typical teenage behaviour.

### Teenagers — Myth and Reality

When you hear the words "teenagers" or "adolescents", what other terms come to your mind? "Rebellious," "secretive," "moody" or "self-centred"? Almost anything written about adolescents is likely to include these words.

But are these really fair descriptions of the typical teenager? Do they spell trouble for teens and their families? Not necessarily. There have been many studies done on teens and their families. To a very large extent the research shows that many parents never encounter serious conflicts with their adolescent children. Studies show that parents can live peacefully with their teens by keeping communication open and positive and by encouraging their teens to become independent while maintaining reasonable rules. Growing a “thick skin” for the duration can certainly help too.

"Teenager" is a loaded word and adolescents are victims of that label. Adolescents are not a separate species, after all, but human beings — just like their parents. They too must cope with the day-to-day problems of living in a complex and changing world.

### **Defining Adolescence**

What is adolescence? The Latin root of the word is *esso* which means “becoming.” The term is used to describe the period from puberty’s onset to the beginning of adulthood. In our culture this period can be described as a span of years, a stage of growth, a subculture, a state of mind or all of the above.

In many other cultures, adolescence is not recognized as a distinct stage of life at all. Young people move directly from childhood to adulthood, with the transition marked by some formal rite of passage.

In Europe and North America, technological advances that have followed the Industrial Revolution have made it necessary for young people to stay in school for many years. This means that there is a much longer period of “becoming” between the end of childhood and society’s legal recognition of adult status at age eighteen. The term adolescence was invented to describe this in-between period in which young people are neither children nor adults.

Adolescence begins with a period of physical development marked by a growth spurt that leads to puberty — the maturation of the primary sex organs. The timing of this process can vary a great deal among individuals of both sexes. For girls, the onset of puberty occurs between the ages of nine and fourteen, with twelve being the average. Female puberty is characterized by breast development, the appearance of pubic hair and broadening of the hips. A year or two later there is a sudden increase in height and menstruation begins.

Boys start to mature physically around the age of eleven. The first sign is the enlargement of the testicles, followed by the appearance of pubic hair, changes in the penis and broadening of the shoulders. A boy's growth spurt usually occurs around age fourteen when the voice deepens and facial hair begins to appear. The ejaculation of semen in "wet dreams" may begin anytime from age eleven to age fifteen.

### **Growing Pains**

In any culture, teens have a natural need to establish their own identity. Adolescents must progress from childhood dependency to adult independence — from being subject to the authority and control of parents to exercising personal autonomy and self-control.

Separating from parents and establishing one's individuality is a normal and necessary step in personal development. Separating is stressful because it involves leaving behind a relatively stable way of being and accepting a new self-image.

For parents this usually means dealing with some tension in the home as teens ask themselves "Who am I?" "What will I become?" and "How will I get along with others?"

Teens often look for the answers to these questions by challenging authority and testing rules. Parents can help by encouraging their teens to assume increasing responsibility for their choices and actions, while continuing to provide appropriate supervision and guidance. No matter how many times teens cry "You are treating me like a baby!", they still need a structure of expectations, routines and values for their safety and well-being.

Teens also have to cope with physical growth — and change. Teens are usually very anxious and sensitive about their physical appearance. They worry tremendously about their height, weight, skin and hair. They are quick to find fault with themselves, although most of these "defects" are largely exaggerated by them. Acne can be a real plague for many teenagers. It is important that parents offer not only reassurance but also practical help with physical problems, for example, by getting medical attention for their teens when it's needed. Parents can also help teens accept themselves by encouraging them to find activities and interests that will enrich their lives and that don't require a perfect body.

Learning how to relate to others is an important task for teens, which is why the opinion of friends often appears to rival parents' influence at this time. In separating from parents, teens are looking for acceptance from others, and a context in which to practise social skills.

We tend to think of peer pressure as negative but in fact much of it is positive. Teens help keep each other on the right track. Parents can help by encouraging teens to bring their friends home. Making your home a welcoming place is good for your teens' self-esteem.

As sexual feelings surface, teenagers also need to learn how to relate to the opposite sex. Teens need information about sex but parents are usually uncomfortable about discussing this subject with their children. Research indicates that parents' attitudes have a major impact on teens' sexual behaviour. Media items can give parents many opportunities to discuss their values in this area. There is also a lot of informative literature about sexuality that parents can share with teens.

Coping with various profound changes in personality, intellect and social status can throw teens off balance. As they adjust, teenagers may behave in ways that can be disconcerting to unprepared parents. How the parents respond to this behaviour depends a lot on how they interpret it. Parents who are expecting trouble and take their teens'

actions at face value may well unwittingly encourage the conflict they fear. By learning about adolescence and the challenges that lie ahead, parents can minimize conflict and promote psychological growth in their children.

