

Strategies for effective parenting

BEING AN EFFECTIVE PARENT TAKES PLANNING

Let's begin by looking at some typical situations faced by Canadian families:

Mike and Wendy, both in their late 30s, have three children, two careers, a nice house in a great location with friendly neighbours—and a problem. Their 14-year-old son, Jeremy, has been worrying them a lot lately. Ever since he started Grade 9, the “old Jeremy”—the fun-loving, average school kid who won soccer medals, played in the band, and collected comics and Space Lego—seems to have vanished. Now he spends his time either out or online with his new (and gruff) friends from high school, while his homework piles up and his grades drop. Any conversation he has with his parents rapidly turns into an argument, and the more Mike and Wendy try to get him to abide by the rules, the more surly and upset he becomes. They aren't disagreeable parents, but they want him to see things their way. Is it wrong for them to make sure he eats and sleeps properly, gets good grades at school and doesn't get into trouble? Why does Jeremy make everything so difficult?

Miranda experiences some of the same problems with her daughter Stephanie. As a single mom, Miranda has to carefully juggle her time between her job and her two children—and Stephanie seems to be using

up more than her share of her mother's energy. Stephanie's room's a mess, she's never around when important chores have to be done, she spends most evenings either online with friends or on the cellphone—the list goes on. Miranda is torn between allowing her daughter enough freedom to go out with her friends and have some fun, and making her face up to her responsibilities around the house. Recently, Stephanie has been dating a boy a year older than her, and Miranda's worried about how far she can be trusted with evenings out, parties and all of the other distractions and worries that dating creates. Like Jeremy, Stephanie doesn't seem to be too focused on schoolwork, or on the other things that used to take up her time, such as choir and skating. What should Miranda do to supervise her daughter without stifling her at the same time?

Fatim and Harshil have a different sort of difficulty. Since moving to Canada five years ago, they have watched their eldest daughter, Noor, adapt to the new society around them. Already, she is much more comfortable speaking English than they are, and she has gradually adjusted to social customs that her grandparents would never have condoned. Fatim especially wants Noor to be more respectful of their family traditions and customs, but Noor seems more interested in her friends—their clothes, parties, music, makeup and language—than in any of the values her parents hold. She argues that she is kept at home while her friends are allowed all kinds of freedoms, and complains that her parents are being unfair. While Fatim and Harshil are pleased that they have found a home where their daughter is relatively safe and able to express herself, they

worry their values are being lost. They are afraid if she is allowed all of the liberties that Canadian teens are permitted, Noor will abandon those things that her parents worked so hard to preserve. How can Fatim and Harshil give Noor what she wants without sacrificing the customs and traditions they value?

Do any of these situations sound familiar? If you are the parent of a teenager (or guardian, grandparent, aunt, uncle, even a friend of a teenager) I'm sure that you will run into situations similar to these. Although the problems and conflicts may sound familiar, the approaches and solutions to them often aren't.

The families just discussed are facing changes that occur rapidly as their teens begin the task of seeking their own identity and gradually separating from their role as children in the family. The teens have no particular roadmap or guide to follow, but they're caught up in a fast-moving adventure driven by their peer culture, curiosity and new-found opportunities. Limit-testing, mood changes and sharply critical attitudes may come with this territory, but your values, your role modelling, your affection and your time and guidance deeply influence the decisions and actions they take. Focus on the bigger picture (your teen's maturity and independence), and accept that getting there is not always easy.

As parents, we're bombarded with advice, warnings and criticism concerning parenting. However, we seldom have the opportunity to think about how we raise our teens. We most often rely on the same familiar methods our own parents used (even if we have bad memories of them) simply because there is so much information out there—talk shows, countless parenting magazines at the grocery checkout, more Internet sites than any parent could ever look at, parent chat

rooms and bulletin boards—but no way to know what or who we can trust. Sometimes we hold our breath and wait to see if anything “bad” happens and then react, rather than spending a little time thinking about our role and planning ways to handle tricky situations with our teens.

