

## Tips to Raising Teens

Miriam Koenig, M.S., M.F.T.

Many parents dread the teen-age years, but they can actually be the most rewarding years of parenting. As always, knowing your child is a key component to successful parenting. This becomes a little trickier during the teen years when kids are less open. It's helpful to have a general idea of what is going on during these years.

Beginning at puberty, kids go through many changes that can be quite disconcerting. They often don't feel comfortable in their own skin and hormones can make them moody. Additionally, the brain goes through major changes during adolescence. Right before puberty, there is a growth spurt where neural connections proliferate in the cerebral cortex. This process peaks around puberty and then the brain begins a pruning process where some neural connections are eliminated. This process will ultimately produce a better brain that will be suited to the demands of adulthood. It's important for parents to recognize that the dramatic changes they see on the outside are matched by equally dramatic changes on the inside.

The most important thing to understand is that the judgment center in the pre-frontal cortex is not fully formed at a time in life when kids can get into serious, life-altering trouble. This area of the brain will not be fully mature until adulthood. This is complicated by the fact that teens often engage in "magical thinking" which results in a personal fable of "It won't happen to me." It is not that teens do not understand that texting while driving is dangerous, it is that they believe bad things happen to someone else and not to them. It is not that they don't understand that sex can result in pregnancy, it's that they believe it happens to someone else. Teens often feel invincible at a time when they can be impulsive and when their brains are not fully developed in terms of judgment. This makes it a very vulnerable time. The parent of a teen needs to walk a fine line between giving their child the opportunity to make choices and keeping them safe.

By the time you are raising a teenager, you have invested a lot in your child. Perhaps, you've incurred some heartache along the way. Maybe your child was teased or struggled in school, had medical problems or made some bad choices. During the teen years, parents begin to be aware of recurrent struggles and weaknesses in their children. You know your time is limited and that you will not

go with them when they leave home. The journey, as you know it, will come to an end. How can you best make use of the remaining time?

**Give your child a sense of personal history.** Consolidation is an important piece of parenting at this time. Your child is figuring out his or her identity. You can help by telling stories, sharing family history, demonstrating how important your child is in your family. Help them see who they are as an individual. You can help your children figure out what strengths and weaknesses they possess. What do they love to do? What are they good at? What are their passions? Where do they struggle?

**Know their peers.** Many parents make a mistake thinking that their kids will be embarrassed to have mom or dad around. Parents who knew every kid in the class by name in elementary school suddenly become parents who don't know who their kid is hanging out with. It's just as important now to know their friends as it was when they were younger. Make sure your home is a place where your child's friends feel welcome. Extend yourself to provide snacks and to make them feel comfortable. Get to know them and make sure you know their parents.

**Have other trusted adults in their lives.** "In the multitude of counselors there is safety." (Proverbs 11:14.) Teens do not always confide in their parents and they don't always listen to them. That's why it's important for them to have other trusted adults in their lives – coaches, relatives, parents of other friends, school counselors, youth pastors, teachers – having adults that your child likes and trusts and has a rapport with becomes very important during these years. You should know who these adults are so that if there is a serious issue they will come to you. You and your teen need a safety net during these years.

**Be involved in their school and extra-curricular activities.** Sometimes parents who were very involved when their kids were younger stop attending school events during the high school years. Even when teens act like they don't want you there, they notice when you are not present. Know the names of the other kids in their lives and make sure they know you. Don't embarrass your teen by trying to act like you are part of the group. Maintaining good boundaries will make your teen more comfortable.

**Monitor online activity.** You should feel free to insist that your child friend you on Facebook while they are under 18 if they have an account. That said, most kids want you to be a silent and invisible friend. Your real purpose is to make sure they are being safe on Facebook, not to be an obvious presence.

**Listen, listen and listen some more.** When your son or daughter is speaking, listen. Don't assume you understand everything because you were young once or because you have so much more life experience. The fact is, you have no idea what it's like to be a teenager in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You didn't grow up with the Internet. Your world was different than your child's world. So listen and learn what your child's world is like. It takes time to get most teenagers to talk. You might need to go on long car rides, share meals or go on walks before a real conversation starts. It's well worth the effort.

**Pick your battles carefully.** You do not want to spend these years fighting with your teen. Sometimes you are going to have to set boundaries but many parents get caught up in battles that are not essential. Clothing is often a big issue. Autonomy is very important to teens. Whenever possible, you should let them make choices. Save your energy for those things that matter and give your teen some freedom on the things that are less important.

**Be a good role model.** Teens are extremely aware of hypocrisy and they watch closely. You are a role model. For better or worse, your virtues and your flaws will find their way into your children. Admit when you make mistakes and make an effort to change those things that set a poor example.

**Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Raising teens can be difficult. Most of the time, things turn out fine, but adolescence is a risky time. Do your best to develop a good support system for when you need advice. Friends and family can be a great help at this time. Sometimes you may need additional support for yourself or your teen. There are some serious psychological disorders that manifest themselves during adolescence. If you sense that your teen is in serious trouble, don't wait to get help. Many parents are devastated once they realize that an 18-year old cannot be forced to get help. If you are concerned that your teen might need help, please feel free to contact me for a consultation.

I hope you found these tips to be helpful. For a personal consultation on parenting or to have me speak to a group, please contact me at [Miriam@miriamkoenig.com](mailto:Miriam@miriamkoenig.com).