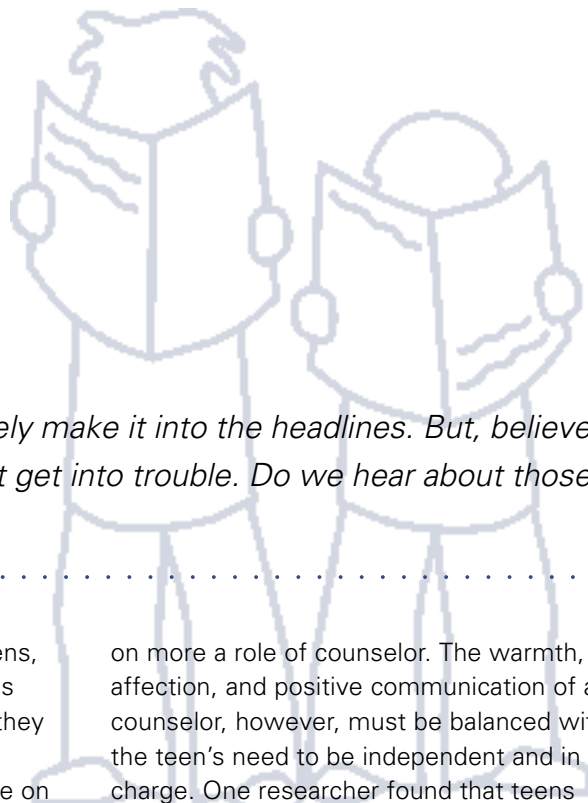


# Parenting Teens



Positive stories about teens rarely make it into the headlines. But, believe it or not, nine in 10 teens do not get into trouble. Do we hear about those in the news?!

Whether children are toddlers or teens, preparing for parenting challenges is tough! The difficulty with teens is that they are becoming much larger, much more verbal, and are able to fight battles more on an adult level. They may experiment with risk taking, and the stakes are higher than at any other developmental stage to this point.

Teens do not turn into teens overnight. There are three phases of adolescence that include the teen years: preadolescence (age 9 to 13), middle adolescence (age 14 to 16) and late adolescence (age 17 to 20).

During *preadolescence*, children feel disorganized, and their growth is rapid and uneven. They are not quite adolescents yet because their sexual maturity has not fully completed, and they are often referred to as *tweens*, meaning *between* the stages of childhood and teen years. Children try to meet the expectations of both parents and friends. Parents of preadolescents may feel less ready to face the new challenges than when their children were younger. They may feel more worried about the number of dangerous situations and substances to which youth are exposed. Parents should meet this stage with warmth, fairness, and even a sense of humor.

During *middle adolescence*, children may go ballistic over a few extra pounds, hair that won't stay in place, or fair-weather friends. During this time, parents may take

on more a role of counselor. The warmth, affection, and positive communication of a counselor, however, must be balanced with the teen's need to be independent and in charge. One researcher found that teens seek information from friends on social events, dating, joining clubs, and other social life aspects while they turn to their parents for information on education, career plans, and money matters.

During *late adolescence*, there are many decisions to be made. Teens are beginning to disengage, and they often prepare to leave home about the same time their parents are reflecting on their own lives and needs. At this time, authority with children is redefined and there is a gradual shift toward economic and emotional independence. A new adult-adult relationship must emerge.

Parenting is complex. Many factors affect outcomes in children. Personal resources, the characteristics of the child, and the stress or support parents get from school, family, and community all enter into the results. This fact sheet is a general guideline.

Good kids don't suddenly go bad. Drug abuse, irresponsible and early sex, and teen opposition to authority are all preventable acts. To understand more about teens, let's start by dispelling some of the myths.

Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Employment and program opportunities are offered to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.

## Myth One

### **Peer pressure is at its worst during adolescent and teen years.**

Peer pressure is overrated, and it can be a positive force. Generally, adolescents choose friends with similar values and tastes to theirs; however, parents still retain the major influence over the child's life. Research shows that parents who monitor their children can help prevent a number of risky behaviors, including alcohol use, sexual activity, delinquency, and other misconduct. Monitoring also gives children the message that with increasing privileges comes increasing responsibilities.

**STRATEGY**—Parental monitoring means establishing guidelines and limits for your child in order to keep track of what is going on in his or her social world. It means knowing:

- where your kids are
- who they are with
- what kinds of activities have been planned
- how they will get there and back again

Parental monitoring also means making expectations clear with the child about what to do in an emergency. But parental monitoring does not mean demanding obedience, attempting to control a child's choices and behavior, or imposing a parent's will on the child.

