

Tips for Effective Parenting

Expert information for parents of adolescents

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Parenting Adolescents

Parenting is probably the most valuable task any person could undertake: being responsible for shaping, guiding and protecting a developing human being. Most parents have very busy schedules and find themselves "time poor", and pulled in many directions at once. The information included in this pamphlet highlights key pointers that all parents of adolescents should be aware of and able to utilize. It is hoped that parents will find this information clarifying, validating, practical, and help them to feel more in control of their parenting, and more effective with the efforts they make. Sometimes, however, issues are not always resolved despite doing all the right things, and in these instances professional support may be useful to assist with overcoming obstacles, including serious psychological health issues.

Boundaries & Limits

What do we mean by Boundaries?

Boundaries are rules and expectations people of any age require to feel secure - emotionally and physically safe. As your child moves through adolescence, the boundaries they need should be adjusted in line with their increasing maturity. Creating boundaries for your child can be done explicitly when you describe rules and expectations to your child, eg. curfew times. Boundaries can also be implied or assumed, that is, when you 'model' or demonstrate behaviour in certain situations for your child, eg. complying with road rules and safe driving even if you become stressed or frustrated.

Why do teenagers "test" Boundaries?

Effective boundaries are crucial for adolescent development. Unclear and ambiguous boundaries can affect healthy development, which can then play a role in emotional and behavioural problems.

Teenagers often test boundaries by transgressing or crossing them for two reasons. First, they may attempt to cross or appear to ignore a known boundary to make a point: affirming their emerging autonomy from their parents, and their increasing ability to make independent judgments and decisions. The second reason teenagers “test” boundaries, is literally that: They are trying to clarify exactly *what* the boundaries are in a given situation. By *acting out* in this way they are testing *when* the boundaries come into effect and *how* – “what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and when?”

So, in both cases you must define the boundaries being tested, making your expectations clear and explicit. If necessary, you should describe in detail, examples of behaviours (both those you desire, as well as those that are unacceptable). The more simple and specific the better – stick to behaviours and avoid the more ambiguous *attitudes*. Keep in mind, setting boundaries is different from outlining *consequences* (see ‘Limits’ below). You might also affirm their *ability* to think for themselves, and their emerging independence, but maintain your position regarding your expectations of their behaviour. If you feel your child is ready for greater independence, you may negotiate the boundaries on a provisional basis (see negotiating below).

What do we mean by Limits?

As teenagers begin to test boundaries, they lack experience and judgment in “how far to go” with their behaviour. In this situation, they need feedback from adults about the appropriateness of the level of *intensity* or *extremity* of their behaviour. Like speed limits when driving a car, parents need to be ready to give feedback as to “how fast” they are traveling. This teaches teenagers what is safe and when things are getting potentially dangerous. Taking risks is important for adolescent development, and parents’ role in setting limits is crucial for them to develop effective judgment.

What is ‘Limit-setting’?

Continuing the car analogy, sometimes parents need to take charge to bring the teenager’s back to a safe “speed” when the conditions dictate it. At times it is safe to take more risks, but without experience, teenagers need to learn *when* it may be more dangerous, and therefore need to apply greater caution.

How do you apply effective Limit-setting?

Parents frequently find limit-setting one of the most challenging tasks of bringing up an adolescent child. The teenager’s enthusiasm for asserting their independence and autonomy may mean they don’t respond to, or even appear to take any notice of their parents’ guidance or attempts to take charge. Parents need to be good judges too, and need to find the right balance of limit-setting. That is, matching their control over their child to the teenager’s ability to use feedback and set their own limits. This is often a trial-and-error process, and can feel like a frustrating power struggle for all involved, but is a critical learning experience that needs to be undergone.

A basic rule of thumb is that you need to take charge over your teenager to the degree required that (a) they can’t take charge of themselves, or (b) they start behaving in ways that are less dangerous or potentially detrimental, and can then “take back the controls”. Examples of limit-setting include consequences such as having to apologise for their behaviour, time-out, removal of privileges, ‘grounding’ and in extremes situations, suspension from school. Like boundaries, limit-setting makes adolescents feel safe. It also makes them more confident to take appropriate risks and experiment with their behaviour safely.

Assertive Communication

Why be Assertive?

