

# PARENTING TIPS FOR FAMILIES WITH TEENAGERS

## Teenage Development – Highlights of some important changes

*Brain Development:* Recent research in brain development has shown that teenagers go through a major shift in brain reorganization similar in scope to that of toddlers. This has significant impact on their behaviour and need for increased sleep. Gentleness and sensitivity is required as teenagers learn to adapt to their “new brains.”

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*Identity Development:* It is normal for teenagers to want to be different from their parents. This is part of their process of learning who they are and developing a sense of adult identity. This is not a personal attack against you as parents or what you believe, even though it may feel like. Some teenagers need to have the experience of trying on different roles, values and behaviours in order to select their own style of life. Research has shown that the majority of teenagers will eventually select the same values and beliefs of their parents in adulthood.

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*Sexual Development:* Teenagers are also developing into sexually active beings. They are developing physically and experiencing feelings of sexual attraction for the first time. It is important that they have support and information about this process and how to manage it. Each family will have different values around what is acceptable sexual behaviour for teenagers. The key to helping them manage these transitions is open, positive and repeated communication about the topic. Teenagers should be able to talk with a supportive adult about their thoughts and feelings on the subject as often as they need to. Teenagers should also know what you believe about the topic and why. The more information they have and the more open you are with them, the better equipped they will be to make good decisions around sexuality.

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### Parenting Tips

*Increasing Responsibilities:* Teenagers do need to have increased responsibility and freedom as they age. This is best done by providing children small responsibilities and freedoms early and then gradually increasing them over time. The process of parenting is the process of teaching children skills and then letting them go a little at a time. Children and teenagers need practice on how to manage responsibilities and freedom in order to have the skills to handle them as adults. Without practice, under the guidance and supervision of parents, young adults will have difficulty making their own decisions and managing responsibilities and freedoms in an effective manner.

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*Maintaining Support and Structure:* While teenagers are becoming young adults and do need increased responsibility and freedom, they also still need nurturing, support, structure and boundaries. While the rules of the home should change as children age, there should still be some basic rules around safety, shared responsibilities and respect. The specifics of these will depend on the values of the family. Teenagers often have the belief that nothing bad could possibly happen to them. This can sometimes affect their ability to make wise decisions. Some basic rules to keep them safe will help them negotiate these issues. E.g. having a curfew, calling home when late. Family rules and their consequences should be made very explicit for all members of the family. If a teenager has an issue with one of the rules, have a conversation about it. Let them present arguments for their case and consider them. Then, as the parent, make the wisest decisions presenting your reasons for your decision. Sometimes negotiating is appropriate. Sometimes it is not. The process of this discussion will allow teenagers the practice in brainstorming, considering alternatives, describing reasons and making a wise decision.

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*Help teenagers make their own decisions.* When your teenager comes to you for advice, do not start by giving them an answer or your opinion. Get them to describe to you the situation and the options they are considering. Then get them to describe the possible consequences, benefits and risks of each choice. Point out ones they may have missed. Through this discussion, your teenager may come to a clear decision about what to do. This also gives them practice at problem-solving and learning to make a tough decision. If they still do not know what to do by the end of the discussion, offer what you might choose in their situation and why.

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*Do not lecture, say, "I told you so," or point out obvious mistakes.* No one likes to be lectured. If a discussion needs to take place, have a discussion. That means both people get to speak and feel heard. Let the teenager start. Pointing out that you were right and they were wrong or mistakes that are blatantly mistakes does not actually prevent them from doing it again in the **future. It creates a "you versus your teenager" environment and adds to their shame. It actually might lead them to do it again, hoping for a different outcome in order to "win."** Saying these things may make you feel better in the moment but it is not an effective parenting strategy. When at all possible, allow the natural consequences of a decision or behaviour speak for itself. This is often all that is needed to correct a behaviour.

