

# Positive Parenting of Teens

## BACKGROUND

### What Teenagers Need from Parents, Teachers, and Other Adults

Developing into mature and responsible adults is a complex task for teens today. Normal changes that have always been a part of adolescence are tough:

- Adjusting to major physical changes in one's body can be strange and stressful;
- Renegotiating relationships with parents make some parent-teen relationships more strained;
- Facing important questions about the present and future (such as succeeding in school and making career choices) can be frightening.

Add to that list the problems of alcohol and other drug abuse, sexual activity, and high rates of depression and suicide among teenagers to get a picture of how dangerous growing up in the 1990s can be. Surveys conducted recently by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Extension found that more than half of all teens drink alcohol regularly. On average nearly two-thirds of high school seniors are sexually active and between 25 and 40 percent of teens show symptoms of depression, according to the surveys.

Teachers, parents, and other concerned adults often wonder what they can do to help teenagers deal with the challenges they face. One approach is to keep in mind that youth need a chance to develop values, social skills, self-esteem, responsibility, and a sense of belonging. The following is a framework for looking at what teenagers need from the adults who care about them.

#### **Teenagers Need Respect from Adults**

No one would deny the important role self-esteem plays throughout life. How adolescents feel about themselves is crucial to their healthy development.

The messages they receive from other people carry a lot of weight. Since respect has been defined as the "quality or state of being esteemed," it's especially important for youth to know that they are valued by adults. Here are some ways adults can communicate respect to young people:

- **Take them seriously.**

Adolescents need to be seen as mature, unique people—equal to adults in their worth and dignity. Unfortunately, some adults tend to brush off what adolescents are going through with comments like "It's only puppy love," "You're just going through a stage," or "You don't know how easy you've got it, just wait till you're an adult." Instead of trivializing teenagers' experiences and feelings, make an effort to be more understanding and accepting.

- **Keep in mind teenagers are not children.**

Teenagers are encountering an amazing array of changes in all areas of their lives—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. For this reason, some of the ways you've interacted with them in the past need to change too. One of the most degrading things a parent, teacher, or other adult can do is treat teenagers like children. Comments such as "Don't be such a baby!" "Act your age!" or "Why don't you just grow up?" are demeaning and insulting to teenagers in the process of leaving childhood behind.

- **Treat teens the way you expect to be treated.**

Adolescents have much to offer, provided they are given a chance. One way is simply to ask for their opinions and suggestions—and then pay attention to what they have to say. You also can demonstrate respect for teenagers by extending basic courtesies (using "please" and "thank you," for example) in-

- **Recognize their talents, abilities, and efforts.**

Instead of assuming teens already know when they've done a good job, tell them so. This means providing specific feedback about what they're doing, as well as telling them that their contributions and actions are appreciated. Honest praise is a good way to let teens know you respect them. And don't reserve praise for only outstanding achievements. Teens live in a terribly competitive world. Sometimes they feel that no matter what they do, it's just not good enough. Look for ways to let teens know they are valued and respected because of who they are and the qualities that make them unique and special—not just for how well they measure up to others' standards. Help teenagers learn to believe in themselves by recognizing that effort and progress are often as valuable as awards and winning.

### **Teenagers Need to Take Responsibility for Themselves**

By the time teenagers reach young adulthood, they are expected to be ready to leave home and take charge of their own destinies. This doesn't happen overnight. During the years prior to leaving home, young people need opportunities to assume some responsibility for their actions. And that won't happen if you insist on being in control of all decisions and behaviors. But trying to figure out just how much responsibility a teenager is able to assume can be a dilemma. It's particularly difficult when you don't want to see teens make mistakes that could lead to harmful consequences. There's a big difference between offering guidance and support and trying to be in control of all decisions. Here are some guidelines:

- **Consider the amount of control you use.**

Expecting your orders to be carried out simply because "I said so" is setting the stage for trouble. Telling a teenager "Don't ever let me catch you doing such and such" doesn't automatically prevent irresponsible behavior. It often means the teen will simply be careful you don't find out about it. On the other hand, assuming teenagers can be left entirely on their own isn't the answer either. Adults who tell teenagers what to do and how they should be acting usually have good intentions. But adults who have all the answers (even if they're good ones) and who insist on imposing them on young people aren't really doing them any favors. Teens need to gain experience thinking and choosing for themselves.

