

# supporting teenagers

helping parents and professionals  
to understand the early teenage years

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into children's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to understand their behaviour.

Parents usually develop some confidence in their capacity to see their young children through problems. Everyone knows how important it is for parents to be involved with their children in the early years and at primary school, so it's not difficult to get to know your children's friends and teachers and to share anxieties with other parents at the school gate. This confidence can evaporate when your children hit adolescence and many of the certainties disappear. It is normal for parents to feel ill-equipped to manage this stage. Lone parents can feel particularly vulnerable if there's no other involved adult to share their worries with. But nobody is in a position to feel confident about the role they have to play during the teenage years.



old had tantrums, you may have talked to the health visitor. Now your towering 15-year-old is having a tantrum and he can hurt himself and other people. How can you cope with this?

Some parents get so frightened and overwhelmed by the difficulties of adolescence that they miss out on the good times.

## Living with teenagers

Living with teenagers can be one of the most exciting periods in a parent's life. It is exciting to see your children growing into young people with separate views, hopes and ambitions. It is interesting to meet their friends and to be challenged by their ideas. Their vitality and energy is infectious and many parents enjoy the stimulation of living with teenagers. You may accept the moods and angry outbursts as part of the whole mixed package and feel able to support your children imaginatively, without being sucked into their problems.

But for many parents it's a much rougher ride than this. Teenagers can make you feel that you've 'got it all wrong', and can be hurtful and undermining. The most conscientious of parents can lose sight of the good feelings they once had about themselves as parents.

Parents of teenagers don't know who to turn to when the going gets tough. When your two-year-

## Being a teenager

### The experience of puberty

When children reach puberty, they experience quite rapid sexual, physical and emotional changes over which they have no control. They can't hide their developing breasts or outcrop of spots. They can't stop their voice from cracking at awkward moments. They reach puberty at very different ages, which can intensify their feeling of isolation and their anxieties. They worry about 'Am I normal?' 'How do I look?' 'What do people think about me?'

It's not simply self-consciousness they feel, but often real anxiety and distress at the unpredictability and inevitability of it all. The safety, the security and the certainties of childhood seem to have disappeared.

It is normal to be self-doubting and self-

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absorbed, and to experience a kind of roller coaster of intense emotions, moving speedily between joy, heartache and despair, and back again. With new-found physical and sexual capabilities, feelings of confidence and independence rapidly change into fears of overwhelming need.

Surrounded by many different and conflicting pressures and role models, the young person has to find their way from the uncertainties and confusion of puberty to fully-fledged adulthood.

## Developing a new identity

During their early and middle teens, young people develop emotionally by making an important change in how they see themselves and their own independent identity. Being allowed to try out and identify with different lifestyles and personalities – just as they try out different clothes and hairstyles – is an important part of the growing process. But the process of sorting out and trying out who they are and who they want to be is often nerve-racking and painful.

## Teenage friendships

Relationships outside the family, particularly with same sex friends, become increasingly important during the teenage years. Teenagers form very intense friendship groups and loyalties, but these may shift and change as they try to sort out who they are and where they belong. Even those long phone calls – sorting out who fancies who and what everyone in class is up to – have a part to play!

## Teenage girls

Parents and teachers may be alert to the vulnerability of girls, but find it difficult to know how to be supportive and empowering. Young teenage girls are often drawn towards intense friendships, which can be enabling but can at the same time mask an underlying

difficulty with being separate from the family and managing independently.

In some school environments, girls still feel like second class citizens and are vulnerable to being 'put down' and belittled.

Girls are sexually vulnerable and may be susceptible to pressures both to have sex and to get pregnant before they are emotionally ready for either.



A teenage girl may see getting pregnant as the only gateway to the adult world.

Girls tend to be more prone to eating disorders, but are also likely to hide the problem away, so it's not easy to know that they need help.

## Teenage boys

The taboo against talking to someone about your problems is entrenched amongst teenage boys. Boys can be just as sensitive as girls to problems such as bullying and feeling unfairly treated, but may not feel they can be as open as girls about these sorts of difficulties.

They find it hard to cry and show their feelings, but they do have particular areas of vulnerability. Their frustration may come out in a different way, like being sullen, rude and hostile. Because it's seen as more important to show a tough exterior, it can be very difficult to know how to handle yourself in public. How do you act 'cool' when you're fearful inside, and may even have been at the receiving end of verbal abuse, racism, physical threats or mugging?

