

5 Mistakes Parents Make With Teens and Tweens

Here are the top mistakes parents make with their teens and tweens, and how to avoid them.

By Joanne Barker

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Things aren't the way they used to be. Your 12-year-old no longer comes to you first when she feels hurt or disappointed. When your son misses curfew -- again -- the time-out corner that used to work wonders is now simply, *lame*. As your child grows into adolescence, you need to adapt your tried-and-true parenting skills to a rapidly changing world.

As tempting as it might seem, don't throw away everything you know about your child -- or yourself as a parent. Your teenager may seem like a stranger in your home, but behind the slammed doors and mood swings, she is still your child. You will face many unknowns in the years ahead. What you can expect is that your limits will be tested and your patience will, at times, wear thin. Here are the top mistakes parents make with their teens and tweens, and how to avoid them.

Teen Parenting Mistake # 1: Expect the Worst

Teenagers get a bad rap, says Richard Lerner, PhD, director of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University. Many parents approach raising teenagers as an ordeal, believing they can only watch helplessly as their lovable children transform into unpredictable monsters. Expecting the worst sets parents and teens up for several unhappy, unsatisfying years together.

"The message we give teenagers is that they're only 'good' if they're not doing 'bad' things, such as doing drugs, hanging around with the wrong crowd, or having sex," Lerner tells WebMD. Raising teenagers with negative expectations can actually promote the behavior you fear most. According to a recent study conducted at Wake Forest University, teens whose parents expected them to get involved in risky behaviors reported higher levels of these behaviors one year later.

Lerner urges parents to focus on their teenagers' interests and hobbies, even if you don't understand them. You could open a new path of communication, reconnect with the child you love, and learn something new.

Teen Parenting Mistake #2: Read Too Many Parenting Books

Rather than trusting their instincts, many parents turn to outside experts for advice on how to raise teens. "Parents can tie themselves into knots trying to follow the advice they read in books," says Robert Evans, EdD, executive director of the Human Relations Service, Wellesley, Mass., and author of *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Child Rearing*.

"Books become a problem when parents use them to replace their own innate skills," Evans tells WebMD. "If the recommendations and their personal style don't fit, parents wind up more anxious and less confident with their own children."

Use books (and articles like this) to get perspective on confusing behavior and then put them down. Spend the extra time talking with your spouse and children, getting clear about what matters most to you and your family.

Teen Parenting Mistake #3: Sweat the Small Stuff

Maybe you don't like your daughter's haircut or choice of clothes. Or perhaps she didn't get the part in the play you know she deserves. Before you intervene, look at the big picture. If a certain mode of self-expression or set of events does not put your child at risk, give her the leeway to make age-appropriate decisions and live with the results.

"A lot of parents don't want growing up to involve any pain, disappointment, or failure," Evans says. But protecting your child from the realities of life robs her of the opportunity to take chances and learn from her mistakes while she's still under your roof. Step back and let your child know you're there when she needs you.

Teen Parenting Mistake # 4: Ignore the Big Stuff

If you suspect your child is using alcohol or drugs, do not look the other way. Parents should address suspected drug or alcohol use right away, before it escalates into a bigger problem, says Amelia M. Arria, PhD, director of the Center on Young Adult Health and Development at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

“The years when kids are between 13 and 18 years old are an essential time for parents to stay involved,” Arria tells WebMD. Parents might consider teen drinking a rite of passage because they drank when they were that age. “But the stakes are higher now,” she says.

More drugs are available today, illegal drugs and legal medications. For example, cough remedies with DXM (dextromethorphan) have become a new drug of choice for some teens. DXM is easy to get and teens and parents alike underrate its [potential dangers](#). Studies show that between 7% and 10% of U.S. teens have reported abusing cough medicine to get high. Although safe when used as directed, DXM can cause hallucinations and disassociations similar to PCP or ketamine (Special K) when used in excessive amounts, as well as rapid heartbeat, unconsciousness, stomach pain, and vomiting.

Watch for unexplained changes in your teen’s behavior, appearance, academic performance, and friends. If you find empty cough medicine packaging in your child’s trash or backpack, if bottles of medicine go missing from your cabinet, or if you find unfamiliar pills, pipes, rolling papers, or matches, your child could be abusing drugs. Take these signs seriously and get involved. Safeguard all the medicines you have: Know which products are in your home and how much medication is in each package or bottle.

Mistake #5: Rule With an Iron Fist, or Kid Gloves

Some parents, sensing a loss of control over their teens’ behavior, crack down every time their child steps out of line. Every day brings a new punishment. The home becomes a war zone. By contrast, other parents avoid all conflict for fear their teens will push them away. They put being a cool parent ahead of setting limits and enforcing rules. For these parents, discipline is a dirty word.

The first style of parenting focuses on obedience above all else. Although the house may run like a tight ship, teens raised in rigid environments don’t have the opportunity to develop problem-solving or leadership skills.

Yet too little discipline does a disservice to teens as well. Teenagers need clear structure and rules to live by as they start to explore the world outside. It is up to parents to establish their household’s core values and communicate these to their children through words and consistent actions. Lerner calls this being an authoritative parent, an approach that “helps children develop the skills they need to govern themselves in appropriate ways.”

Your Child Is Your Child, Through Thick and Thin

Raising teenagers isn’t always easy or smooth, especially when testing parents’ authority is part of growing up. Some days, faced with one teenage eye roll too many, you may wonder if it’s even worth trying.

Keep in mind that your influence runs deeper than you think. Most teens say they want to spend more time with their parents. And teens choose friends that have their parents’ core values. Keep making time for your child throughout the tween and teen years. Even when it doesn’t show, you provide the solid ground they know they can always come home to.