

PARENTING PRIMER

**Tips for Parents of
Teenagers**

ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA) has been strengthening families in Pennsylvania for more than thirty years, and is a vital community partner in the prevention, intervention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Program services are designed to provide a positive environment for children through the provision of education in parenting skills, support services for families and training programs for professionals.

PFSA provides a wide range of services, including training, technical assistance, and various support services to affiliated agencies in our statewide network. With strong support from our organization, community-based member agencies administer services such as our parenting curriculum, "Building Your Family" or our Family Support Program with childcare provided, in most communities. Services are also geared to professionals who may receive training on recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect in order to fulfill their legal obligation under the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law.

If you are parenting a child, or work with children in your chosen profession, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance has services to help you in your role - call our office today or visit our website for more information.

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

There are several keys to being a good parent - one is information and the other is support. This booklet gives general information about a variety of topics of interest to parents, and encourages its readers to find support through Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance in their local communities. Neither information or support can solve all parenting problems, and we encourage readers to get professional help whenever it is warranted; no book can take the place of a doctor, counselor or other professional.

To avoid the awkwardness of "he/she," we have used "he" or "she" interchangeably-each implies all children, of course.

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UNDERSTAND TEEN DEVELOPMENT AND-BEHAVIOR

This is a time of rapid change for your child - physically and emotionally. It helps to understand what your child is facing. Remember what it was like for you to be a teenager!

- During adolescence your child will grow more quickly than at any other time since the first year of life. Good nutrition, extra sleep and patience with one's body are needed at this time. Be sensitive to your child as she struggles to become an adult.
- Talk to your child about the changes he can expect (borrow a book from the library or buy a good teen-gearred book if you need help). Reassure your teen that these changes are normal.
- Be positive about growing up -take concerns about breast or penis development seriously. Don't refer to menstruation as "the curse" or scare your teen with horror stories about his changing body. If you talk about her body (or yours) in a negative way, you make it hard for her to learn self-acceptance.
- Teens are very uneven in their emotional lives. They can be happy one minute and sad the next, and think it's all your fault. Remember that the teen's job is to become his own person. The transformation from child to adult is a chaotic one. Mood swings are normal for teens, so try to weather the storm until she feels more like the "old" kid you always knew.
- It may seem like your teen spends all of his time in front of the mirror. Teens are very egocentric, and need to keep tabs on their appearance. They worry that they are not "normal." Reassure your teen frequently, but don't be surprised if she seems critical of herself.
- Teenagers like to stay up late, often as a sign of privilege and freedom. It doesn't really hurt to let them (though you may be tired in the morning when it's time for work); the novelty soon wears off and they are in bed at a normal hour.
- The teen years can be filled with minor, but aggravating, problems such as musical preferences, chores, eating habits and bedtime. Decide which problems are important enough to set limits. Remember -just because the behavior is aggravating you, doesn't make it a serious problem.



KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS OF SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Teen troubles aren't always easy to catch. These are years of change. Your relationship with your teen may be strained; often, trouble shows up in unexpected ways. Parents need to be alert to signs of serious trouble, and have resources to turn to when they see them.

- If you think there is something wrong with your teen, there probably is. Gather information from others who know your child, but be persistent if you feel that your teen needs help. Your instincts are usually right!
- Depression is a serious illness in teens that can lead to other dangerous behavior -joining a gang or cult, running away, drug use, suicide attempts. Signs of depression include: sadness that is more intense and lasts longer than normal; loss of pleasure in activities the teen previously enjoyed; self-destructive behavior; changes in personal appearance; extreme mood swings; rebellion in a child who doesn't normally rebel; inability to concentrate; increased anxiety or paranoia; loss of self-esteem and expression of hopelessness or guilt; lack of appetite or overeating; extreme fatigue or sleep disturbance; change in school performance; frequent physical complaints; self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. Any threat of suicide, talking about suicidal fantasies or giving away favorite possessions should be taken very seriously. You should intervene right away.
- There are lots of places to get help for your teen, but it may take research and persistence on your part. Your doctor or a school counselor can give you referrals; support groups offer a place to talk to other parents and share experiences about what services have worked for their families. Keep trying until you find the help your family needs!
- A teen in crisis is extraordinarily draining -you are likely to be exhausted and under extreme stress. All members of the household are affected by the teen's problems, so check with his siblings as well. Find ways to give yourself a break and be good to yourself. The good news is that most teens want to be helped and the odds are good that you will make progress.



