



PARENTING: THE TEEN YEARS

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THE LESS REWARDING YEARS FOR PARENTS

I once read an article that suggested parenting teens was less rewarding than parenting children of other ages. I found myself thinking that the same would be true for teens; that adolescence isn't a particularly rewarding time when it comes to being parented. When you consider that these years are a period of intense growth emotionally and intellectually, it's understandable that it's a time of confusion and upheaval for many families. Despite negative perceptions about teens, they are often lively, reflective, and idealistic, with a deep interest in what's fair and right. So, although it can be a period of conflict, the teen years are the time to help kids grow into the distinct individuals they will become.

THE TEENAGE BRAIN: UNDER CONSTRUCTION

One of the most popular misconceptions about brain development is the idea that the most important changes happen in the first three years of life. This myth has been the source of much anxiety over the fear that parents are in a race against time to provide as much positive stimulation and opportunities for growth before "it's too late". So while parents of tots can breathe a sigh of relief, parents of teens have even more to worry about!

Our brains contain grey matter and white matter. **Grey matter** consists of neurons, the brain cells that form the building blocks of the brain. **White matter** (axons) are the connections that form between grey matter, helping to move information from one area of the brain to the next.

ENTERING THE CONSTRUCTION ZONE

While grey matter (neurons) growth is almost completely finished by the age of six, white matter—the wiring between brain cells—continues to develop well into the 20s! Since the wiring in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for reasoning and executive function, is incomplete, teens often have a harder time making accurate judgments and controlling their impulses.

At the same time that teens' brains are laying down connections, puberty has triggered the **pituitary gland** to release hormones that act on the brain's emotional centre. The combination of heightened emotions and an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex explains why teens are often prone to emotional outbursts and also why they seek out more emotionally charged situations.

As if this wasn't bad enough, teen brains are highly sensitive to the release of **dopamine**, which acts on the areas of the brain that control pleasure and helps explain why teens seem to take so many risks. It's not that they don't know any better. In fact, reasoning abilities are largely developed by the age of 15. Simply put, the adolescent brain is more motivated by the rewards of taking a risk than deterred by its dangers. Below are some suggestions to parent your teen and their crazy brain!

POSITIVE PARENTING FOR TEENS

Check in every single day. A few minutes of conversation can keep you tuned in and establish open communication. In addition to these short daily check-ins, establish a regular weekly routine for doing something special with your teen.

Avoid lecturing. Teens generally don't like to hear how things used to be or how you think they should be—and may tune you out.

Don't act as if you have all the answers. Ask your child for his or her ideas on how to handle situations. This shows you value your teen's thoughts and opinions.

Keep your standards high, but realistic. Your teen wants to be his or her best self. But don't expect your child to achieve goals you decide for her; she needs to begin charting her own goals now. Support your teen's passions and explorations as she finds her unique voice.

Communicate. Allow your child to talk without interruption until he or she gets to the point. It may take your child a few minutes to state what is really on his or her mind.

Make the punishment fit the crime. The most effective lessons for teaching teens are consequences, and the seriousness and nature of the consequence should match the crime. For example, breaking curfew by 30 minutes should result in an earlier curfew the next time.

Help them gain confidence. Encourage your child to explore a variety of activities and find areas of expertise. Succeeding at one or more activities will help your teen gain confidence and those who succeed in one area of life tend to have successes in many areas of life.

Be clear about the rules. By making the house rules well known to all, your teen can't plead ignorance for breaking one. You may even want to post house rules in a common area. Additionally, it may help to get input from your teen when making the rules.

Never criticize. If you disapprove of a behaviour, make it clear that you dislike the behavior—not your child. If you must comment on your teen's activities, behaviours, music or fashions, try to be positive rather than hurtful. Teens are often very sensitive and even good-natured teasing can hurt their feelings.

Allow your teen space. Don't take it personally if your teen isn't always in the mood to talk, or if he or she wants to be alone with his or her friends.

Respect their privacy. To help your teen become a young adult, you'll need to grant some privacy. If you notice warning signs of trouble, then you can investigate or do spot checks, but otherwise, it's a good idea to back off. Your teenager's room, phone calls, and texts should be private. You also shouldn't expect your teen to share all thoughts or activities with you at all times.

Praise them. Compliment your child often, and make sure the praise is genuine. Your child may shrug off your praise, but underneath, he or she is glowing with pride.

Let your teen see your fun side. While your child still needs a parent, show your teen that you are fun and interesting. Share your excitement about hobbies you have in common, talk to them about aspects of your work they may find interesting, and talk about activities that you find fun. Tell them about your youth! Let your children see you as a person, not just as a parent.

Make appropriate rules. Bedtime for a teenager should be age appropriate, just as it was when your child was a baby. Reward your teen for being trustworthy. Does your child keep to a 10 PM curfew? Move it to 10:30 PM. And does a teen always have to go along on family outings? Decide what your expectations are, and don't be insulted when your older child doesn't always want to be with you. Think back: You probably felt the same way about your parents.

Pay attention to your child. If the conflicts with your teen are more random in nature (spontaneous outbursts that have no central theme) it may indicate that your child is simply seeking your attention. This can be confusing because teens, in their desire to be perceived as independent, often pretend they don't need their parents when, in fact, they need them as much as ever.

When does it get rewarding again? As kids progress through the teen years, you'll notice a slowing of the highs and lows of adolescence. And, eventually, they'll become independent, responsible, communicative young adults. And then, when they have their own teenagers, you can smile, support them, and enjoy the rewarding years of parenting for years to come.

Sources: [Inside Your Teenager's Scary Brain, Macleans Magazine, January 2015](#); [Positive Parenting Strategies for the Teenage Years, LifeCare, 2011](#).