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*Managing Mistakes:* When mistakes happen allow for an opportunity to talk about what happened. This begins by creating an environment where the teenager knows that you accept them no matter what mistakes they have made. While their behaviour may not be acceptable, the teenager needs to know that they are accepted. With this clearly communicated to the teenager, have them describe to you what happened, why they made the decision they did, what the outcome was, what else might have happened and what they would do in the future. Often, teenagers know exactly what they have done wrong, why it was wrong and how they would do it differently in the future. If this is not the case, add whatever pieces they may have

missed. Support them as they experiences the natural consequences of a poor choice but do not take the consequence away. Show them that you are proud of them for facing their consequences and for their thoughts of how to do things differently in the future.



*Some Disagreement is Normal:* Teenagers will complain, argue and disagree. This is not enjoyable but normal. Rate the success of the interaction, not by how much they complain, but on if they actually comply with your request or instruction.



*Managing Disagreements:* During the teenage process of intense brain development, emotional developing, identity development, social development, sexual development and increased responsibility and freedom, there may be increases in arguments around the home. This is not unusual. There are three things that can help you deal effectively with arguments:

1. Try to stay as calm as possible. This argument is not about you. This is about their need to assert their independence, hormones, etc. Children and teenagers take their emotional lead from their parents. If you stay calm, they will find it easier to become calm. If you escalate, they will escalate as well. Find tricks that work for you to stay calm. E.g. mindfulness, relaxed breathing, imaginal exercises.
2. Attend to their feelings. While you may not agree with them and they may be saying terrible things, underneath their words are feelings of hurt, anxiety, anger or other difficult feelings. In this moment, they may be having trouble coping with the feeling or appropriately expressing the feeling. You may be the scapegoat for stress or difficulties. Name the feeling for them and empathize with it. This helps them to identify what is going on inside them and shows that you have heard them and care for them.
3. Do not bend a rule or change a consequence because they are arguing, shouting at or becoming emotional with you. This is not the time to make a change in a rule or procedure. You can empathize with them without giving in to them. If you give in during an argument, you will be teaching your teenager that arguing with you is an effective strategy to getting what they want. If the teenager has a valid point in their argument, set another time aside to discuss it and consider it in a calm manner.



*Quality Time:* Spend time doing enjoyable things with your teenager. In general, peers become very important relationships during this time period. Take every opportunity you can to spend positive time together but do not force them to do so. Invite them to do different things with you. Choose activities you think they would enjoy. Even if they decline, they will remember that you invited them and want to be with them. Being sneaky about spending time with then can be effective. For example, joining them while they are watching their favourite television programs. Having a positive relationship with your teenager is the best way to have influence over their behaviours and the choices they make.



*When Stuck in Repetitive Arguments:* If you and your teenager seem stuck in a negative pattern or arguments and/or noncompliance, try something radically different. The current strategy is not working so trying something completely different likely will not make things worse. While what you try may not be the final solution to the problem, it can have the benefit of getting the family unstuck and open the way to other possible solutions.



*Use Rewards/Focus on the Positive:* The best way to have influence over behaviour is to use rewards for the behaviours you want to see. Behaviours that are rewarded will increase and take the place of behaviours that are not rewarded. Notice all the things your teenager does right and well. Tell them that you notice these things. Kind and encouraging words are often the best rewards. If you have specific behavioural goals or changes in mind, describe the change in positive terms (what to do, not what not to do) and then what the reward for that behavior will be. If a teenager wants a specific freedom, one option is to have him or her earn the freedom with a behaviour they need to increase. This can be a helpful way to teach goal making and attainment.



*If Needed, Seek Professional Support:* Transitioning children into adulthood can be a particularly difficult time for some families. All transitions have their challenges and can be bumpy. Should this be a particularly difficult time for your family, consider accessing family therapy services. Family therapy can help parents negotiate their new role as parents of teenagers, help to address particularly conflictual relationships, identify and help adjust negative interactional patterns or cycles and help all members of the family find ways to appropriately express their emotions and needs.

