



Living with your Teenager

University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension

understanding emotional changes

Whenver parents of teenagers gather, a topic of conversation is bound to arise — the trials and tribulations of living with a teenager.

Parents of teens are likely to nod sympathetically when a parent complains of his or her teen's excessive moodiness. Many will agree that this teenage "problem" causes much of the conflict in their families.

Pre-teens' and young teens' increased emotionality may make these years very difficult for many parents and their children. Both parents and the teens themselves might become distressed by the teens' emotional moods. And all have difficulty managing their feelings of distress.

This publication is designed to give parents some basic information about changes and pressures during the teen years, and what teens say worries them. Understanding this may help you maintain communication and a tolerant attitude during what might be a turbulent time.

It is important to understand that teenagers' increased emotionality often relates to the biological, cognitive and social changes they are experiencing. For example, in pre-teen and teenaged children, one source of increased

emotionality is the physical changes associated with puberty — height, weight, facial and body hair, developing breasts in girls, etc.

The same hormones that set off the physical changes at puberty also affect moods, emotional responses and increased awareness of sexuality. Changes in body size may also result in unconventional meal patterns. Skipping breakfast and fasting to lose weight are common.

Another source of young teens' emotionality is the strain caused by changes in their **cognition**, or thinking. Teenagers become increasingly able to think about abstract concepts and hypothetical situations — things that have not yet happened, but will or could happen.

New ways of thinking may also make young teens convinced that everyone is concerned about the same things they are concerned about and, especially, that everyone is as interested in them as they are in themselves. They are sure that everyone is looking at them and talking about them. Since they believe everyone is as interested, they conclude that they are very special people with very special feelings no one in the world ever felt before: "Oh Daddy, you don't understand!"

These changes in cognitive skills may also result in teens challenging parents more about certain rules or long-held values. That is, they begin thinking more on their own, and no longer simply accept things at face value.

Added to physical changes and changes in thinking — which come from within the child — are social changes. Teenagers must adjust to the expectations of people around them. However, these expectations may be quite confusing. For example, adolescents pay adult prices for movies at about age 12, but cannot get into certain adult movies until they are 17 or older. They are allowed to drive at 16 and fight for their country at 18, but cannot buy alcohol until they are 21.

Teens' social environment may also require changes in behavior. They are often expected to act more mature in social situations, and take on more responsibilities. Teens may also become concerned with dating and behaving in ways to attract someone they want to date.

The expectations of adult behavior along with the restrictions for childhood may put tremendous pressure on young teens and lead to emotional uncertainty.

What worries teens?

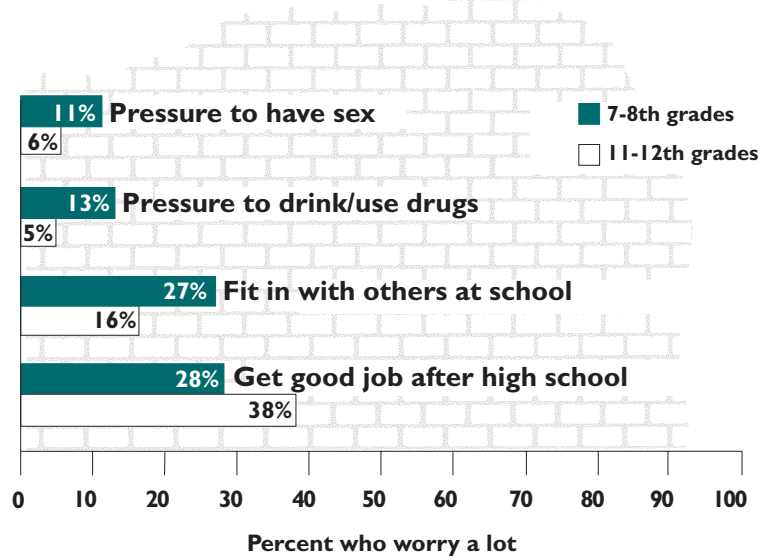
Given these changes, it is important to know what worries your teen so you can best understand him or her. University of Wisconsin-Madison and UW-Extension researchers surveyed more than 40,000 teens in 40 Wisconsin counties. According to the findings of Teen Assessment Project (TAP) 1992-96 surveys, teens' five most common worries are to:

1. Get good grades in school.
2. Look good.
3. Get along with their parents.
4. Get a good job after high school.
5. Fit in with others at school.

