

20 Top Tips for Parenting Teenagers by Sue Blaney

Keep home a safe haven as much as you can. A teenager's life is mentally exhausting as he participates and competes in his world. Home needs to be a place where he can restore his energy, and relax without fear or criticism. At home, build up his confidence, don't undermine it.

Try not to let their moods run the house. Do not allow teens' inevitable mood swings to negatively impact the whole family dynamic. When conflicts arise, they do not always have to be resolved immediately. In fact, few conflicts are resolved in the heat of the moment; it's often best to wait and address issues when everyone is in a calm frame of mind.

Do not count on teenagers to always use good judgment or see consequences of their actions. The prefrontal cortex, the section of the brain responsible for judgment and planning ahead, is still developing in adolescents. You may have to step in to provide important judgment calls. Remember this is not a character flaw but a normal developmental stage.

Teens need and expect a curfew. Be smart about this. The younger the teenager, the earlier the curfew. Do not give kids privileges and freedom for which they are not ready or in which they will not be safe. Kids need boundaries and rules and your role in establishing these and maintaining them is essential. When rules are broken establish logical consequences.

Make sure you know where your teenager is after school, in evenings and on weekends. Check things out. Call ahead. It's not a good idea to leave kids home alone without an adult present. Most high-risk behavior occurs between 3pm and 7pm on weekdays.

Know your child's friends. Knowing who your teenager is spending time with is an important part of parental monitoring, and will require more of your effort in middle and high school. Welcome your teen's friends into your home; offer to drive them. Listen more than you speak; be non-judgmental.

Give teens all the responsibility they can handle. Teenagers often feel powerless, and this impacts their behavior. By helping her feel powerful and responsible, you are helping her develop and grow. Monitor her behavior; reward and encourage her increasing responsibility.

Be a good example of what you want your teenager to learn. Your behavior is your single most powerful tool, and your teen is noticing everything you do and say. He will learn values from you, as well as how to deal with conflict, how to behave in relationships, how to reach his potential.

Strive for *connection* even more than *communication*. When you connect, you share experiences and it provides the conditions under which communication can occur. You can't have good communication without being connected. Go out of your way to play a game of ball or chess, go for ice cream or just hang out; make sure your teenager knows you're listening and really care.

Heighten your listening skills because communication is likely to change. Your teenager may begin to withhold information and not share things as she used to. Try not to be hurt by this because it truly doesn't reflect on you; try to understand that this is a way that she is developing her sense of herself. You'll still need to have a good idea as to what is happening in her life, so begin to focus on non-verbal cues and other available ways to gain this knowledge.

Expect indirect communication. Don't be too disappointed if the heart to heart talks you hope for don't last long. Keep the messages direct, to the point, and short. Talking in the car, using e-mail and notes can be a good way to cover sensitive ground if talking directly is too uncomfortable.

Respect and trust your intuition. Teens don't always say what they mean. They may say "don't come," when they really want your attendance at an event. They may beg to have permission to attend a party, and yet be relieved when you say "no." Your intuition is your best guide.

Help adolescents obtain what they crave:

- opportunities that help them develop and establish their identity and interests;
- opportunities to do a good job;
- achievement and recognition;
- respectful interactions with adults and peers;
- participating in activities that have importance in school, in the family, and in communities;
- physical activity.

Do not lessen adult influence in your teen's life; rather, gradually adjust your parenting style from being a manager to being a mentor and consultant. A mentor rarely has real control, but is able to influence, educate and facilitate development. This shift is important to help your teen develop responsibility and autonomy. But make this a gradual change, lasting over several years.

Nurture curiosity; model the pursuit of ideas, knowledge, and reading. Parents can't leave all the teaching up to schools; parents, schools, and communities all have a responsibility to teach young people and prepare them for adulthood. Model a love of learning and curiosity about the world.

Encourage your child's connections to the school; make this a priority. School performance is the single most important determinant as to whether a teenager will engage in destructive behaviors. Connections to the school can come in many areas, not all of which have to be academic. Clubs, sports, and music programs are some examples of other ways to connect. Encourage some school activities your child does simply for enjoyment.

Expect behavior that covers up insecurities. Sometimes an exaggerated sense of confidence, or being hypercritical of peers is actually covering up for underlying insecurities. Parents should guide kids to behave with sensitivity to others; one sure way to guide this behavior is to model it!

Connect with other parents often. By connecting with your peers you share important ideas, strategies and information, and gain a perspective that helps you in your parenting. Never worry alone. Being connected in your community as parents helps keeps your teens safe.

Talk to your kids about the dangers of drug and alcohol use, about appropriate sexual behavior, and taking essential precautions. This is an essential part of a parent's responsibility.

Be cautious about your assumptions; double check situations and ask good questions. Don't assume your teenager will be safe at an event, or even at a football game, without adult supervision. Gradually allow him the opportunity to go places once you are certain your teen knows how to behave, it's safe, and he knows how to contact you. Be aware that not all supervision is adequate, even in homes with parents present. Introduce yourself to the parents in charge and ask smart questions. Help with the supervision or offer alternative activities if you're at all in doubt.

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Sue Blaney is the author of the acclaimed guide, *Please Stop the Rollercoaster! How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride*. Approved by the National Middle School Association and endorsed by numerous professionals, this book and the associated programs have helped parents of teens improve communication, learn about adolescent development and keep kids safe from risky behavior. For tips, tools, resources, podcasts, tele-seminars and a free newsletter, visit her information-rich website at www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com.

Sue Blaney, President, ChangeWorks Publishing & Consulting
978-264-0692 fax 978-263-7717 800-234-2150 sue@SueBlaney.com
www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com www.ParentingTeensInfo.com