- **Provide opportunities to choose.**

Young people often appear to make choices without

really thinking about what's involved or the consequences of their actions. It's frustrating to watch teens do things that appear ill-advised, such as refusing to wear hats in cold weather to preserve their hairstyles. But for teens to develop the ability to make decisions, they must be given opportunities to make up their own minds without someone else trying to do it for them. A good place to start is giving teens more freedom to make day-to-day choices—how to spend their allowance, what clothing and hairstyles to wear, and how thoroughly to clean their rooms, for example. Often these decisions will not reflect your own. Ask yourself what would be gained—or lost—by trying to insist that your teenager do things your way. Constantly trying to control teens by insisting they do what they're told prevents their learning how to think and choose for themselves.

- **Involve teens in decisions about the rules they're expected to follow.**

Adults have a tendency to dispense advice pretty freely because they feel they know what's best, and often they do. For example, to prepare a teenager for future options, an adult may try to influence a teenager's choice of classes or extra curricular activities. Or, parents may attempt to control a teenager's social life out of a desire to prevent him or her from getting involved in hurtful or problematic relationships. But young people need opportunities to learn to handle themselves in a variety of situations involving choices and decisions, and that can't happen if adults insist on having things done their way. Involve teens in whatever process is used to make decisions about rules, policies, procedures, and guidelines that affect them. This is one way to give teenagers an opportunity to assume more responsibility for themselves. Psychologists who study adolescent behavior find that when teens understand why a rule is necessary and have had a voice in determining it, they are more likely to comply.

- **Understand the difference between discipline and punishment.**

While young people need to be given increasing opportunities to assume responsibility for themselves, they also need adults to provide enough structure to ensure that their efforts are met with success rather than failure. This means parents must be able to follow through with discipline strategies that help teens learn from the mistakes they make. While punishment often implies a judgment on the teenager, discipline focuses on the misbehavior and separates the deed from the doer. Parents who punish teens are

usually meeting their own needs—venting their anger, demonstrating who's boss, or acting out of revenge. By contrast, effective discipline strategies help teenagers accept the consequences of their misbehavior. For example, if a teenager's grades drop because of a job or too much social activity, he or she should be required to quit the job or limit socializing until the grades improve.

### **Teenagers Need to Share Beliefs and Opinions and Form Their Own Values**

In a complex society like ours, teenagers face many conflicting values and opinions. To form consistent and healthy values, youth need to share their views and opinions with others, consider the pros and cons of issues, and experience how others react to what they say. These experiences give teenagers a chance to form a well-examined personal stand. Here are some suggestions for parents and other adults:

- **Listen to them.**

One of the most important things any adult can do to help teenagers form healthy values is to listen to the things they have to say. During adolescence teenagers develop new intellectual abilities such as abstract thinking. Discussing and exploring new ways of looking at the world gives teenagers outlets for these new abilities. Adults sometimes have a difficult time listening to what teenagers have to tell them, especially if they disagree or the topic is highly sensitive or controversial. When you talk with teens, try not to impose your own values on them. Instead, share how you feel and why you feel that way, while at the same time encouraging the teens to explore and express their own feelings and beliefs.

- **Provide opportunities for youth to share their values with each other.**

Young people need to share their perspectives and ideas with one another. But this can be threatening if they fear being criticized, insulted, or belittled for what they have to say. Teachers and other adults who work with youth can help foster a sense of openness and trust that will enable teens to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings. Camp and retreat-like settings can provide excellent opportunities for creating this kind of climate.

### **Teenagers Need to Experiment and Take Healthy Risks**

Taking risks and experimenting are a necessary and normal part of growing up. But there's no denying

that some risks are more dangerous than others. Getting drunk, driving fast down a highway, or having sexual intercourse are a few examples of risks teens sometimes take that can have disastrous consequences. The challenge for adults is to find a way to help teenagers learn to weigh the possible consequences of the risks they take. This can be difficult because youth are inexperienced, highly influenced by peers, and often lack the thinking skills to make sound judgments. Here are some ways adults can support positive risk-taking in youth:

- **Support healthy experimentation.**

It's healthy for teenagers to try out all kinds of possibilities in the process of finding out who they are. Much of this experimenting (particularly when it involves "weird" fashions, hairstyles, fads, and jargon) can be bewildering to adults who have forgotten how exhilarating it can be to do and say outrageous things. Instead of criticizing or insulting teenagers for their taste, back off and give them the room to experiment and try new things.

