

Caring for... your teenager (12-18 years)

Caring for children and young adults is challenging and it's hard to know what is and isn't normal behaviour.

Teenagers tend to push boundaries and break rules as they shape an identity for themselves, as a separate, independent person. Having open lines of communication is important during these years.

Below are some normal teenage behaviours, with tips on how to manage them.

1

Risk taking

Being a good role model and communicating calmly and openly will help your teenager manage their risk taking, especially when they're not with you. Talk about the rules and help them understand why they're important. Avoid a debate and try to negotiate a decision that you can both live with.

Try:

- Saying:
 - » "I need to make sure you're safe if you're out at night. It helps if you tell me where you're going and who you're with"
 - » "I know you're angry because you can't go tos party. The rule is that you can only go to parties where there's adult supervision"
- Reminding your teenager to minimise risk, by not accepting drinks from others, not being alone with people they don't know and by staying close to friends and people they trust
 - » "Yes, you can go to the concert with [friend]. You can get there on the train by yourselves, but I will pick you up when it finishes"



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Drugs and alcohol

Teens may use alcohol or drugs for many reasons: for fun, out of curiosity, to feel part of a group or to try and feel better or different. Help your teen understand the effects of drugs and alcohol, without lecturing.

Try

- Saying:
 - » “I’ve noticed a few changes in you lately, and I’m a bit worried that you’re not happy...what’s going on in your life at the moment?”
 - » “Drinking slows your reflexes and reduces your ability to make safe and fast decisions. It may put you in danger”
 - » “Please know that whatever happens, if you’re in trouble, you can call us”
- Help your child plan what to say to their peers, for example “I quit smoking”, “I don’t like the taste of it”
- Make a pact with your child: “I want you to be safe. If you want to leave a situation, all you need to do is to call or text me, I will pick you up without asking questions”
- Having a code text message your teenager can send you, if they need help to get away from a peer pressure situation

3

Problems or absences from school

If you try to start a conversation about school, but your teenager doesn’t want to talk, it might be a good idea to reflect on what you think your teen is feeling, or raising some of the things you’ve noticed.

Try:

- “You seem a bit down. I wonder if you’re feeling worried about school?”
- “It sounds like a lot of your subjects are boring at the moment. I wonder why that is?”
- “I had a call from the school today. They said you’ve had three detentions in the last two weeks. What’s happening?”
- “I got an automated text message from the school this morning to say you hadn’t arrived. Just wondering where you were?”

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Romantic relationships and sexting

Most teenagers will experiment with sexual behaviour at some stage. This is why your teenager needs clear information and guidance from you on consent, receiving and sending nude photos, safe sex, contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This could also be your chance to talk about dealing with unwanted sexual and peer pressure, and helping build their confidence in being assertive in relationships. Use active listening skills to help your teenager feel heard and understood without judgement – eye contact, get close when talking, put phones away, TV off and bring yourself back if your mind wanders.

Try:

- “Thank you for coming to me about this”, “I am so happy that you trust me to help you with that”
- “Don’t feel pressured to do things that make you uncomfortable”
- “No, I do not want to go to party”
- “Once you send a photo to someone, you lose control of it. It could be shared with other people and put on social media. People you don’t know could see it. Ask me for help to get them to stop”
- “Don’t send sexts to anyone you’ve met online, or who you haven’t met in person”
- Talk about ways your teen can handle a request for a nude photo. They could respond in funny ways like sending a picture of some noodles or an animal, or just say no.

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Technology use

From social media, to phones, apps, games, television and more, technology is becoming an increasingly essential part of our lives. Teenagers use technology for schooling, as well as access the internet, emails, social media and online games, to connect with, comment on and discuss things with others.

Try:

- Setting aside time to come up with rules the whole family can agree on about technology use. This will help set boundaries and expectations
- Keep technology out of bedrooms. This will avoid them from being disturbed by calls, texts or notifications and reduce the chances of them staying up late to play games or go on social media
- Avoid screen time before bed. The backlight on screens makes the brain believe it's still day time, affecting how quickly your teenager can fall asleep

For more information or advice, visit reputable parenting websites such as:

- **ReachOut**
parents.au.reachout.com
- **Raising Children**
raisingchildren.net.au
- **Family Connect and Support**
familyconnectsupport.dcj.nsw.gov.au
- **Parent Line**
parentline.org.au (NSW) or
free call 1300 1300 52
- **eSafety**
esafety.gov.au

Don't let frustrations escalate – reach out for help when you need it.