

living with your teenager :

Understanding Emotional Changes

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A topic of conversation that is bound to arise whenever parents of teenagers gather is that of the difficulty of living with a teenager. Parents of teens are likely to nod sympathetically when a parent complains of the excessive moodiness of his or her teen. Many will agree that this teenage "problem" causes much of the conflict in their families.

The increased emotionality of pre-teens and young teens make these years very difficult for many parents and their children. Both parents and the teens themselves are distressed by the teen's emotional outbursts but all have difficulty managing their feelings of distress. This publication is designed to give parents some basic information about the teen years which may help you to maintain a tolerant attitude during this troublesome period.

Experts generally agree that the period of extreme emotionality begins at about age 11 to 12. Thirteen to 14 year olds are often irritable, excite easily, and are more likely to explode than succeed in controlling their emotions. Fifteen year olds, on the other hand, try harder to cover up their feelings and, therefore, are more apt to be moody and withdrawn. By the time teenagers reach about 16 or 17, they are more capable of taking a calmer approach to life and experience fewer worries and far less moodiness.

One source of increased emotionality in pre-teen and teen-aged children is physical changes. The same hormones which set off physical changes at puberty are also responsible for affecting moods and general emotional responses in children. The young teen's worries about physical changes—height, weight, facial hair, developing breasts in girls, etc—are also a source of heightened emotions.

Other physical conditions that are not directly related to puberty also can be responsible for the heightened emotionality of teens. Many teenagers, for example, have unconventional meal patterns. Skipping breakfast and fasting to lose weight are not uncommon. Lack of rest, too, may lead to

moodiness and gloominess, irritability, and a tendency to fly off the handle. Some parents have found that making sure their teens eat a well-balanced diet and encouraging adequate rest make emotionality less of a problem. In addition, by explaining the effect of hormones on emotions, some parents help their teens feel less worried about their feelings.

Another source of emotionality in young teens is the strain caused by changes in their thinking. New ways of thinking 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 everyone is so interested, they conclude that they are very special people with very special feelings never before felt by anyone in the world ("Oh Daddy, you don't understand!"). While it is fruitless to try to convince the young teen that not everyone is watching or that the feelings they are experiencing have been shared by others, as a parent 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, for example, say "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 or not help is wanted.

In addition to physical changes and changes in thinking, which come from within the child, there are changes in the expectations of people around the child and changes in his or her surroundings to which he or she must adjust. Any and all of these changes can leave the teen feeling insecure and more emotional. As youngsters begin to leave behind the world of childhood, many changes may occur in their patterns of life. Children who begin to look more like

adults may also be expected to behave like adults. The expectation of adult behavior can put tremendous pressure on young teens and lead to emotional outbursts. During the early teen years, there is considerable concern about learning how to behave correctly in social situations, what to talk about, and how to be popular with members of the other sex. While learning all this, the teen may be extremely nervous and generally excited. Any incident which makes teens feel they've made a mistake is likely to result in an emotional outpouring complete with tears, slammed doors, and general depression.

A common cause of emotional outbursts in teens is parental restrictions. In fact, it may not be too strong a statement to say that conflicts over control of the teen's life are at the root of most problems between parents and teens. On the one hand, parents are frequently correct when they say, "He is not responsible or careful enough to be allowed to do . . .". On the other hand, teens are probably also partially correct when they say, "My parents continue to treat me like I was ten years old." There are few things more difficult about being parents than trying to figure out how to give teens freedom enough to learn responsibility and self-reliance while still keeping control over behavior that is potentially damaging to them. However, it seems to be true that parents who begin quite early allowing children to make decisions appropriate to their age are less likely to have problems with teenagers who are demanding "freedom now!" Children who decide what to wear at age three, whether or not 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 be constantly demanding more decision-making rights. Parents who have tried to control every aspect of a child's behavior in his or her young years are rightly worried about their child's demands for more freedom in the teen years. The chances are that such a child is unprepared to make decisions for himself or herself. Many parents find it helpful to give teens as little restriction as they can handle, while still making it clear that there are certain aspects of behavior over which the parents will retain control.

As a parent, you should keep in mind, too, that it is during the teen years that children may become aware of the importance of doing well in school for future job success. In some cases, this results in an anxiety over school and school work that was not present at an earlier age. Similarly, teens may begin to worry about what to do after school is finished and to dread the prospect of facing the day-after-day work world. Parents who do not push their children toward a particular vocation but instead offer support, encouragement, and help can make these worries less troublesome for their child. While you must encourage your child to think about the future, you should do so in a way that makes your teen feel supported and not anxious. Helping a teen explore various career possibilities, expressing interest in continued education, training programs, or apprenticeships, and discussing the pros and cons of various career interests are all ways in which you can show encouragement without "pushing" your child.

The emotional storminess of the teenage child is very difficult for both the child and the parents. Parents who are able to take a calm, sympathetic but firm approach, find that they can maintain good relationships with teens most of the time. It is extremely difficult for anyone—teenager or adult—to fight with someone who won't fight back. Thus, parents who are able to say things like, "I'm sorry you are upset. I am getting upset too so let's talk later," 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 to adult parents to remember that they were once teenagers themselves.

Reference

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