- **Support healthy risk-taking.**

In addition to experimenting with the way they look, teenagers need activities and experiences that are "risky" in a positive sense. For example, running for a class office, trying out for a school play, learning to rock climb, or volunteering to be in charge of an event can be extremely risky for a teenager. There's also risk involved in participating in classroom or small-group discussions, getting involved in team sports, and participating in any kind of competitive event or activity. It's important for adults to support and encourage teens to get involved in activities that enable them to take risks and test out their new physical and mental abilities while minimizing potential dangers.

- **Know when to intervene.**

There's no denying that many of the risks some teenagers take are dangerous. Parents and other adults need to be alert to the warning signs that indicate a teenager has moved from healthy into harmful risk-taking. Sudden and unexplainable mood swings or personality changes, a sudden drop in grades, isolation or acting as if there's something to hide, as well as more obvious signs of trouble such as being caught with alcohol or other drugs are all clues that a young person may be in over his or her head and needs parental or adult intervention.

## Teenagers Need to Interact with Peers and Acquire a Sense of Belonging

Like adults, teens need to feel they are valued and appreciated by others. Being part of a larger group or circle of friends helps many teens feel they belong and are wanted. In addition, peers can help adolescents try out a variety of roles and identities during the years they are developing their own sense of self. While peer pressure can often be a negative force, it also can be channeled in positive directions. Here are some ways adults can help promote positive relationships among teens:

- **Provide opportunities for teens to interact.**

Teenagers are looking for ways to discover more about themselves as well as what's involved in getting along with others. Just as youth yearn to be understood, accepted, and affirmed, they also must learn how to respond to those same needs in others. Being part of a larger group that has meaning and purpose is an important way for youth to learn who they are in relationship to others. Teachers and other adults who work with young people in classroom and social settings can structure learning and social activities to foster these kinds of opportunities.

- **Provide opportunities for youth to work together on common goals.**

Learning the value of teamwork and cooperation is another important ingredient in positive peer interaction. Working together in community service projects, peer helping programs, extracurricular clubs, organizations, and planning committees can teach youth valuable lessons about getting along with other people. In addition to learning how to plan and carry out activities and events, these experiences provide opportunities to negotiate guidelines and rules that apply to their own behavior, learn how to resolve conflict, and solve problems. Adults who work with youth in these settings need to give them opportunities to plan, organize, and follow through with projects and activities for which they receive recognition.

## Teenagers Need to Take Responsibility for and Develop Accountability to Others

To grow up to be dependable adults, workers, and citizens who are responsible for the welfare of themselves and others, teens need to experience what it

means to be accountable to others. Learning how to become the kind of person other people can depend on takes time. Here are some things adults can do to help teenagers develop this quality:

- **Help youth develop organizational skills.**

Countless school and community settings provide opportunities for developing leadership skills. Getting involved in youth groups, volunteer organizations, and after school jobs all give young people a chance to learn how to express themselves, use their talents and skills, get organized, manage their time, and follow through on commitments. By encouraging and supporting the efforts of youth who participate in their programs, you empower them to succeed.

- **Encourage youth to volunteer in their communities.**

To grow into caring and nurturing parents and citizens, young people need opportunities to learn how to care for and nurture others, especially those who are less able or mature. Teens need a chance to learn these skills by responding to people who need them in their families, schools, and communities. For example, through helping the elderly, taking care of younger children, tutoring the less capable, or getting involved in peer support programs, teens learn how to care for and be accountable to others.

## Teenagers Need Positive Adult Role Models

Teenagers look up to adults whom they like and respect. Such adults are usually respectful of teens and are fair and consistent in their own actions. Remember that when it comes to influencing teenagers, the things you say probably aren't as important as the things you do. You can have a powerful, positive influence on teens by cultivating supportive and respectful relationships.

Although this list is not complete, it provides an overview of some of teenagers' more important needs and the ways adults can meet those needs. Growing up today can be difficult, but there is much that parents and other concerned adults can do to make the task a little easier and more successful.

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