RESPECT YOUR TEEN'S CHOICES ABOUT HIS FUTURE

Many teens shrug off the future, preferring to think only fifteen minutes ahead. Other teens make choices about jobs, school, and leaving home that parents oppose. It is important to keep lines of communication open, and respect your teen's choices. Provide support and respect while you slowly give up control of his future.

- Resist the temptation to lecture and offer advice unless your teen asks for it; listen to your teen and offer reassurance when needed. Remember -it's his life! Heartbreaking as it may be, teens need to learn from their mistakes.
- Realize that you are entering a new phase in your relationship with your teen. You have spent much of his life being the one in control, and it may be hard to let go. But trying to direct your teen's future will not benefit him in the long run, and you may end up losing communication completely.
- Prepare your teen to take care of himself away from home. This includes information about drugs, sex, drinking and money, as well as day-to-day living skills. Cooking, balancing a checkbook, shopping and doing laundry are rarely taught in school; your teen needs preparation for the real world.
- Enlist the help of school counselors, the library, or internet to help your teen learn more about his interests and possible careers. Many professions have meetings that are open to students who are considering a career in that field. Encourage your teen's decision-making skills by providing information.

KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

Even though your teenager appears uninterested in having a conversation with you, research shows that they value their parents' opinions and wish their parents spent more time talking with them.

- You never know when your teen will want to talk. While riding in the car, or doing chores -many occasions become unexpected opportunities to share your opinions and values with your teen. Stop what you are doing and seize the chance to get to know this new adult!
- Be available to your teen when problems arise. Teens tend to operate in "crisis mode," and want immediate answers to their questions. While you may not be able to accommodate all the time, try to be sensitive to his need to talk.
- Conflict is necessary in any relationship, and teens are especially good at arguing. View arguments as a chance to learn, negotiate and come to agreement. Arguments will not ruin your relationship unless you let them get out of hand.

- Take a time out, then give your teen your undivided attention to work out a solution that meets both your needs and the needs of your teen. Listen to your teen, and then try to re-state his position. Ask your teen to come up with some possible solutions and present them to you for discussion.
- Time spent together is an investment in your relationship with your teen. She is still part of the family, even when she doesn't want to be seen with you. Plan vacations and activities with your teen in mind, but respect his desire to have time away from you also. It may seem impossible to get everyone together for family meals, but keep trying. Pick at least one evening a week when teens are required to be with you. Don't worry if they complain; it's their job at this age!

MAKE APPROPRIATE RULES AND LIMITS FOR YOUR TEEN

Your teen is learning to make decisions in preparation for adulthood. Gradually increase your level of trust by keeping the rules appropriate to his age and maturity.

- No matter what she says, your teen still wants you to make rules. Just don't make too many trivial ones, and know why the rule is important. It may be time to let the rope out a little on things like hair, clothes, bedroom decor, and after-school activities. Solicit your teen's opinion on rules and she will be more likely to follow them.
- Every family must decide on its own rules and work out differences between parents. Parents who are consistent and specific with rules have an easier time. Even if you have not enforced rules consistently in the past, it is not too late to start now. Write down rules and post them if you feel yourself giving in. Look for support from other parents who share your views and have similar rules in their homes.
- While you want your teen to be independent, he lacks your judgment and experience. Provide him with enough freedom to learn on his own, but keep him from learning dangerous lessons the hard way. It's a delicate -and difficult -balance to reach.
- Spell out household rules clearly, but keep them few and simple. Include consequences for breaking the rules. Be realistic and don't make consequences you can't, or won't, enforce. Family meetings are a good time to discuss rules about telephone use, curfews, car rules, loud music and other topics that affect everyone in the house. Meetings may occur monthly or on an as-needed basis, but keep them casual; nobody wants a long lecture.
- If your teen has a complaint about something, listen to her. You don't have to give in every time, but give it a hearing, and don't say "no" without good reason. This will make it easier to say "no" to the really important things.

YOUR WITH YOUR TEEN ABOUT SEX

Talking about sex can be hard. But it offers wonderful opportunities to share your values and encourage your teen to be honest with you.

- Help your teen develop his own attitudes and coping skills by talking honestly about your concerns and providing accurate information. Many teens say they don't get enough information from their parents; they may get "facts" from other sources, but they want help from their parents on values, and on how sex fits into a young adult's life.
- Share your feelings about abstinence and sexual responsibility. There is more to responsibility than just preventing pregnancy and disease - it involves feeling good about our choices and goals, making commitments and trusting others.
- Talk about the results of sexual activity with your teen, both the pleasurable aspects and the emotional and physical risks. Make it clear that even if you do not approve of teen sex, and if your teen does not agree with your values, he needs to know about safe sex.
- Be prepared to answer questions. If your child is old enough to ask the question, he is old enough to have an answer. Borrow books from the library or ask your doctor or school nurse for resources. Buy a book for your teen to "find" in the house; give her time to read it without offering your input.
- Don't demand to know all the details of your teen's interest in sex. Don't assume that she is sexually active because she asks a question. Not respecting their privacy is a sure way to turn the discussion off.