### **Why are Teenagers So... Difficult?**

Teenagers seem to do the most outrageous things, but it is all part of growing up. Some so-called negative behaviour is considered normal for teenagers as their ideas about the world develop.

***Rebelliousness*** — In many ways teens tell parents "I am not you, I am me — and here is how I'll show you!" Outlandish hair styles and clothing, messy rooms, listening to loud and "vulgar" music, or sleeping late are some common ways teens assert their individuality. You can choose to see this kind of behaviour as defiance of authority — or as a display of integrity.

It is important for parents to remember that in rebelling, teens are fulfilling an important psychological need. Annoying as some of their tastes and habits might be, it helps to realize that things could be a lot worse! Parents can cope by gritting their teeth and tolerating some of this behaviour for the sake of their teens' development. Save your concern for truly destructive behaviour.

**Mood swings** — Teens can change from day to day or even from moment to moment, from bright cheerfulness to sullen withdrawal, over seemingly minor issues or for no apparent reason at all. Moodiness is often related to hormonal changes. These mood swings can be frustrating for parents especially when their offers of sympathy or helpful suggestions are rebuffed. Parents can avoid overreacting if they understand that these unhappy moods are not directed at them personally.

**Self-Centredness** — Teens are often preoccupied with themselves, a common characteristic of people under stress. They assume that everyone around them is focused on them too. Because of this increased self-consciousness, teens feel they are always “on stage,” and can spend hours in front of a mirror grooming themselves.

It is important for parents to see self-centredness, not as a disregard for others, but as a form of psychological self-protection. Teens have fragile egos. Parents can be helpful by giving their teens *tactful* grooming tips and by encouraging them to look beyond themselves in some way — perhaps by joining an interest group or taking up a new sport or hobby.

**Aggressiveness and Showing Off** — Teens often mask their insecurity about their social roles, or about how they “rate” with their peers by acting in rowdy or aggressive ways. Perhaps

they feel the best defence is offence! Talking loudly, pushing and shoving each other, driving too fast or generally being unruly when in a group in public are typical ways they show off. At home, showing off takes the form of “talking back” to parents. Challenging and contradicting are ways to establish who “I am” really is. At this point teens need adults around them who can keep their cool in the face of teenage know-it-all posturing.

**Argumentativeness** — Teens are developing intellectually and testing their mental powers. That’s why parents often find themselves in frequent arguments with their teens. Parents may be earnestly trying to get a point across but teens may simply be arguing for the sake of arguing. Parents would be better off listening to their teens than trying to win the debate. Listening doesn’t necessarily mean agreeing.

Although it may be tempting to use arguments as an opportunity to “set them straight,” a parent’s role is to be a sounding board rather than an adversary. Teens have to learn how to think things through for themselves. They are more likely to do so when their pride is not on the line in winning an argument. When their emotions are intense, teens are not much inclined to listen to reason anyway.

**Criticizing parents** — Teens often accuse parents of being hopelessly out of touch, out of style and old-fashioned. Teens are terribly sensitive to and easily embarrassed by their parents' looks or dress or by what their parents say, especially in front of their friends. As a result, they may be reluctant to be seen with their parents.

Parents should not be offended, for example, when teens ask to be dropped off a block away from school. They are only trying to avoid the appearance of dependency. When parents understand their children's need to look grown up in the eyes of their peer group, they'll see why it is wiser to laugh about rather than resent their teens' view of them as "dinosaurs" or "antiques."

### **What Teens Need from Their Parents**

Teenage behaviour is not always easy to live with. Learning to accept — though not necessarily condone — "typical" behaviour is one of the biggest challenges in bringing up teenagers. Parents have to try to keep this behaviour — especially the aggressive type, — at a manageable level, so that it doesn't escalate into violence or become self-defeating for their teenagers.

Parents who lose their tempers or withdraw in despair can make things worse. Mothers and fathers can help their teens by establishing what behaviour is or is not acceptable in the

home. Decide what you really care about and put your energy into enforcing the rules that are really important. As for the rest, ignore what you can reasonably tolerate for the sake of your teen's growth. Otherwise, you will likely find yourself in continual confrontations that may end in a painful rift.

### **Help Ease the Tension:**

**Express concerns.** But don't condemn your teens. Teens need parents who can stand firm in the face of their inconsistent and unpredictable behaviour. Parents' responses should be in the form of opinions and observations — not judgements and condemnation. Whatever their doubts, parents should always express confidence that things will get better.

**Stay interested.** Keep up with your teens' activities and friends but try not to pry into their lives. Don't be hurt if your teens don't confide in you, but spend hours on the telephone sharing secrets with their friends. Respect your teens' need for privacy.