Depression in young men may manifest itself in unexpected ways. Parents and others may not recognise what lies behind the 'anti-social' behaviour or sitting in a room for hours listening to music.

The reality is that suicide rates amongst young men are disproportionately high. It's particularly important that parents and those working with young people are alert to reading the warning signs with sensitivity and can teach boys acceptable ways of dealing with overwhelming emotions.

## Being the parent of a teenager

The teenage years put parents under a lot of emotional pressure and they can experience their children's adolescence as very threatening.

- Realising that their children want to distance themselves from the family often makes parents feel powerless and inadequate.
- Their teenage children may stir them up so much – putting them in touch with strong memories and unfulfilled longings of their own – that they can't stand back and see what their children need from them.
- The challenges and raw emotion their children subject parents to can stir up doubts and insecurities about their own beliefs and the choices they have made in life.

Teenagers push the boundaries of behaviour, often attempting to provoke their parents to retaliate and be rejecting. If their parents reject them, then they don't have to face the responsibility and the anxiety of separating or becoming grown-up. If parents can understand this process, they are likely to be more tolerant and less likely to fall into the trap of retaliation.

## Setting boundaries

Parents of teenagers often feel very confused and uncertain about rules and sanctions with this age group, particularly if they haven't quite worked out where they stand on issues to do with control and authority. What does being a 'good' parent involve? What actually works with adolescents?

Parents can't make teenagers do what they want. Parents who try to lay down the law – 'You shall not sleep with your boyfriend', 'You shall not smoke cannabis' – are likely to get a rebellious, if secretive, response.

Because teenagers challenge and break the rules and boundaries, some parents give up and 'abandon them to their fate' with the mistaken view that they're now old enough to look after themselves.

You can't stop your children from breaking boundaries. But you can help them to understand why you put them there in the first place. It is important to:

- make your values and position clear
- say clearly what you want, and what you find unacceptable
- give good reasons for your rules
- insist on some of them being observed in your own home.

## Problems within the family

### Family circumstances

Some family circumstances can interfere with or hinder the process of becoming more independent.

- A child whose parents are in the process of a divorce or separation may not feel safe enough to let go of the parent who provides the security for the time being. Or they may go to the opposite extreme, denying any need, and blocking out what's happening at home, with a rush towards a 'false' and often mindless independence.
- Teenagers with a single parent may find it hard to 'let go' at this point, too, particularly if they feel protective towards a vulnerable parent.
- Some teenagers may feel an impossible conflict between the pressure to conform to a powerful religious or cultural identity, and the pull to identify with their experimental independent-minded peer group at school. For some, these developmental changes will take place later, after leaving home.

### Breakdown of relationships between parents

The family may be destabilised at a time when teenagers are at their most vulnerable. It can be particularly tricky in complex families with a variety of step-parents and step-brothers and sisters, often with different sets of values and beliefs.

It's hardly surprising that less stable partnerships can come unstuck at this time as parents hit their own 'mid-life crisis'.

If the communication between the adults in the teenager's life is not good, which it sometimes isn't, there's no end to the confusion. At one level, teenagers may enjoy playing one parent off against the other. At the same time, they may feel muddled and unsafe, hearing different messages coming from all sides.

Young people of this age, like much younger children, have a continuing need to know who they 'belong to' psychologically, and who is responsible for them, particularly when they live in different places and relate to many different people. Where several people share the care of a young person (including in institutions or residential settings), it is helpful to reach some agreement as to who is the main boundary setter. Other adults then need to back up this person's decisions.

## Breakdown of relationships between parents and young people

The painful reality is that some parents can't bear the pressures that their teenage children put them under. Children in their mid-teens do get 'abandoned'.

- Sometimes they are abandoned emotionally, with the message that they can now 'fend for themselves'.
- Sometimes they are physically turned out of the house.
- Young people themselves may choose to leave, particularly from situations involving violence or abuse.

They are especially vulnerable in newly established families where the step-parent doesn't share their history. Parents don't always understand how much work needs to go into sorting out old loyalties and new jealousies, and teenagers can get the raw end of the deal if parents are too taken up with their new partnerships. But this is by no means the case for most families.

### Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

*Divorce and separation*

*Fathers*

*Grandparents and the extended family*

## Sex – a highly charged issue for parents and teenagers

Most young people find it impossible to contemplate their parents having any sexual life. It is often equally hard for parents to acknowledge their adolescent children's emerging sexuality, their powerful sexual feelings, and the reality of the fact that they're physically capable. Not knowing what your teenage children are getting up to can provoke great anxiety, and fantasies can run wild.

Parents of children with a physical or learning disability are necessarily more involved with their children's physical care, and may be more emotionally involved and protective too. It may be particularly difficult for them to accept the reality of their child's developing sexual feelings and needs.

Unless parents accept the idea of sexual activity in young people, they're unlikely to be able to give the kind of information and guidance that their adolescent children badly need.

### The information teenagers need

Most young people want more than the bare facts they get at school.

Teenagers need access to information about contraception, the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Evidence suggests that this approach does not encourage sexual activity but, on the contrary, gives them the confidence to delay it. When the time comes, they will be more likely to use the appropriate contraceptive. Given the high incidence of teenage pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in this country, this has to be a top priority.

But young people want their parents to help them deal with the emotional aspects of relationships, too. It may be difficult to do this in a positive and encouraging way if you're feeling disillusioned yourself and are not too confident and settled in your own sexual identity and choice of partner – and even if you are! Young people want to challenge their parents' attitude to sex, and can all too easily tap into their parents' insecurities on sexual issues.

Sharing something of your own experience, and being honest about the pitfalls and difficulties of making and sustaining long-term stable sexual relationships, is likely to be appreciated.

### What schools can do

A caring school environment can provide an invaluable halfway house between the security of home and the demands and pressures of the adult world.

Research with young people gives an insight into what can make the difference in helping them feel self-confident and empowered to achieve. What they appreciate above all is a caring school environment that makes them feel safe and valued. Young people want schools that recognise that how you feel affects how you learn.

### Exams

Both boys and girls in this age group put worries about work and exams at the top of the list of what stresses them. It may

be easier to imagine this with our sometimes over-conscientious and perfectionist daughters, but surely not with those laid back 'do it all at the last minute' lads?

What parents and teachers sometimes fail to appreciate is that behind the bravado may be a real anxiety about whether you'll 'make it'. The spectre of unemployment can loom large, even at this age. If you fear for the future and have no achievable goal, you are far more likely to become disaffected and unmotivated.

Parents and teachers need to recognise how vulnerable these young people are. Without appropriate support, advice and encouragement, they can go down routes that seem more immediately attractive. A teenager with no realistic vision of his future may feel propelled into mindless thrill-seeking activity, like drug-taking or joy-riding – anything to blot out the bleak reality that he feels lies ahead.



### Help in school

Some schools try to find ways of offering help to vulnerable pupils. They employ school counsellors, or train pupils themselves to offer peer support and counselling. It is important for parents to find out how the pastoral side of the school works:

- what systems are in place for personal support for each child
- who takes responsibility for the pupils
- what processes there are for when things go wrong
- what is the school's anti-bullying policy and whether they implement it in a way that's seen to be effective by the pupils themselves.

Teenagers can get very embarrassed and annoyed if they feel their parents are butting in to what they see as 'their territory'. Work still needs to be done to change the attitude that only the weak and inadequate ask for help. Good home-school contact and involvement, sensitively handled, can make a crucial difference.

### Getting help when things go wrong

One of the hardest things for parents of young people is to have a sense of when to intervene and when it makes sense to wait and see. Part of being an adolescent involves trying things out, testing your parents, and going a bit too far.

If you remember your own teenage years, you can usually think of an example of some pretty outrageous over-the-top behaviour – your own or a friend's – which

fortunately had no disastrous consequences. The parents weathered it and the young people grew up a bit.

Parents need to give their children some leeway, but at the same time recognise that all behaviour has meaning. Was that outburst a gesture of defiance or rebellion, or does it indicate that something is wrong and needs some attention? Is your child in danger of going off the rails, being excluded from school, being picked up by the police, or do you need to bide your time?

### When you need professional help

There may be times in your teenager's life when your concerns go beyond the everyday worries and you feel out of your depth.

It may or may not be helpful for your teenager to be seen themselves. The reality is that teenagers – especially boys – are often reluctant to be seen themselves.

It may make sense for you to get advice and support for yourself, if only for reassurance. Remember that if your child has the same GP as you, the doctor may not be able to tell you what your child has confided in them because they have a professional duty of confidentiality towards any competent person, including young people under 16.