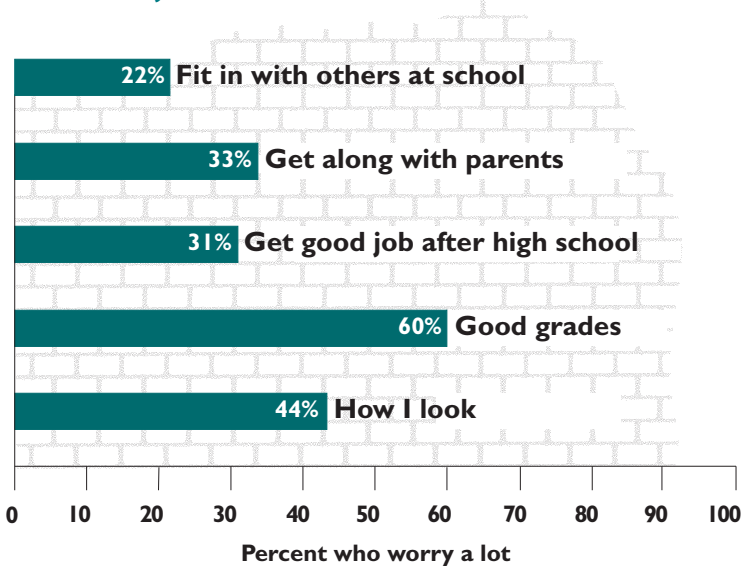
For more than half the females surveyed (55 percent), how they look is a major concern.

However, keep in mind that some worries may become more or less important in later years. For example, young adolescents tend to be more concerned with fitting in with others at school. And older adolescents are more worried about getting a good job after high school. Also, young teens are more worried about being pressured into having sex or using drugs and alcohol than are older teens. Your older children may be more likely to feel comfortable with their own decisions, so they may not be as influenced by their peers.

What worries young teens, older teens



Teens major worries or concerns?



N = 40,000 Wisconsin teens, 1992-96 Teen Assessment Project

Keep the lines of communication open.

Some parents may feel that their teens will not listen to them, and will only do what pleases them and/or their peers. This may be true about preferences and tastes such as dress, music or leisure activities. But parents influence values, which develop gradually over time. **Express your values clearly.** Parents may not verbally convey these values to their children, but take an attitude implying: “They’d better know what we expect.” This attitude may cut down on communication between parents and their teens.

More than half of the teens surveyed said they **never or rarely** talk to their mothers about the dangers of drinking and drugs, or premarital sex. And nearly three-fourths **never or rarely** talk about birth control. Even more said they don’t discuss these topics with their fathers. Yet your children may still **want** to talk with you more often. More than half the teens say they would like to talk more frequently than they do with their parents about things that are troubling them.

So given a better understanding of adolescent changes and worries, what can you do to help parenting go a little bit smoother?

Parental restrictions commonly cause teens’ emotional outbursts. On the one hand, parents are frequently correct when they say, “My child is not responsible or careful enough to be allowed to....” On the other hand, teens are probably also partially correct when they say, “My parents continue to treat me like I was 10 years old.”

Parents who early on begin allowing children to make decisions appropriate to their age are less likely to have problems with teenagers demanding “Freedom now!” Children who help decide what to wear at age 4, whether to join scouts at age 8, when to do chores at age 11, and so on, are better able to make responsible decisions about behavior at age 15, and less likely to constantly demand more decision-making rights.

If parents have tried to control every aspect of their child’s behavior in his or her younger years, chances are the child is unprepared to make decisions for himself or herself.

So let your children make some decisions concerning tastes and preferences, as long as their choices are not dangerous to themselves or others. But make it clear that you retain control over certain aspects of their behavior.

It is also important to keep the lines of communication open. Your child may want to talk with you. It is fruitless to try to convince the young teen that not everyone is watching, or that others have ever shared the feelings they are experiencing. But you may find it helpful to tell your teen that you realize he or she is feeling badly and offer your support and encouragement.

You might say, for example, “I’m sorry you’re feeling unhappy. If you would like to talk about what’s troubling you, I would be happy to talk with you.” In this way, you can show that you care and want to help, while leaving the way clear for your teen to decide whether to ask for help.

Parents who do not push their children toward a particular vocation — but instead offer support, encouragement and help when the child requests it — can make these worries less troublesome for their child.

Offer support, encouragement and help when the child requests it.

Encourage your child to think about the future in a way that makes your teen feel supported and at ease. You can show encouragement without “pushing” your child by:

- ✍ Helping your teen explore various career possibilities;
- ✍ Expressing interest in continued education, training programs or apprenticeships; and
- ✍ Discussing the pros and cons of various career interests.

The emotional storminess of the teenage child can be rough going for both the child and the parents. Parents who are able to take a calm, sympathetic but firm approach usually find that they can maintain good relationships with their teens most of the time.

It is extremely difficult for anyone — teenager or adult — to fight with someone who won’t fight back. By saying things such as “I’m sorry you are upset. I am getting upset, too, so let’s

talk later,” parents find that they can continue to communicate with their teens without getting ulcers in the process.

It is often useful to remind teenagers that it is easier to treat them as adults if they act like adults. And it is very useful for parents to also remember that you were once teenagers yourselves — and you survived.

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- Data cited are from the 1992-96 Teen Assessment Project (TAP) databank (University of Wisconsin-Madison, unpublished).

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