

# Parenting

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*Teenagers*  
– 13 to 18 years

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In this stage children are developing their emotional, practical, and social independence. They are moving from the dependence of childhood to the interdependence of relating as an adult. Huge changes are taking place in the brain as connections between the prefrontal cortex (logic and control) and the rest of the brain are re-formed. The limbic system (emotion) is very much in the driving seat. Expect moodiness, mood swings, dramatic outbursts, egocentricity, and provocative behaviour. Novelty-seeking and an increased need for social connection with peers make this a time of both risk of harm to themselves and others, and of potential for great personal and creative growth. The risk of harm is increased by isolation from adults, so it is essential to maintain strong, secure relationships and open, respectful, lines of communication with your teen.

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## Typical behaviours and how you can help

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### **Challenging family norms and values, pushing boundaries, experimenting in the forbidden**

Relax. Give them the information they need to keep safe, and let them know you are always there if they need you. Respect their privacy – their room is their space. Use compromise, negotiation, and contracts to help them learn healthy ways of dealing with conflict and difference. Respect their opinions, even if you don't agree with them. Expect the behaviours you would like, but don't be disappointed when they don't happen. Let them know that you believe in them, and give them another chance. Show them that you enjoy their company.

### **Moodiness, dramatic behaviour, and egocentricity – no-one else has experienced, or can experience the world as they do**

Stay calm. Emotions are contagious – if you meet anger with anger, the situation will just get worse. Avoid “you'll get over it” type advice – however well-intentioned – as they will just assume that you don't understand. Listen, empathise, support them through

their disappointments, and celebrate their successes.

### **Changed hygiene habits, sleeping late and staying up late, dissatisfied or obsessed with their appearance**

Help them with physical needs – deodorant, sanitary items etc. Talk to them about their changing needs and the importance of self-care, including sleep and proper nutrition. Talk about screen time in the hour before sleep, and negotiate reasonable bedtimes. Let them choose their own clothes and hairstyles.

### **Embarrassment or anxiety about their maturing body, coping with comments from peers about breasts, pimples, uneven voice etc**

Talk to them. Ensure they know what is happening to them, and what is going to happen. Help them to be confident in their changing bodies, and to cope with social pressures. Talk to the school if they are getting negative or upsetting personal comments from others – this is bullying. Respect their need for privacy, but make sure they know they can come to you if they need to.

### **Developing more complex relationships with friends of both sexes, learning to handle sexual impulses in socially appropriate ways, coming up against peer pressure**

Talk to them about sex and relationships – both friendships and romances. You may not approve of their relationships, but they will have them anyway. Ensure they have the information they need to keep safe, and be there for them if they need you. They will have more secure relationships if they are secure in their one with you, and will be better able to resist peer pressure if they feel supported by you.

### **Learning to deal with the pressures and demands of secondary school – homework and exams – and to balance academic and other activities**

Help them with timetabling and prioritising. Ensure they are properly fed and getting enough sleep at night. Expect that they will get stressed, especially at exam time, and help them to deal with it. Try not to put your expectations onto them – they are living *their* lives.

## **Confusion and uncertainty mixed with the “bullet-proof and know-it-all” mentality**

Believe in your adolescent and their ability to work their own life out. If they blow it, give them a second and a third chance. Allow experimentation in safe ways, and don't belittle their attempts to find their own identity. Ensure they have the information to keep themselves safe while experimenting, because they WILL experiment. Be there for them when they need you.

## **Wanting privileges of adulthood – going out, learning to drive etc – but may be less enthusiastic about the associated responsibilities**

Expect them to be responsible around the house. Have specific chores as well as general expectations such as tidying up their own mess in communal areas. Tie privileges to performance of these, and enforce consequences calmly. Have a written agreement so that there can be no argument – and don't argue. As appropriate, explain their legal position in regard to behaviours around alcohol, sex, drugs, anti-social behaviour etc.

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## **General parenting strategies**

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- Keep your sense of humour – you will need it.
- Negotiate where you can, and be absolutely clear about what is not negotiable. You are their parent, not their friend, and you are responsible for their safety (at least until they are 16).
- Think before you speak. If you don't show them respect, you won't get it back. Apologise if you get something wrong.
- Choose your battles.
- Resist being drawn into emotional arguments, and shrug off dramatic statements about how they feel about you. Remember, their brain is running on emotion – if you react emotionally, they will just become more so. It is enough to say “I'm sorry you feel that way” and leave it at that.
- Loosen and negotiate boundaries where you can – they need more space – but keep reasonable consequences for breaking rules. Remember that consequences need to be consistent, in the right ‘currency’, and short-term –

once you have used it, you need to get it back before you can use it again. As with younger children, shorten the period of the consequence in recognition of specific good behaviour, and remember – only use consequences that you can control. Grounding is pointless if they are going to climb out the window – your problem just becomes bigger. Confiscate devices or cancel social or other privileges, and be clear about how they need to behave to get these things back. Do not negotiate or give in to hysterics once the consequence has been imposed – you set the rules.

- Respect their privacy.
- Don't punish honesty. If they get in trouble for coming to you when they make a mistake, they won't come to you. You don't have to approve of anything they've done, but do reward their maturity in coming forward, and help them when they need you. You can talk through what's happened, and what they've learned from it, later.
- Be there for them. Be the one they know they can always come to, any time, for help, support, straight answers, and unconditional love.

- **Look after yourself.** Get the support you need to cope.
- Enjoy them. Help them to become the best adults they can be.

### **Parent Helpline**

If you have found this information useful and would like to talk with one of our trained telephone support workers, give our free Nationwide Parent Helpline a call on **0800 568 856**.

**Parent Help is a non-profit organisation supporting parents to build strong and resilient families/whānau free from abuse and neglect.**