Your teenager’s new connections with friends pose new challenges to your relationship. Although peers can and do influence one another in positive ways, we also know that they increase the likelihood your teen will experiment with tobacco, alcohol, other drugs, unsafe sex and delinquent behaviour. You are now confronted with an entirely new set of worries and concerns.

Although this may sound bleak, parents do continue to influence the behaviours and decisions of their children well into and beyond the teen years in extremely important ways. Your relationship is changing for sure, but this process does not have to be painful or unpleasant—in fact, the changes you are both undergoing are some of the most important, valuable and long-lasting of all.

KEEPING UP WITH YOUR TEEN

The idea for this guide arose from my experience and that of my colleagues in listening to adolescents as part of our efforts to provide educational strategies to strengthen their healthy relationships and reduce risk behaviours. Simply stated, teens are eager for guidance about the best ways to fit in with their peers—both same-sex and opposite-sex peers—without making mistakes that can get them into trouble or lead to rejection. They are also eager for information about the choices they have concerning new pressures and expectations (such as sex, substance use, and avoiding abuse from peers or dating partners). However, they

must trust the source of the information, feel they are being heard, know their opinions are respected, and have some degree of say in their decisions. In other words, they do not like to simply be told “just say no” or “because I say so.”

Teens often express the wish their parents would make more of an effort to understand the challenges and pressures they face at school, at home and in the community. During classroom discussions about these pressures, I often hear them say “My parents need to know this!” They voice concern that their parents are quick with the rules and consequences of breaking them, but don’t seem to take the time to really listen and help to problem-solve the situations that matter to their teen (for example, working together on the answer to “Can I go to a party Friday night?”). Worse, they may feel that their parents hold outdated views from their own teenaged years, or that they rely on newspaper headlines of tragedies, leading them to make unbalanced and unfair decisions. I’m not saying they’re right—I just want you to remember where they’re coming from!

To get around these concerns, some teens find it easier to create a “parent-persona” in order to avoid suspicion and appear to be the same kid their parent has always known. By keeping their new-found interests, friends and opportunities secret, they believe they can get away with more things and at the same time, keep their parents happy.

A teen who takes the parent-persona route, for example, may know that his parent will be concerned about his going to a party, so he will head this off with a prepared statement such as “Pat’s parents will be there. There’s no booze or drugs— I don’t do that. You can trust me—there’s no need to phone Pat’s parents.” This approach stems from the time-honoured adage, “the less they know the better,” and, to an unsuspecting parent, this may lessen his worry and help maintain

the perception that his teen is more trustworthy and mature than the rest (until the inevitable happens).

Other teens are more upfront and confrontational, choosing to simply override parental authority and launch into their new-found status and privileges with abandon. A “so what?” or “who cares?” attitude can elevate their status among peers and force a new relationship onto their parents. These teens are more likely to be the “early starters,” leading the way as they and their friends try out new temptations such as substance use, romantic relationships and sexual activity.

Being this type of “leader” during early adolescence, of course, carries many risks. Not only are there risks directly related to these activities (for example, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, injuries and addictions), but there are indirect risks as well (for example, academic decline, violence, bullying and delinquent activities) that some teens will entirely ignore or minimize, focusing instead on the elevated status they gain from their peers.

You know your child best. You know that there is no magic pill, no simple method that works every time, and mistakes do happen. You’ve been learning the best ways to raise her all along. Now you just need to continue learning: What’s normal? What’s changing? What role do you play during this time? Although it’s seldom easy, there are some simple strategies that should guide you as you navigate new issues. This booklet tackles these issues from the perspective of *normal adolescent development*, and it draws from research studies and the author’s experience raising teens to provide practical advice for strengthening your relationship with your teen and minimizing conflict.

The information is intended to make you think about, and perhaps change, some of the strategies you use as the parent of a teen—much as we ask teens to

think about and revise their strategies for making safe and healthy decisions. There are no easy solutions or quick fixes, but there are some simple strategies that work better than others to foster the values and sense of responsibility you hope your teen will adopt. Being informed, and somewhat open-minded, is a great starting point.