



Thriving with your teen

A handbook for parents and other caring adults

If you are the parent of a teen...

... or someone else close to a teen, you are automatically a role model. What a challenging and rewarding job! And you care about doing the job well, or you wouldn't be reading this.

Here's the first thing to keep in mind: healthy connections with adults are the single most important factor in helping a teen develop into a successful adult. Yes, we know, it may not seem like that at times. Teenagers' friends are extremely important and what their friends think definitely influences them. But that's not the whole story.

Teens agree: adult role models matter

According to research, teens themselves say that their parents' (and close adults') beliefs, values, and actions do sink in—that's what teens come back to, as they grow and develop.

We don't have all the answers in this handbook, but we hope you get some ideas to help strengthen your relationship with your teen.

So how can you be the best possible role model for your teens?

Start with these 10 ideas.

You may find that you already know and practice many of these things. But it never hurts to be reminded of all the great stuff you do for your teens!

1. Love them no matter what and let them know it.

Teens need large doses of compassion and loving care. They need to know that you are someone who always loves them (even when you don't love their behavior).

It's normal for teens to be focused on relationships with their friends, but that doesn't mean your relationship doesn't matter. We've asked lots of teens, and they've told us now is when they need you the most, so stay connected!

2. When teens mess up, teach them how to do better next time.

Teens will go against their parents' wishes at times (some more than others).

But the important thing is not what they do, but how you react. You could lose your cool—but then nobody will be better off, including stressed-out you.

So instead, take a deep breath and use that incident to help your teen (and you) learn something. This way, you can:

- Strengthen your relationship (“What’s wrong? Let’s talk about this.”)
- Teach teens how to make amends (“So you took something that wasn’t yours—how will you return it or repay the person?”)
- Teach teens how to re-build trust (“We had an agreement that you’d be in by 10. You should have called to tell me you’d be late. Now you’re grounded. Keeping the terms of the grounding will let me know you can be trusted again.”)

Remember, you are your child’s first, best, and lifelong teacher.

The point in all of this is to help kids learn a better way of doing things—and not to hurt them through angry words or actions.

3. Tell the kids what's good about them. Tell them often.

Okay, we know sometimes it's hard to find good things to say about moody 14-year-olds who are driving you crazy. It's not as easy as when they were 7-year-olds, looking to you for guidance at every turn—right?

But really, you can do it. Teens and parents have told us it's important. Find what makes the kids unique and wonderful, and praise them over and over for it.

You have no idea how powerful these six little words are: “You did a really good job.” Even if the only response you get is a shrug—trust us they heard you. Keep it up. Catch them being good. Let them hear you saying good things about them “behind their back.”

4. Build trust.

Read carefully, because this is a tough one. One of the hardest yet most important things for parents of teens to do is to recognize and value their increasing independence, but know they still need you.

Yeah, they may look like adults; they may tell you they're grown up now; they may even act adult once in a while, but the truth is they're kids who still need your guidance.

Teens are going to push, complain, whine, and even try to get around your rules. Don't give up. Know your rules and enforce them consistently. Decide which rules are negotiable and which ones are not. Predictability is your friend! When you become predictable, teens can trust something.

Give teens opportunities to earn your trust. Give them choices to make—safe choices, sure, but let them make some decisions. Then, when they keep agreements, make good choices, and honor rules, congratulate them for being responsible and progressively give them more responsibility.

5. Listen. Really, really listen.

When teens say, “I want to tell you something,” it’s time to give them your undivided attention. To show that you are listening, make eye contact with them, nod your head, show concern, and wait until they are finished to respond.

Everyone deserves to be heard. The great thing is, when you hear them out, their ability to listen to you will also increase!

6. Show respect.

Teens and adults who show respect to one another will spend more time working together and less time struggling against each other.

How do you show teens respect? Ask questions to better understand their point of view. Acknowledge their feelings, their ideas, and yes, their complaints. This doesn’t mean you have to do things their way, but you do need to let them know you heard what they said (“I understand that going to your grandparents’ house is not what you’d like to be doing today. But it’s important for us to spend time with them.”)

Be careful not to hurt your teen by using angry words or actions with them.

Teens will learn to show respect to you from the way you show respect to them. And who knows, they might have a better idea than you!

7. Help teens belong.

Teens who know they have a community—friends, teachers, parents, family, other adults—have more fun and more success.