**Be alert to your teens' sensitivities.** Teens don't usually have the self-confidence to laugh at themselves. They can react quite badly to teasing and jokes at their expense.

It is important to be aware of the messages you are sending both by word and by action. Parents' anxiety over teen behaviour can convey an attitude

of annoyance and distrust. Teens are particularly sensitive to the latter: the accusation that “You don’t trust me!” ranks a close second to “You just don’t understand!” Constant negative messages from parents can lead to hostility, indifference and withdrawal in teenagers. To be helpful, direct criticism at the event or behaviour, not at your teen’s personality.

Try not to dwell on the negative but look for positive ways to solve a problem. “This isn’t working — let’s find a better way!”

***Catch them doing something right.***

During this time of shaky identity, teens need parents’ help to build their sense of self-worth and self-confidence. They need parents to support their efforts and cheer their achievements. When they are struggling, they need their parents’ faith in them and their parents’ encouragement. Although teens do not want their parents hovering over them, they do want their parents to be available. Your faith in them can have a powerful positive impact.

***Set clear expectations.*** Although teens may complain about rules and limits, they need the security of knowing what is acceptable and unacceptable to their parents. Much conflict can be avoided when parents are clear and firm about what they expect.

When parents set guidelines, they should try to think ahead and foresee the kinds of situations involving their

teens that are likely to arise. The parents will then be better prepared to take the right stand when the time comes. It’s best to know in advance whether or not you are willing to compromise.

***Show them you love them.*** Adolescents are hard on themselves and on their parents. At times their behaviour makes them hard to like. And of course, teens go through phases when they don’t like their parents very much either.

Nevertheless it is important to show affection even in difficult circumstances. Teens do not want to be kissed or hugged by their parents in public but they can still exchange kisses before bedtime and before leaving the house. Teens need to hear from their parents that they are loved unconditionally for themselves and that their parents will stand by them no matter what.

**Where to Turn for Help**

Every parent feels overwhelmed from time to time. If you feel your family life is continually in turmoil or if you are always worried about your teens, you can reach out to other parents for ideas and support. You can look for family life education groups. There is also a great deal of family life education material available in audio, video and printed form. Similar material for people of different cultural backgrounds is beginning to become available. You

can also ask your school, doctor or clergy for names of agencies where you can get professional counselling and parenting advice.

### **Suggested Readings**

These and other helpful books on bringing up adolescents are available in your local library.

Bayard, Robert, and Jean Bayard. *How to Deal with Your Acting up Teenager*. New York: M. Evans and Co., 1988.

Bélanger, Robert. *Parents d'adolescents*. (2nd edition). Coll. Éducation à la vie familiale, 1989.

Brenton, Myron. *How to Survive Your Child's Rebellious Years*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1980.

Cloutier, Richard. *Mieux vivre avec nos adolescents*. Montreal: Éditions le Jour, 1994.

Delaroche, Patrick. *Adolescence à problèmes : Comprendre vos enfants pour les aider*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1992.

Dolto, Françoise. *La cause des adolescents*. Paris: Laffont, 1988.

Erickson, Erik H. *Adolescence et crise : la quête de l'identité*. Paris: Flammarion, 1972.

Falardeau, Guy. *La sexualité des jeunes. Un pédiatre raconte*. Montreal: Éditions le Jour, 1994.

Gardner, James. *The Turbulent Teens*. San Diego: Oaktree Publications Inc., 1982.

Levine, Saul. *Tell Me It's Only a Phase*. Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall Canada Ltd., 1987.

McCoy, Kathleen, and Charles Wibblesman. *Crisis Proof Your Teenager*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1991.

Mitchell, John. *Adolescence: Some Critical Issues*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Ltd., 1971.

### **Audio-Visual Resources**

Preventing Family Violence – A Catalogue of Canadian videos on family violence is available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. It contains more than 60 videos which may be borrowed from the regional offices of the National Film Board of Canada.



This document was prepared under contract by Gus Fraser, the coordinator of the Family Life Education program at the Family Service Centre of Ottawa-Carleton. We would like to thank the following people for their invaluable assistance:

Molly Fraser, staff member Children's Aid Society of Ottawa-Carleton; Maggie Fietz, Executive Director of the Family Service Centre and staff members Wilma Stollman, Lorna Erickson-Fraser, Liz Shannon and Jan Christensen; Moe Turner, former supervisor and colleague; Pauline Van Lammers, Executive Director of the Nepean Community Resource Centre; Mollie Elie, guidance counsellor at Philomen Wright High School; Danièle Fréchette, psycho-sociologist specializing in conjugal violence and family crisis interventions; and Gisèle Lacroix, program consultant with the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

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