While children may complain that parents "don't trust them" or that they are being unreasonable, there is security in knowing that parents care enough to ask. Parents need to understand that monitoring is an important right and responsibility of parenting.

If you wait until the teen years to begin monitoring it will feel too much like you are trying to control them. Teens will turn the issue into a power struggle. So start monitoring children early in ways that are age appropriate. This will help children accept this as a part of life. Teenagers need increasing freedom to begin their road to independence and they need parents who monitor their behavior in a respectful and appropriate way. Starting early may be the best strategy, but it is never too late to begin.

Since you cannot always be around to monitor children, family rules will help parents monitor their children when they are out of sight. A phone call to a parent at home or at work at an agreed-upon time or when plans change will help parents know where their children are. If the parent is not available by phone, a neighbor or relative can serve as the connection.

## Myth Two

### **Teens prefer their friends to their parents.**

As children begin school they spend less time with parents, and their friends become more important. Youth begin to create their own identity through what they do, where they go, and who they know. Often teens with low self-esteem or high anxiety will seek a "quick fix" of approval from a peer group. However, if children have been given strategies early in life to deal with tough decisions, they will be able to face these tests with good results.

Early in life, children should be given smaller decisions to make (which shirt to wear, which game to play, how to arrange their room). Children who have been allowed to experiment with and learn that decisions have consequences are better able as teens to make tougher decisions! Parents who always TELL their children what to do and control their behavior with no choice by the child are preparing their children to listen to others without ever developing an inner voice to guide them for a lifetime.

**STRATEGY**—Stay involved and connected.

Talk and listen to your children. Know their friends, their school experience, and what their world is like. Parents busy with work and children busy with school activities have very little time to interact. That's why it takes special effort. Here are some suggestions for connecting with your child:

- Be a sounding board. Make it clear that you are willing to listen.
- Use everyday family activities to stay close. Making dinner, running errands, taking a walk can all be turned into quality family time.
- Build in extra time to "check-in" at bedtime. Do not assume your child has outgrown this important bedtime ritual.
- Use notes, bulletin boards, and even e-mail to communicate with each other.
- Get to know your child's friends by inviting them to your home and on family outings.

## Myth Three

### **My teen won't talk to me. I can't get him or her to open up.**

Teenagers like to talk. But they must have a willing listener. If simply asked, "How was your day?" by a parent who listens only halfway and responds "uh huh,"

teens will begin to seek more willing listeners. If all that is said is “clean your room,” or “look at me when I am talking to you!” then teens will begin to tune out. There must be a balance between routine chatter and deeper talk. When psychologist Torey Hayden asked several hundred teens what they wished they could talk with their parents about, they named:

- ❑ **Family matters** — Vacations, decisions, rules, curfews, serious illness, money problems.
- ❑ **Controversial issues**— Sex, lifestyles, drugs.
- ❑ **Emotional issues**— Parents’ feelings about them and other things.
- ❑ **Big whys**—Why do people go hungry? Why is there war? Other philosophical issues.
- ❑ **The future**—Work, college, making plans for their life beyond the current home.
- ❑ **Current affairs**—World and community happenings.
- ❑ **Personal interest**—Sports, hobbies, friends.
- ❑ **Parents themselves**—What were parents like at their age, stories that show parents are real.

## Myth Four

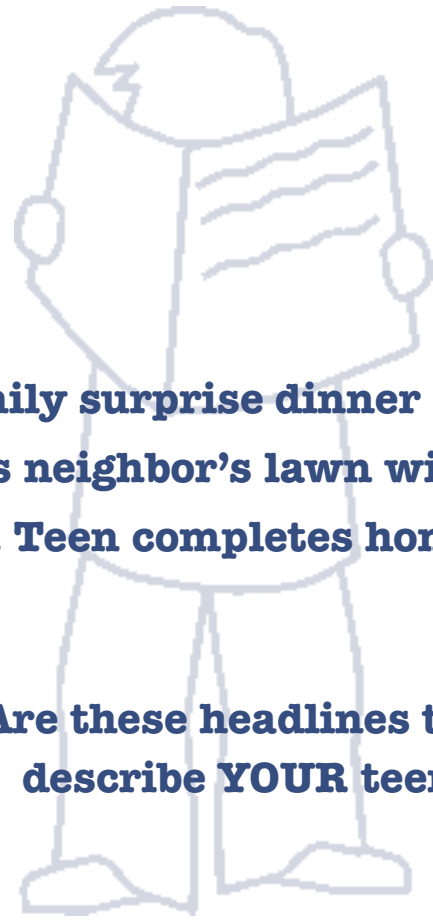
### **If I don’t get control of my child now, I may be sorry later.**

Depending on the level of previous interaction with your child (see Myth Two), this may be true. But CONTROL may not be the right term. Instead, it is critical to seek a balance between parental control and teen control, realizing that teens are expanding their independence and freedom.