Encourage their interests and help them find positive ways to interact with others.

Get to know their friends! Building bridges between a teen’s family and friends is good for everyone. You’ll know teens better when you know their friends.

8. You don't have to do it alone.

You deserve help and support! Raising a teen is a tremendous responsibility—don't even try to do everything and know everything!

Talk with your friends, family members, and other parents to get support for the everyday stuff.

Talk with professionals—counselors, health care providers, clergy—to problem-solve the tough situations.

9. Don't give up.

It takes time to build solid relationships with teens. Don't give up when the going gets tough.

You are shaping the life of another human being. This job really matters!

The payoffs are great. Solid relationships feel really good and they make your life easier, too. When teens care about you, trust you, respect you, they're more likely to want to follow your rules.

Keep your sense of humor. Being able to laugh together really builds a family, and being able to laugh at our mistakes helps us carry on.

10. Teach joy.

Every teen deserves to be included. Every teen deserves to be encouraged. Every teen deserves to look forward to a good day.

Now you know! Your job is:

- To give kids the structure and the freedom to learn and grow
- To create a safe and supportive environment
- To be a role model and make a difference

What teens want their parents to know

We asked teens of all backgrounds and cultures to answer the following questions. You may be surprised at some of the responses!

1. What do you wish your parents knew about what it's like to be a teenager?

- We have the capability to make good decisions so let us
- I wish they understood the pressure we face as teenagers
- I can't be the perfect teenager
- Teens need their space
- The kinds of situations, influences, and risks we have are different from the ones you had
- Teens aren't all bad

2. What is the most important thing that your parents do (or could do) for you?

- Listen and offer support objectively
- Always be there but give me space to make my own decisions and learn from my mistakes
- Accept mistakes
- Talk to other people if you're stuck or can't relate to where your teen is coming from
- Listen when we are being honest and trying to share

3. Who or what are the biggest influences in your life?

- My mom, my friend, my boss
- My parents, my parents' actions
- Parents, friends, education, activities
- My older brother
- Adults, other teens, children who are inspiring or unique
- Teachers, parents, friends, sisters, experiences

4. What attitudes do you wish adults in your community would have about teenagers?

- Take us more seriously
- Smile at us every once in a while
- Support youth activities in any way, small or large
- Don't view us all as trouble-makers; the majority of us are good
- Accept that we are young adults
- We are human; we make mistakes
- Look beyond the problems some teens have and realize that there are tons of great things about teens
- I wish that more adults would be guides, mentors, teachers, "wise people with stories"

What parents of teens say about parenting

We also asked some parents of teens a few questions. Here's what we heard from them.

1. What do you find most rewarding about parenting an adolescent?

- Their creativity and independence
- Their ability to talk and think about things on a deeper level than young children
- Watching them grow emotionally, psychologically, intellectually
- I really love when they share something they've learned or discovered, and are able to articulate their attitudes and impressions

2. What do you find most challenging?

- Letting them make mistakes so they can learn from them
- Responding to the need for ever-increasing independence
- Setting limits—accepting that they may not always respect my decisions about what's in their best interests

3. What do you think is the most important thing for parents of teens to know?

- That parenting is a “job” and that you are preparing your child to make it in the world as an adult
- To listen well and respond in positive, caring ways in order to maintain open communication
- When and how to let go, when and how to hold on and stay involved

Thanks to teens, parents and staff from TeenLine, Saint Paul Youth Service Bureau, Wilder Foundation young women’s groups, Ramsey County Youth Initiative, La Oportunidad, New Beginning Center, and Saint Paul/Ramsey County Public Health for participating in our survey.

Remember these 10 ideas...for adults who care about teens

1. Love teens no matter what, and let them know it.
2. When teens mess up, teach them how to do it better next time.
3. Tell the kids what’s good about them. Tell them often.
4. Build trust. Know your rules and keep them consistent.
5. Listen. Really, really listen.
6. Show respect. Acknowledge teens’ feelings, their ideas—even their complaints.
7. Help teens belong. Kids with a community behind them are more secure and successful.
8. Remember, you don’t have to do it alone. Seek support from other adults.
9. Don’t give up. It takes time to build relationships with teens, but it’s worth it.
10. Teach joy. Every young person deserves to look forward to a good day.