UNDERSTAND GANGS AND CULTS

Many parents do not understand the allure of a gang or cult. These groups are popular with teens, especially teens who are feeling "lost" or making a difficult transition to adulthood.

- Gangs and cults offer teens a way to be accepted and respected. Teens who are depressed or have low self-esteem may join these groups as a way to "fix" their problems.
- Cults are dominated by a charismatic leader who controls all aspects of the members' lives. Today's cults have become quite savvy about how to locate members; they often look like study groups, support groups or environmental organizations. They rely on teaching through repetition, and limit contact the members may have with their families. Gangs operate under a similar dynamic, replacing the family with a select group of peers, often with an older leader. Gangs are usually same-sex groups of teens who have unique rituals, clothing and language that distinguish them from competing gangs.

- Lessen the attractiveness of these groups by communicating with your teen. Pay attention to what is happening in his life and who he is hanging out with. Be available when your teen needs to talk and don't pressure your teen to be perfect in everything he attempts. Strengthen his ties with other groups, religious organizations and peers.

KNOW YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDS AND THEIR PARENTS

Suddenly you are not the center of your child's world, and you feel abandoned. It is normal for teenagers to prefer the company of their peers to their parents, as they seek out their own identity.

- Your teen relies on you for emotional and financial support, but pictures herself as more independent than she really is. She looks to her friends to verify what she thinks about herself. Try not to criticize your child's friends; this only makes her defensive. She may be drawn even more to those friends if you object.
- Don't judge your teen's friends by appearance alone. Children often choose friends with outrageous dress or hair as a way to "test the waters" of what they would like to do, to shock parents, or to fit into a popular group. Get to know the friends before you form an opinion.
- Younger teens often "try on" different groups of friends to see where they fit in, while older teens are more stable in their friendships. Younger teens often exclude one another from groups and form cliques whose membership changes quickly. Girls tend to make friends by talking to each other, sharing secrets and laughing together; boys by sharing activities.
- Younger teens value their peers' opinions and seek constant approval from other teens. As they mature, teens start to look outside of their own group for approval.
- Include your teen's friends in your family plans every once in awhile. You validate your teen's choices and you can still spend time with your teen in a "the more the merrier" mode.
- Develop friendships with the parents of your child's friends. This gives you a chance to talk about your child's behavior, compare notes and get advice from other parents. It also helps you learn the values of the other family, and decide on what limits your teen – and his friend – may need in your home. If parents have similar rules and expectations, it is harder for teens to "divide and conquer."

ADJUST YOUR OWN ATTITUDES

The change from child to teen is hard on parents. Often, we react with anger and criticism. This makes the situation worse. Finding ways to become a partner in your teen's journey to adulthood can make this difficult time a bit easier.

- Examine your reactions to your teen. Do you automatically criticize and yell? Do you give your teen a chance to explain, while you really listen? It's fine to disagree, but listen first.
- Commit yourself to making a positive change in your interactions with your teen. Look for his efforts, praise him, and show you are interested in what he does and says.
- Make your home a positive place to be. React with humor, tolerance and honesty. Note his improvements and keep the mood light and cooperative. Relax a little, and you will feel less stressed out with your teens. Let the little things go!
- Look for solutions together, and avoid "me against them" thinking. Put yourself in a 'relationship-building frame of mind and your teen is likely to follow.
- Model the behavior you want. This is as true now as it was when he was a toddler! This is especially important in areas of high risk to teens: alcohol and other drugs, speeding, coming home when you are supposed to.
- Take time for yourself. Now that your kids are older, you have a little more freedom to pursue your own interests and friendships. Nurture yourself with positive relationships and activities.
- Take responsibility for yourself and your actions. Reclaim your sense of self by using statements; state clear boundaries about what your teen may and may not do, how it effects you and others in the family, and what consequences will follow when rules are broken.
- Believe in change. Have confidence in your ability to interact with your teen, and in his ability to accept your love and guidance.
- Don't give up on your child. Not now. Not ever.



MY OWN PARENTING SOLUTIONS:



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