

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding the Reasons : Parenting an Adolescent

Adolescence can be a confusing and distressing time for parents and their children. You may struggle to know how to parent as your child and your relationship with your child changes. Many parents do.

Your teenager is still learning to be independent. Sometimes they will need you to show them how to handle things, or to pick them up when they have fallen, just like when they were younger.

You do not need to face all the challenges of parenting an adolescent by yourself. There are people and places you can turn to for support and advice.

The following tips are a good start.

Time to change your approach

Your approach to parenting needs to change as your child matures. Tactics that worked with young children will not work with teenagers.

Young adolescents need different rules from older adolescents. Your approach needs to suit the young person's stage of development.

There will be a period when you are still in charge. During this time it will be up to you to set limits. You can have rules, such as when and where your teenager can go out, but it is also important to help your child move towards greater independence. Your teenager should be encouraged to begin to make their own decisions in some safe areas – a budget for buying clothes, for example.

Later, your relationship will need to change again. You will no longer be able to set the rules, and will need new skills to gain co-operation. You will have to allow the young person to run their own life – even when they make mistakes in your eyes.

You are entitled, however, to still have boundaries and expectations about how they behave towards you and other family members, and how they help around the home.

Rejection

Parents of adolescents can sometimes feel rejected, which can be very hurtful. You may feel ignored, insulted, disobeyed, criticised, disrespected or ridiculed.

It can be hard to react in useful ways. The best strategy is to find the maturity in yourself to know that this rejection is part of growing up, and let some of it wash over you.

You still have the right, however, to be clear about how you want to be treated and what consequences there are if this is not respected.

Accept disagreement

Your child can learn from you that disagreements do not break relationships. Show that you can have different views and still respect each other. Try not to nurse resentment after a fight.

Acknowledge your mistakes

You may do things as a parent that you regret. Say sorry if you know you have made a mistake. This helps them to see how a good relationship works.

Set boundaries

Clear boundaries are important for your teenager. This is still a time to be firm as a parent about what you will permit and what you will not. Most teenagers will complain and rebel to some degree, but they also need limits to be set and kept by you so they know they are being cared for and kept safe.

Make sure your limits are reasonable. Decisions should be in your teenager's best interest, rather than your interest. Needless restrictions can cause conflict at a time when a warm and caring relationship needs to be maintained. It may be time to allow some new freedoms.

Experimenting

As your teenager tries out new styles and activities, there are likely to be some you do not like. Try to be relaxed about things that do not really matter, even if you don't like them.

Anger

Anger is a common emotion in adolescence. It is normal and healthy. Anger towards parents can be part of creating distance from you and strengthening their ability to be independent.

However, feeling angry should not be an excuse for behaviour such as abuse or violence. You can help young people learn to stay calm, to talk and to handle anger well by doing it yourself.

Giving advice

Sometimes your son or daughter will ask for advice, and you should respond. It can be fine to offer ideas and guidance when the young person is open to it. Your knowledge of the world can be helpful. But it is important to show respect at the same time. Suggesting things, and letting them decide what to do, is a better method than telling them what to do.

Find good moments

If your relationship with your son or daughter becomes strained, try to keep some times when you are together without fighting. Try to have good moments together – for example a walk, a meal together, watching a DVD, playing a computer game. Let your young person choose.

Extra Tips for Hard Times

Parenting an adolescent becomes harder when the young person has a lot of difficulties, or if they are risking their health or their future, or if they have become very distant from you.

Risky Behaviour

Experimenting is a normal part of adolescence, but if your teenager is experimenting in very risky ways – like train surfing or drugs – you must try to intervene. Talk to your child about the behaviour and what the underlying reasons for it might be. Share with them your concerns and fears about their behaviour. Take the time to listen to their responses carefully. Remind them that you love and cherish them and that you would like to try to help them with whatever difficulties they are experiencing. Even if they are angry or appear to be ignoring what you are saying, it is important that you communicate this message to them. On some level it will sink in and they may come back to you at a later time more ready to talk over their situation.

You may be able to understand the feelings that are driving their behaviour, such as belonging or thrill seeking. It may be possible to redirect them to a safer way to achieve those goals, for example, encouraging challenging activities like rock-climbing, or making suggestions about how they can meet new friends.

Maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in your home and relationship with them, so that they know that their home is a safe haven and so that other members of the family are protected from witnessing any risky behaviour.

Remember that it is important to let your child know that you are very concerned about the risky behaviour and the possible consequences, whilst you continue to show commitment and support.

If your child continues to engage in the risky behaviour, seek some professional advice together, if your child is willing to go with you. If you can't get your child to consult with a counsellor or other professional, go by yourself so that you can get some advice on strategies to deal with the behaviour.

Over-responsibility

You can be left feeling distressed or guilty when your child makes mistakes in life. Part of letting them grow up is learning not to feel responsible for them. Once they start to make their own decisions they are also responsible for the consequences.

Violence

If anger at you spills over into violence, it is important to deal with it. Do not put up with violence. Do not reward it by giving in to demands made with threats. Keep yourself and the rest of the family safe – call the police if you think anyone is in serious danger. Make it clear violence is not on and certainly will not be tolerated in your home.

Remember violent behaviour is not accepted outside the home. A young person who gets into the habit of reacting violently is likely to end up in more trouble.

Stay connected

Some young people leave home in anger or reject their families when they go out on their own. Research shows that an ongoing connection with parents or key caregivers is still very important for young people – especially those who are experiencing hard times. The young person may be acting to keep family at arms length, but they still need to know that you will be there. It is important to stay connected.

Foster other connections

You may find it hard to have any relationship at all with your son or daughter. But there may be other significant adults in their life who care about them – a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or adult friend. Try to help your child stay connected with this person if you can.

Find good moments

Even if your relationship with your son or daughter feels damaged beyond repair, you may start to connect again by finding some brief moments or times when you enjoy each other's company. Make it a time when you do not bring up the issues you clash over. Just show you still want them around.

Seek help

If your relationship with your child has become very difficult, you may need extra support from family, friends or professionals. You may need expert advice. Individual, or ideally family counselling, can be very helpful.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Your approach to parenting needs to change according to your child's different stages of development.
- You may at times feel rejected. The best strategy is to let some of it wash over you, but you can still say how you want to be treated and how this behaviour makes you feel.
- Clear boundaries are still important, no matter how difficult the behaviour.
- Anger is common at this stage of development, but violence is never acceptable.
- Your teenager is more likely to listen when you suggest things, rather than give advice.
- Keep some good argument-free times happening if possible.
- Even at the worst of times, ongoing connections with parents and other family members are still very important. Encourage responsible extended family members to stay in contact with your child too, as your child may be more open to communicating with someone else in the family during adolescence.
- If your relationship has become very difficult, it is time to accept this and seek help. This is a positive strategy not a sign of failure.



Related Help Sheets

- Adolescent Development
- Setting Boundaries
- Dealing with Conflict
- Dealing with Violence
- Need a Helping Hand?
- Building our Relationship
- When there is no Relationship
- Improving communication





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