An assertive style of communicating is an essential skill that both parents and teenagers need to master to effectively navigate their way through adolescence. In particular, assertiveness is a most effective way for parents to communicate with their adolescent children, and an equally important skill adolescents need to learn in order to communicate their feelings and negotiate their needs.

It's easy... isn't it?

Some parents can find it quite an adjustment when their previously compliant child begins to assert their own point of view, and challenge parents' ideas, values and directives. While this can be difficult at times for parents, it is also a most important developmental stage all adolescents need to successfully traverse on the path to independence. It does, however, require parents to change tack, and be ready and able to engage in assertive interactions and to 'model' for the adolescent how to effectively apply these newly developing skills. In order to do this, parents need to be skilled at assertive communication themselves!

What exactly is Assertiveness?

Assertive communication is differentiated from aggressive or passive/submissive communication in these important ways:

- Assertive communication respects the rights and feelings of both parties equally,
- Assertive communication seeks to achieve a two-way understanding of both parties views, feelings and desires,
- Assertive communication uses body language, facial expression, eye-contact, tone of voice, and gestures that are controlled, direct, forthright, confident, and calm. It also respects personal space, is not threatening, not overly emotional, nor timid, unconfident or deferring,
- Assertive communication uses considered statements and is not reactive to the 'heat of the moment',
- Assertive discussion allows equal time for each party to express their views and time to respond to the views of the other.

Good assertive communication takes time to master, and like all important skills it requires practice. As Covey (1989) suggests: "*Seek to understand, and then to be understood.*"

Conflict & Negotiation Skills

A little conflict is a good thing...

The adolescent's emerging independence brings unavoidable conflict in many areas that significantly effect parents. As the adolescent is developing their identity and clarifying their self-image, they often push away as a means to differentiate themselves from their parents and family. We need to understand that conflict is a way adolescents learn who they are and allows them to fine-tune critical social skills. This process is sometimes painful for parents and can lead to a feeling that their relationship with their child is suddenly full of conflict and "problems." Especially for parents of their first adolescent child, this apparent reversal from earlier dependence on them can be unexpected and very anxiety provoking. It can also lead to parents feeling to need to "clamp down" on what appears to be reckless behaviour or ill-judged opinions or attitudes. Extreme reactions in either direction can create or add to problems, so a moderate, middle-of the road approach is very important.

Manager or Consultant?

At this time, it is important to change your role and approach from being a manager to that of a *consultant*. Some parents who are used to being in managerial positions in their work can find this transition difficult – for obvious reasons! In this new role, you have the important job of teaching your adolescent child how to resolve conflict through *negotiation*. Again, one of the best ways of doing this is to model through your own behaviour and establish a negotiative style of problem-solving around issues of conflict. Taking a collaborative, problem-solving approach helps to de-personalise issues, and importantly focus on the solution rather than the problem, or the issue over which you disagree.

Structure, plan and implement

Using and encouraging assertive communication, set up the following process:

1. identify what both parties agree on,
2. identify exactly the point of difference,
3. brainstorm options and solutions,

4. choose a "win-win" solution that is the most easily applied and most acceptable to both parties,
5. establish a short trial period to see if this is a realistic and effective solution,
6. agree to a 'Plan B' option (including when and why this would take effect) and/or to a time/date to re-convene on the matter with a view to reviewing the issue in light of what has been learned from the first attempt at a solution.

Remember that you are not negotiating from a position of equality. As a parent, you should still define the boundaries and set-limits, but be prepared to negotiate these in areas that you feel can be negotiated. However, don't forget, you have the right to veto, and some specific aspects may not be on the negotiating table – i.e. "A is negotiable... but B is not!" In the end, your job is to remain in charge and grant privileges only once they've been earned, or remove them until the privilege can be earned back. This is also an important way to develop self-esteem (see below).

Ouch that hurts!

When angry, attacking or threatening exchanges occur, then emotional scars can remain, leaving both parties reluctant to engage in, or pessimistic about future attempts to negotiate. In these times, it is very important here for you to rise to your maturity as an adult and responsibility and as a parent.

First, remind yourself that you are the adult, don't be tempted to regress to their level, even if it feels like it's only fair that you fight fire with fire – they are still children developing towards adulthood. Use assertive limit-setting with their behaviour: explicitly state what they are doing that is hurtful or destructive to your relationship, and that you will not engage with them if they are not going to respect you in the process. Make future discussion on issues contingent on respectful, assertive communication.

