

Strengthening Parent-Teen Relationships in a Challenging World

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Keys to Strengthening Parent-Teen Relationships

Teenagers in the 21st Century

The 21st century represents new opportunities and challenges for family life and parenting. Teenagers can communicate with a parent by cell phone wherever they go. Parents wonder if their children will be able to learn new job skills for a new century. What does the future bring and how is it different from the past?

Consider some of the differences for teenagers today:

- They live in the age of computers and many were raised with a “mouse in hand.”
- Earlier maturation occurs both physically and culturally.
- Parents encourage kids to act like adults, and are more open to discussing issues with teens.
- Teenagers are big shoppers, and even kids under age 12 spend \$35 billion of their own money each year in the United States.
- Fewer kids are born per family, so teenagers are less likely to have many brothers and sisters.
- The Internet has fostered a global community at the touch of a button.

The concerns that parents have for teenagers today range from doing well in school and learning to manage money to other serious topics such as depression, drug use or delinquency.

Recent Findings on Parent-Teen Relationships

Recent research on parent-teen relationships has demonstrated key factors that make a difference are common across many circumstances. For example, findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, which is a nationally representative study of 90,000 teenagers in the United States, suggest the following:

- Certain factors exist that are protective of teenagers and help lower the risk for many concerns, such as suicide, depression, substance abuse and delinquency.
- These certain factors that are protective apply similarly among different groups of teenagers (rural and urban, differing family structures, different ethnic backgrounds).
- The factors that protect teenagers from challenges can offset the negative influences of other risk factors. What are those factors?
 - **Connectedness to parents and family**
 - **Parental regulation and monitoring of behavior**
 - **Healthy decision making and autonomy of adolescents**
 - **Positive peer group relationships**

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JULY 2005

Key 1 = Connectedness to Parents and Family

Teenagers who express a sense of connectedness to parents and family are at a much reduced risk for unhealthy behavior. What does “connectedness” mean? It refers to a positive, warm, stable emotional bond between parents and children, so that children feel close to parents, cared for by them and valued by them. Ways to develop connectedness include:

- Express affection frequently and openly to children – hugs, approval, etc.
- Express encouragement and interest in your child's world – talk to your children, support their activities, etc.
- Spend time in shared activities, including recreation, work, etc. Time in shared activities strengthens relationships and provides opportunities for meaningful conversation.

Key 2 = Parental Expectations About Behavior

High expectations about behavior are protective of children and send them clear messages, communicate that someone cares about them, and teach them what is acceptable versus not acceptable. Setting clear expectations for behavior is called “regulation” (rules, etc.), and encouraging good behavior is “monitoring.” Ways to facilitate such expectations include:

- Engage youth in establishing family rules and arranging consequences – you can hold family meetings to discuss rules for certain areas of family life and appropriate consequences.
- Enforce consequences when rules are broken – teach children to abide by clear standards. Be firm but not harsh or unkind.
- Spend time with your children and check up on them. Ask questions. Who will you be with? What will you be doing? Where will you be? When?

Key 3 = Healthy Decision Making and Autonomy of Adolescents

As part of the growing up process, teenagers must be allowed to make decisions for themselves. Parents should guide them in learning such skills and making healthy decisions. Thinking independently from parents can help them express their own feelings, think about consequences of their behavior and resist negative peer pressure. Ways to facilitate decision making include:

- Encourage independent thinking and respect your child's ideas. Be supportive of children making certain decisions for themselves.
- Validate your children's feelings – communicate that their feelings are valued and respected.
- Express unconditional love and also avoid withdrawing love to coerce behavior.
- Avoid guilt-making to control behavior – use reasoning, consequences and guidance.

Key 4 - Positive Peer Relationships

Friends are a critical influence on teenagers, and the relationship of your teenager's friends with you, as parents, also is important. Do they know and trust you? Ways to work on this include:

- Provide a positive, friendly atmosphere for peers of your children as they come to your home.
- Get to know the parents of your teenager's friends and communicate with them about expectations.
- Assist and coach your child in making friends, keeping friends and appreciating friends.

Handout No. 2 - Strengthening Parent-Teen Relationships in a Challenging World