Youth are exposed to many more freedoms today than when their parents were young. There is more unsupervised time with parents working. There is greater access to information via television and the Internet than ever before. Parents have a complex job being a filter to these influences.

**STRATEGY**—Listen and reflect.

Listen to your child’s request. Evaluate the request based on their maturity and ability to manage decisions. Quickly saying “No!” at each request and not listening for more details will create problems. Hear out their request and see if there is a reason behind it. For example, if a 13-year-old wants to sleep at a friend’s house on a school



**“ . . . Teen cooks family surprise dinner . . .**

**Teen mows neighbor’s lawn without  
being asked . . . Teen completes homework  
on time!”**

**— Are these headlines that  
describe YOUR teenager?**

night, which is generally not allowed, find out if there is a reason that concerns homework, school activities, or other arguments before flatly saying no. Of course having consistent limits is important as well. Encourage teens to develop a sound argument. Encourage them to tell the difference between what they want and what they need. This is good practice for them and allows a more extensive and less emotional discussion. Then listen and consider what was said before responding.

**STRATEGY**—Set clear, reasonable limits. A teen who says, “You are the most strict parents. I wish I had Alex’s parents,” is a teen who has limits. Respect your teen’s point of view and be willing to discuss rules. This happens best when the argument has not become heated. Take a break before continuing by saying, “Let’s take about 10 minutes to cool down, then we will discuss this together.” This will allow both of you to consider what you will say and will take some of the heat out of the argument. Parents and other adults must understand the importance of eliminating emotion from the discussion and leave personality out of the discussion. Many teens will argue for the sake of arguing. Arguing gives them practice in defending their position and can be a constructive learning technique.

Involving the teen in the decision does not take away a parent’s power, but helps to create a balance of power and

control. Allowing teens to have some control in this way lets them know they are important and valued and CAN indeed work with you through important life decisions.

## Myth Five

### **Teens are moody, rebellious, and never serious.**

Instead of believing the worst, look at the positive aspects of teen years. Teens are curious, imaginative, and have many new ideas about the world. This stage is a time of remarkable social and mental growth. There are certainly many physical changes during this time, but the effects of these changes depend on the social, personality, and temperament factors of the child. Adolescents are now capable of complex reasoning and thinking. Given guided practice, youth can make thoughtful decisions.

**STRATEGY**—Look for the positive aspects of budding development while modeling what you want.

Youth are interested in information about relationships, and yes—even their bodies. If parents are not willing to provide it, other sources such as television, the Internet, or friends will fill in. Youth are interested in exploring the unknown. Be willing to talk, answer questions, and help them join acceptable community activity groups. Teens are ready to “try on” adult behaviors. Be a positive model from early ages. Stay connected to their friends and know where they go when you are not with them.

When it comes to influencing youth, the things parents say may not be as important as the things parents do. If parents expect children to let them know where they are going, when they will be home, and how they can be reached, parents need to model this behavior by providing this same information to their children. If parents want their children not to use foul language or to have good manners, then parents should model good manners and acceptable wording with their children and with adults.

## Myth Six

### **Teens don't care about others.**

To develop a caring teen, we must also model and practice CARING through caring talk and confirmation.

- ❑ Modeling: Modeling is acting the way you want your teens to act. Teens mirror the behavior back to us.
- ❑ Caring talk is the chance to question WHY. It connects us to each other. Using open-ended questions (What do you think about...? Why do you think they acted that way? How could we figure this out?) is good practice in understanding and listening to others.

- ❑ Confirmation: Confirmation is verifying someone's worth. It involves naming something admirable in the teen and encouraging the development of that trait.
- ❑ Building trust is a process. Continuing trust is critical to not misusing what has been shared.
- ❑ Practice caring for others through caring talk, finding the best in others, and building the relationship.