Finally, be aware of your adolescent child's exceptional skill at "pushing your buttons." Adolescents know what hurts most, and are often not afraid to dig into any sensitive areas when they get angry. It is important that they know when they have done this and how it has effected you. But, remember, as the adult you need to stay composed despite the provocation and take the lead in finding a resolution positively and collaboratively.

Building Self Esteem & Resilience

Contrary to outward appearances, adolescents' self-esteem and confidence in their ability to face and overcome hardship is typically fragile. Despite the emerging importance of peers, adolescent's relationships with their parents remain a vital source of self-esteem and provide the means of developing resilience to setbacks. Parents can build self-esteem and teach person-centered coping skills by:

- Affirming *any* ability of the teenager, including seemingly minor ones such as: punctuality, the ability to be organized, self-reliance, etc. Adolescents can never hear enough genuine positive feedback about their adequacy. Bringing a teenager "back to reality" with criticism will only make a teenager feel rejected, worthless and resentful.
- Affirming the adolescent's capacity to learn from, overcome, or master set-backs of any kind, including failures, poor motivation, loss, etc.,
- Affirming in them those things the young person values in themselves and others, such as their sense of humor,
- Modeling, or demonstrating, an optimistic, future oriented outlook – especially in the face of defeat or failure

Besides enhancing psychological development, being a source of self-esteem and resilience strengthens relationships and maintains parents as important figures in a young person's life. It is the glue that bonds parent and adolescent child together, helping achieve healthy development and an adequate preparation for adulthood. Most frequently, it is the relationship with parents, which nurtures the young person when life serves up overwhelming experiences or failure.

Building self-esteem through limit-setting

Contrary to popular myth, teenagers feel better about themselves if their parents set limits on them. Knowing they have someone looking over their shoulder – or at least, watching them from a distance – and noticing what they're doing, not only makes them feel secure, but helps them gain confidence.

Knowing their parents will intervene if necessary, allows them to experiment, take risks and "refine" their judgment about their limits and abilities. In this way, they feel affirmed about their competence. Proving to their parents they can be trusted to exercise good self-control makes teenagers feel competent and prepared for adulthood. Confidence grows when parents set limits early, and then adjust them accordingly as the teenager "earns" their independence.

Teamwork or Tragedy?

How effective you are as a parent is less important than how effective you, together with your child's other parent, work as a team. In adolescence, this is even more important as teenagers become skilled in "splitting" parents and "playing" one off against the other. So, regardless of the detail or specific issue, it is always more important to present a united front. You can get away with the occasional poorly executed parenting strategy, but inconsistent or opposing parenting approaches from the "parent team" will cause much confusion and angst. When it comes to defining boundaries and setting limits, you (and your child) need to think of both parents as a unified partnership, and not as two separate individuals.

A good parenting team aims to be excellent problem solvers – always looking for solutions for all parties. A *win-win* mind-set and approach is critical to any effective parenting and also teaches valuable relationship negotiation skills to the adolescent.

Skill for life

Further, and more broadly, good parents seek to model (or demonstrate) all the skills and behaviours you seek your adolescent child to develop and adopt. Remember that adolescents are acutely aware of any inconsistencies between what parents say and what they do. Before they believe anything you propose, they will expect you to show them that it can be done, and that it is worth doing!

Parents can model invaluable social skills through their relationship with each other. For instance, communication skills like active listening and empathy, assertiveness, emotional control, and relationship management skills like conflict resolution, negotiation and compromise are skills for life.

A Case in Point

An example might help to illustrate how important all of these issues are in the role of effective parenting for healthy adolescent development.

A 14 year old, and eldest of three children, Rebecca was coming to the attention of her teachers because of increasing disobedience and disruptive and "controlling" behaviour with teachers and peers alike. At home, Rebecca's mother was also finding her behaviour challenging, frequently demanding attention and behaving in ways that called for her mother to discipline her. Despite an emotionally close relationship, her mother was often the target of Rebecca's anger and would frequently be ignored or verbally abused, criticised and "put-down" through derisive comments. In contrast, Rebecca enjoyed a co-operative, playful yet respectful relationship with her father who, due to work commitments, had less contact and involvement in daily routines.

