



# Ten Tips to Parents

## ... on fostering positive peer relationships in adolescence

It's common for American parents to believe that by the time their child becomes a teenager, they've done about all they can do to mold the child's beliefs and guide the child's behaviors. Peers compete vigorously with the family for the child's attention, allegiance, and time. Parents often feel they simply don't have much of a "say" in the child's choice of friends or activities with peers. And that can be scary!

Our interviews with parents and our studies of teenagers and their families cast doubt on these conclusions. Most parents *do* make an effort to remain involved in their child's life, right through adolescence. And that effort can be very helpful to teens--*if* parents choose the right ways to be involved. From our interviews, here are 10 tips on how parents can help children have healthy peer relationships during adolescence.

**1. Know your child's friends.** Teenagers are heavily influenced by their friends. So it's helpful to make an effort to get to know your child's close friends. A casual approach works best. Take a couple minutes to chat on the phone with a friend who calls for your child, or to say hello when you run into the friend out in the community. You may even ask



your child to invite a friend over for dinner, or along on a family outing so you can get to know them better. Some teens will resist! But they're usually willing if they feel their parent is genuinely interested in the person and not just trying to screen their friendships. Getting to know the friend's family is also a wise idea, because studies indicate that teens are influenced by the parents of their friends, as well as by their own parents.

**2. Nurture your child's interests.** Like all of us, teens usually make friends with peers who share their interests. So, involvement in healthy, self-enhancing activities breeds healthy, self-enhancing friendships. Involvement in undesirable activities is likely to lead to undesirable friendships. By encouraging your child's natural interest in healthy activities, you help them find healthy companions. Also, hobbies and activities in which a child has strong interests and abilities are strong sources of self-esteem, and children who feel good about themselves tend to select more desirable peer associates.

**3. Stop, look, and listen!** The best way to learn how your child is doing with peers is to observe the child around peers. Teens are more comfortable being around adults when the adults don't force their way into the teens' activities. A fly on the wall learns a lot more about what's going on than a fly that's constantly buzzing in your face!

#### 4. Make your home a welcome place for your child's peers.

The more comfortable your child's friends are "hanging out" at your home, the more opportunities you'll have to "check out" what's going on with friends. Teens enjoy hanging out where there are fun things to do, opportunities for private conversation, but also where they feel safe and accepted.



**5. Encourage positive peer pressures.** Contrary to popular belief, not all pressures that peers put on teenagers are unhealthy or self-destructive. In fact, peers are often a source of positive pressures that can motivate the child to try new things, explore hidden talents, or try again after a failure or setback. The task, then, is not to teach children to simply resist all peer pressures, but to discriminate between healthy and unhealthy pressure from peers. It's wise for parents to (subtly!) encourage a child to pursue relationships with friends who offer constructive pressures, or to help a child participate in environments in which peer pressures are likely to be more positive than negative.

**6. Give your child practice in decision-making.** When young children come to their parents with a problem, they usually want answers! At adolescence we expect young people to start thinking through problems for themselves--but with guidance from adults. So, adolescence calls for a new strategy of family decision-making. Teens should participate, but parents are still involved and can exercise "veto power," if necessary. Saying to a child, "It's your choice; whatever" can be heard as "I don't care what you decide because you don't matter." Inviting a child to join in decision-making is an acknowledgment of the child's growing capacity to make mature decisions. It's also excellent practice for facing the tough decision that teenagers often confront with peer pressures.



"I'D LIKE YOU TO STAY HOME TONIGHT. THE WEATHER REPORT SAYS THERE'S A LARGE AREA OF PEER PRESSURE BLOWING IN FROM THE EAST!"

#### 7. Set reasonable limits on peer interactions.

Parents often feel that, at adolescence, they no longer have a right to interfere with their child's social life--or that their child won't listen anyway! But parents *do* have a right to feel comfortable in their own home and to feel confident about their child's safety and well-being. Monitoring a child's interactions with peers is very important. It's also reasonable for parents to set limits on peer interactions. But those limits should be sensitive to the

child's needs and maturity level, and to the expectations of the child's peer group. Children are most likely to respect family rules when they are perceived as rational, clearly articulated, consistently enforced, flexible enough to allow for exceptions, and open to input from the teen.



## 8. Try to be more supportive than directive.

As parents we grow comfortable lecturing to our children, rather than listening to them. That needs to change at adolescence. Teenagers respect adults who will listen to them, who respect their opinions and acknowledge their experiences. When teens talk to parents, they're often seeking support rather than solutions; they want ideas, not ultimatums. Words of empathy also work better than efforts to "play down" problems. "I can see how this is hard for you" is more comforting to hear than "You'll feel better in the morning" or "By next week you'll have forgotten all about this"--or worse yet!, "Wait til you grow up and have *real* problems!"

## 9. Discipline with choices and consequences, not demands and punishments.

In saying "This is the rule, period!," the subtle message that parents give their child is: "I don't think you're able to make good decisions." An alternative is to lay out choices and consequences. "You may choose to do this or you may choose to do that, but if you choose to do *that* please understand that the consequences will be . . ." Children whose parents use this strategy tend to have better grades, higher self-esteem, a better ability to respond appropriately to peer pressures. They also tend to have closer relationships with their family.

**10. Network!** Keep in touch with other parents. When neighborhoods or communities share a common set of expectations for teenage behavior, life is much easier for parents *and* their teenage children. Networking with other parents (especially the families of your child's friends) is a good way to establish shared expectations. It also can be a way to learn how other parents have handled situations you are facing. Schools, churches, and neighborhood or community organizations can assist in setting up parent networks.



### ***One final thought:***

*Each child is unique, and so is each parent-child relationship. There is no magic formula for parenting teens. So, these tips need to be adjusted for your relationship with your teenager.*

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