These are the situations in which it is particularly important to talk to someone:

- There has been a noticeable change in your teenager's behaviour or emotional state and it has persisted. They may have become markedly more aggressive or withdrawn. You cannot identify any obvious cause, such as the death of a grandparent or the ending of a long-term relationship.
- You suspect your teenager is at risk of harming themselves. They have made a suicide threat, or there is evidence of self-harm in the form of cuts or burn marks on their body.
- Your teenager has lost interest in schoolwork, hobbies, and friends, seems tired and lacking in energy, and finds it hard to concentrate. They may not be eating and sleeping as usual. These could be signs that your teenager is depressed, or that they have got involved in persistent drug use. Both may be the case.
- Your teenager's obsessive and extreme eating habits – severe weight loss, weight gain, or evidence of vomiting after meals – indicate the possibility of an underlying eating disorder.
- Your teenager has become involved with violent, 'risk-taking' activity, and may be in trouble with the law.
- Your child's refusal to go to school has persisted for some time.

## What teenage children need from their parents

There is no one 'right' way of being an effective parent, but the following suggestions may be helpful to parents and others who care for teenagers:

- Set limits and be in charge, but keep an open dialogue with your children and be willing to reassess.
- Keep lines of communication open if at all possible – teenagers who feel they are listened to fare better emotionally and academically.
- Try and keep a balance between respecting your child's privacy and, at the same time, keeping a watchful eye on them.
- Teenagers value being treated with fairness and being trusted.
- Parents being emotionally involved – giving time and attention – is crucial to how children feel about themselves. For boys, in particular, the involvement of a father or father figure matters more than whether or not they live in the same home.
- Teenagers appreciate parents who encourage initiative.
- Strong emotional support from the family is the most powerful weapon against peer pressure.
- Parents need to know the facts about the different drugs available and the health risks involved. Those who are prepared to discuss the issue, and give advice and support, are more likely to have a positive effect. Trying to frighten teenagers off drugs, or forbid them, is not likely to be effective. Get professional advice if necessary.
- If your child does get into trouble – for example, has an unwanted pregnancy or becomes involved with illegal activities – support, advice and reassurance will be all the more important.
- It's not where you live, how much you earn, or the size and structure of your family that makes the difference. What matters more is the relationships – how you care for and interact with your children.
- You have an important role to play in determining what happens to your relationship with your children and how they are developing as adults. It helps if you can give yourself time to think about it.
- If a problem persists, do get outside help.
- Remember, enjoy your teenager and have fun together!

## The late teens: on the brink

If the earlier years have been 'survived' by everybody concerned and your child has come through with some sense of who they are and some ideas of where they might now want to go with their life, you will have come a long way

together.

Now you will both be moving towards the next dramatic developmental leap. The transition between childhood and adulthood, between school and the working world, is the next stage in the ongoing process of letting go and moving on.

### Further help

**In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local support agencies, visit your library, your town or count hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.**

#### **YoungMinds Parents' Information Service**

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person

*Free parents helpline* 0808 802 5544

*Web* [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

#### **Parentline Plus**

Support and advice for anyone parenting a child

*Free parentline* 0808 800 2222 (24hr)

*Textphone* 0800 783 6783

*Web* [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

#### **Talk to Frank**

Help and support on drugs.

*Helpline* 0800 77 66 00

*Web* [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

#### **Young People in Focus**

Provides a range of materials for both parents and professionals working with young people

*Phone* 01273 693 311

*Web* [www.youngpeopleinfocus.org.uk](http://www.youngpeopleinfocus.org.uk)

#### **Youth Access**

National membership organisation referring young people between the ages of 14 and 25 and parents of young people to the nearest counselling, information service or helpline

*Phone* 020 8772 9900

*Web* [www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

#### **Black Parent Network**

Support and advice sharing about the black family

*Email* [parents@blackparentsnetwork.com](mailto:parents@blackparentsnetwork.com)

*Web* [www.blackparentnetwork.com](http://www.blackparentnetwork.com)

#### **Childline**

Help for children and young people on any problem

*FREE helpline* 0800 11 11 11

*Web* [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

#### **Chatdanger**

How to keep safe when chatting on line and mobiles

*Web* [www.chatdanger.com](http://www.chatdanger.com)

#### **Brook**

Confidential information on sexual health to under 25 year olds

*Helpline* 0808 802 1234

*Web* [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

**There are likely to be similar useful organisations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.**

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