These caring traits are a basis for good moral development and caring behaviors toward siblings, friends, and parents.

## Summary

The most effective parents set high standards and are demanding but wrap this approach with warmth, love, and involvement. Some parents say:

*“I don't have time.”*

*“They are not as cute and cuddly as when they were younger.”*

*“I don't have any problems out of my younger children.”*

*“I don't like the person he is becoming.”*

Each of these arguments can be met with effective strategies and a little understanding:

- ❑ Schedule time. Studies show teens want to spend more time—not less—with their families. Put your heart into it.
- ❑ Accept this stage by making your expectations known. Granted, children grow larger with age, and they may develop acne and experiment with their hairstyle and clothing. But pick the biggest arguments and let some things be a part of the teenager's learning process.
- ❑ Take care not to exclude your teen because he/she is becoming independent while younger children are still more dependent. Their needs just differ. They both need attention—but in different ways.
- ❑ Accept your teen as an individual. Children often model what they are exposed to. The traits we least like in ourselves often are mirrored through our children. Recognize this and address it in yourself and in conversations with your teen. Parents can't simply create the child, but they can guide and love them for who they are.

**For additional information, refer to one or more of these Internet sites.**

**❑ Internet sites for parents of adolescents and teens**

Advocates for Youth:	<a href="http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/">http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/</a>
CYFERNet fun stuff for kids:	<a href="http://www.cyfernet.org/youth.html">http://www.cyfernet.org/youth.html</a>
CYFERNet resources for parents:	<a href="http://www.cyfernet.org/parents.html">http://www.cyfernet.org/parents.html</a>
Teen Pregnancy Prevention:	<a href="http://www.teenpregnancy.org/">http://www.teenpregnancy.org/</a>
Girl Power:	<a href="http://www.health.org/gpower/">http://www.health.org/gpower/</a>
Search Institute:	<a href="http://www.search-institute.org/">http://www.search-institute.org/</a>
Focus Adolescent Services:	<a href="http://members.tripod.com/FocusStretch/Main.html">http://members.tripod.com/FocusStretch/Main.html</a>
National Institute on Out of School Time:	<a href="http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/nioost.html">http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/nioost.html</a>
Boystown Common Sense Parenting:	<a href="http://www.parenting.org/">http://www.parenting.org/</a>
National School-age Care Alliance:	<a href="http://www.nsaca.org/">http://www.nsaca.org/</a>

**❑ Great sites for kids and parents**

American Library Association:	<a href="http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/">http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/</a>
Brockwell Medical Group:	<a href="http://www.brockmed.freemove.co.uk/teenagers.html">http://www.brockmed.freemove.co.uk/teenagers.html</a>

**References**

- Carnegie Corporation (1995). *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century*. New York.
- Elkind, D. (1984). *All Grown up and No Place to Go*. NY: Addison Wesley Publishing.
- Hammer, T. J. and Turner, P. H. (1990). *Parenting in a Contemporary Society*. Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Simon M.M. (1995). *How to parent your tweenager*. Thomas Nelson Publishers: Atlanta.
- Small, S. A. (1990). *Preventive programs that support families with adolescents*. Carnegie Working paper: Washington, DC.
- Steinberg, L. and Levine, A. (1987). *You and Your Adolescent*. Harper Perennial: NY
- Tralle, M. (1997). *Monitoring Tips for Parents*. Minnesota Extension Service. Online Document <[http://www.extension.umn.edu/Documents/D/E/Other/6961\\_11.html](http://www.extension.umn.edu/Documents/D/E/Other/6961_11.html)>

### **Group Teaching Guide:**

These exercises can stretch the ideas from this fact sheet for extended learning when groups of parents of teens are together :

- At the beginning of the teaching, brainstorm parental perceptions (myths) about teens. Then address each one. Many will be similar to the ones included in this fact sheet.
- Have parents give examples from their families about each of the myths.
- Give parents a chance to air their concerns in small groups as you introduce the topic. This avoids interruptions with pressing personal stories later.
- Use David Elkind's book *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* to excerpt scenarios and stories he so eloquently uses to illustrate developmental aspects of youth.
- When talking to parents about listening, take this chance to practice listening skills in pairs. Discuss communication and how "noise" interferes with communication. Noise can come in the form of being preoccupied or being too busy.

*Prepared by  
Karen DeBord, Ph.D., State Extension Specialist, Child Development*

*5,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$xxx, or \$.xx per copy.*