Rebecca's mother sought help when the school, frustrated with multiple detentions and suspensions due to disruption in class and disrespect to teachers, suggested she leave the school. Upon closer examination it was clear that Rebecca's parents had starkly contrasting expectations for Rebecca's behaviour. Boundaries were often contradictory and limits were

enforced by her mother for minor transgressions, and by her father - who didn't see a problem - only when she was extreme. Rebecca's parents frequently disagreed over the standards expected, and fought-out their differences by disciplining and giving attention at polar extremes of her behaviour as a way of trying to make a point.

With counselling that engaged Rebecca's father to see there was a problem, both parents came to realise how poorly they were working as a team, and how unequal the parenting involvement had become. When her father committed to private discussions around what the boundaries and limits were, and how consensus could be reached, he also became more involved, and shared responsibility for setting limits consistently. The net result was that Rebecca was unable to play one parent off against the other, and she quickly learned what boundaries were expected, and when she had reached acceptable limits in her behaviour. This unified response from both parents created a more predictable and consistent environment for Rebecca. With increased feelings of safety and containment, her behaviour at school settled and she began to respond co-operatively to teachers' authority, becoming a more motivated and involved student who could share the "air-space" with peers. She also became less depressed and angry, and her self-esteem improved.

So, how are you doing?

By yourself, or with your child's other parent, take a second to rate yourself honestly as how effective you are in the following areas:

1. *Specifying clear and unambiguous boundaries:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

2. *Setting limits – knowing when and how:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

3. *Communicating assertively:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

4. *Responding positively to conflict – turning it into a learning opportunity:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

5. *Negotiating win-win solutions:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

6. *Ensuring your strategies build self-esteem:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

7. *Working together as a positive and supportive parent team:*

Rating: Great Good most of the time Struggling I/we really need help

How did you go? If you need to, set some goals to work on, or perhaps speak to someone who might be able to guide you in ways to improve your parenting effectiveness. Like most things in life, time and effort now will lead to great benefits later.

When to Consult a Professional

As a parent, the best sign that you need help is when you feel stressed or overwhelmed! Parents often think that they should struggle on by themselves until they figure it out, or get it "right." An exhausted, or demoralised parent, by definition, is one that is unlikely to be functioning at their best, nor ready to take on the often exceptional challenge adolescent children can throw at even the most committed and skilled parents.

Alternatively, if you're feeling on top of it, but have concerns that your teenage child may need professional help, below are a few signs that suggest it may be worth talking to a psychologist:

- If your child shows signs of on-going distress or poor coping, including withdrawal, denial of obvious problems or the impact thereof,
- If your child does not "return to normal" from a set back or loss such as change of school, lost friendship or change to family relationships, etc.,
- If your child becomes overly influenced by a negative peer group, and appears to lack the skills to manage the situation effectively,
- If your child unexpectedly starts doing things that are very out of character for them, i.e. becomes especially secretive, or obsessed about interests at the expense of other things,
- If your child functions far less well than usual in performing tasks in their school, work, friendship or home routines,
- If your child's school or friends express concerns about your son or daughter,
- If your child directly or indirectly communicates they are not coping, or expresses the need for help.

Psychological Counselling – A Double Edged Sword?

When can counselling be helpful?

Psychological counselling has been demonstrated to be helpful for a wide range of issues. Learning to overcome common adolescent development obstacles is usually quickly achieved through counselling. Here, developing specific skills like social problem solving, or addressing conflict with parents can fairly easily be addressed through setting goals, applying strategies, and then reviewing and modifying.

However, if initial problems have consolidated into persisting conditions that might include depression, anxiety or behavioural difficulties, then a more in-depth professional assessment and treatment may be indicated. There are many well researched and effective therapies for more serious psychological problems. These have been found to bring about improvement in a relatively short period of time. You may wish to discuss these various options with a psychologist.

Can counselling be harmful?

Under inappropriate circumstances, attempting counselling may not be helpful at best, or at worst, may cause additional difficulties. How any person engages in counselling is an important factor that affects how effective or useful it is. There are several common reasons counselling may be less effective, more difficult, slower to be beneficial or potentially detrimental to the participant.

For instance, when counselling is made compulsory, or when there is subtle or obvious coercion to participate. This can create resistance against the counselling process or distrust in the relationship with the counsellor. Likewise, if the person perceives they are "sent" to counselling as a form of punishment. Some adolescents may feel stigmatised for having to attend counselling or that someone even suggested that they need it. Here, it is important to give a simple, non-judgmental, yet honest rationale for the need to gain some professional advice or support, and to "normalise" the notion of professional support.

Sometimes the personality of the adolescent and the counsellor may not be a good "fit." This can lead to a difficulty in finding a connection and can make open communication and

understanding more difficult. Sometimes it may be important to be ready to try a couple of counsellors until this fit feel right. If effective work is going to occur, then a high level of trust is needed. This can only happen if the adolescent feels well understood by someone who can effectively empathise with their circumstances.

A final issue that may be problematic, is when the adolescent is not clear *why* they are there. Sometime the reasons why there are problems are hard to understand for all parties initially, but if the teenager doesn't think there is a problem, then work may need to be done to clarify everyone's concerns. In this instance, family counselling may be a better approach, where family members can help to define the problem.

Finally, a negative counselling experience can have the detrimental effect of closing off counselling as an option in the future. For someone who may struggle without professional support, this can be a real step backwards that is very hard to reverse. Whenever possible, it is important to get it right the first time.

How do I get my child to see a Psychologist?

Keep these key points in mind when talking to a young person about seeing a psychologist:

- In general, younger adolescents will expect and need supportive direction – usually parents should make the decision to seek help after explaining their reasons. Older adolescents will usually listen to your advice, but will expect to make any final decision primarily themselves, and are more likely to agree with your suggestion if given the chance to decide for themselves,
- Suggest that everyone has their limit, and knowing when they have come close to theirs is a sign of good judgement and wisdom – a strength that confirms their maturity,
- Seeing a psychologist is like having tutoring with school work, or a sports coach, etc.,
- It is often best to encourage the young person to only commit to taking the first step and having one meeting with the psychologist – then let the psychologist do their job of engaging the young person. Don't try and "sell the whole package" before they've had a "test drive,"
- Re-affirm that seeing a psychologist is a confidential relationship (for most adolescents 14 and older) and that you will respect the young person's privacy,
- Commit to being a co-client with the young person – make it clear you are not simply "dumping" them with the "shrink" to "fix", but recognise your role in the problem as well as the solution.
- Take a neutral position about the usefulness of seeing a psychologist – let them see for themselves if it is actually helpful, from their perspective.
- Less is more – don't burn the bridge by making seeing a psychologist *your* agenda, and not letting them "own" the idea or relationship with the psychologist.

In particular, it is not wise to: Threaten to withhold a privilege if they don't comply; emphasise how negatively the situation is affecting you; or make them feel guilty or stupid for not seeing things from your point of view. **It may severely damage trust if you trick the young person into attending a session telling them something that is not true.** Remember, the young person is probably likely to be feeling vulnerable and have feelings of low self-esteem, so be sensitive to the messages you might accidentally imply in what you say or do.






Keep in mind, that it may take some time before a teenager is ready to take this step and talk with someone. Sow seeds and be patient. If all else fails, many parents find it useful to discuss other strategies with a psychologist first, to better gauge how serious the situation is, and to make sure their approach is most likely to succeed.





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Services available to the public include:

-  Counselling for adolescents, adults, parents & families
-  Educational and clinical psychological assessments
-  Engaging programs for adolescents, parents & families
-  Team development and professional supervision and mentoring for teachers & human services professionals
-  Support, advice and educational / clinical advocacy for parents



Dr Simon Crisp founded Neo Psychology to provide specialist services and support to parents, schools and youth professionals. He has been an innovator in public mental health services, pioneering Australia's most developed and researched Wilderness Adventure Therapy® programs which are now available through Neo. Neo also has links to Monash University where Dr Crisp has taught post-graduate counselling & professional ethics in psychology, and currently undertakes research into adolescent counselling programs in schools. Neo has provided programs and consulted to numerous independent and government schools, and advises bodies such as the Victorian Government's Schools Innovation Commission and the South Australian Premier's Drug Taskforce.

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More information about counselling and assessments for adolescents and parents can be found on our website:

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