

Help for Parents of Troubled Teens

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Why do teens act the way they do?

Parenting a teenager is never easy. You may feel exhausted from lying awake at night worrying about where your child is, who they're with, and what they're doing. You may despair over failed attempts to communicate, the endless fights, and the open defiance—not to mention the moodiness, the intense emotions, and the impulsive and

reckless conduct.

Sometimes it may be hard to believe, but no, your teenager is not an alien being from a distant planet. But they are wired differently. A teenager's brain is still actively developing, therefore processes information differently than a mature adult's brain. The frontal cortex—the part of the brain used to manage emotions, make decisions, reason, and control inhibitions—is restructured during the teenage years, forming new synapses at an incredible rate, while the whole brain does not reach full maturity until about the mid-20's.

Your teen may be taller than you and seem mature in some respects, but often they are simply unable to think things through on an adult level. Hormones produced during the physical changes of adolescence can further complicate things. Now, these biological differences don't excuse teens' poor behavior or absolve them from accountability for their actions, but they may help explain why teens behave so impulsively or frustrate parents and teachers with their poor decisions, social anxiety, and rebelliousness.

Understanding adolescent development can help you find ways to stay connected to your teen and overcome problems together.

It's also important to remember that while teenagers are individuals with unique personalities and their own likes and dislikes, some traits are universal. No matter how much your teen seems to withdraw from you emotionally, no matter how independent your teen appears, or how troubled your teen becomes, they still need your attention and to feel loved by you.

Teens read emotions differently

Teens differ from adults in their ability to read and understand emotions in the faces of others. Adults use the prefrontal cortex to read emotional cues, but teenagers rely on the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for emotional reactions. Research shows that teens often misread facial expressions; when shown pictures of adult faces expressing different emotions, teens most often interpreted them as being angry.

Source: ACT for Youth

When typical teen behavior becomes troubled teen behavior

As teenagers begin to assert their independence and find their own identity, many experience behavioral changes that can seem bizarre and unpredictable to parents. Your sweet, obedient child who once couldn't bear to be separated from you now won't be seen within 20 yards of you, and greets everything you say with a roll of the eyes or the slam of a door. As difficult as this can be for parents to endure, they are the actions of a normal teenager.

A troubled teen, on the other hand, exhibits behavioral, emotional, or learning problems beyond typical teenage issues. They may repeatedly practice at-risk behaviors including drinking, drug use, sex, violence, skipping school, self-harming, shoplifting, or other criminal acts. Or they may exhibit symptoms of mental health problems such as **depression, anxiety, or eating disorders**. While any negative behavior repeated over and over can be a sign of underlying trouble, it's important for parents to understand which behaviors are normal during adolescent development, and which can point to more serious problems.

Typical Teen vs. Troubled Teen Behavior

Changing appearance

Typical teen behavior: Keeping up with fashion is important to teens. That may mean wearing provocative or attention-seeking clothing or dyeing their hair. Unless your teen wants tattoos, avoid criticizing and save your protests for the bigger issues. Fashions change, and so will your teen.

Warning signs of a troubled teen: Changing appearance can be a red flag if it's accompanied by problems at school or other negative changes in behavior. Evidence of **cutting and self-harm** or extreme weight loss or weight gain are also warning signs.

Increased arguments and rebellious behavior

Typical teen behavior: As teens begin seeking independence, you will frequently butt heads and argue.

Warning signs of a troubled teen: Constant escalation of arguments, violence at home, skipping school, getting in fights, and run-ins with the law are all red flag behaviors that go beyond the norm of teenage rebellion.

Mood swings

Typical teen behavior: Hormones and developmental changes often mean that your teen will experience mood swings, irritable behavior, and struggle to manage their emotions.

Warning signs of a troubled teen: Rapid changes in personality, falling grades, persistent sadness, **anxiety**, or sleep problems could indicate **depression**, **bullying**, or another emotional health issue. Take any talk about **suicide** seriously.

Typical Teen vs. Troubled Teen Behavior

Experimenting with alcohol or drugs

Typical teen behavior: Most teens will try alcohol, smoke a cigarette, or **vape** at some point. Many will even try marijuana. Talking to your kids frankly and openly about drugs and alcohol is one way to ensure it doesn't progress further.

Warning signs of a troubled teen: When alcohol or drug use becomes habitual, especially when it's accompanied by problems at school or home, it may indicate a **substance abuse issue** or other underlying problems.

More influenced by friends than parents

Typical teen behavior: Friends become extremely important to teens and can have a great influence on their choices. As a teens focuses more on their peers, that inevitably means they withdraw from you. It may leave you feeling hurt, but it doesn't mean your teen doesn't still need your love.

Warning signs of a troubled teen: Red flags include a sudden change in peer group (especially if the new friends encourage negative behavior), refusing to comply with reasonable rules and boundaries, or avoiding the consequences of bad behavior by lying. Similarly, if your teen is spending too much time alone that can also indicate problems.

Seeking professional help for a troubled teen

If you identify red flag behaviors in your teen, consult a doctor, counselor, **therapist**, or other mental health professional for help finding appropriate treatment.

Even when you seek professional help, though, that doesn't mean that your job is done—it's just begun. As detailed below, there are many actions you can take at home to help your teen and improve the relationship between you. And you don't need to wait for a diagnosis to start putting them into practice.

Keep in mind that whatever problems your teen is experiencing, it is not a sign that you've somehow failed as a parent. Instead of trying to assign blame for the situation, focus on your teen's current needs. The first step is to find a way to connect with what they are experiencing emotionally and socially.

Tip 1: Connect with your troubled teen

It may seem hard to believe—given your child's anger or indifference towards you—but teens still crave love, approval, and acceptance from their parents. Positive face-to-face connection is the quickest, most efficient way to **reduce stress** by calming and focusing the nervous system. That means you probably have a lot more influence over your teen than you think.

To open the lines of communication:

Be aware of your own stress levels. If you're angry or upset, now is not the time to try to communicate with your teen. Wait until you're calm and energized before starting a conversation. You're likely to need all the patience and positive energy you can muster.

Be there for your teen. An offer to chat with your teen over coffee will probably be greeted with a sarcastic put-down or dismissive gesture, but it's important to show that you're available. Insist on sitting down for mealtimes together with no TV, phones, or other distractions. Look at your teen when you speak and invite your teen to look at you. Don't get frustrated if your efforts are greeted by nothing more than monosyllabic grunts or shrugs. You may have to eat a lot of dinners in silence, but when your teen does want to open up, they know they'll always have the opportunity to do so.

Find common ground. Trying to discuss your teen's appearance or clothes may be a sure-fire way to trigger a heated argument, but you can still find some areas of common ground. Fathers and sons often connect over sports; mothers and daughters over gossip or movies. The objective is not to be your teen's best friend, but to find common interests that you can discuss peacefully. Once you're talking, your teen may feel more comfortable opening up to you about other topics.

Listen without judging or giving advice. When your teen does talk to you, it's important that you listen without judging, mocking, interrupting, criticizing, or offering advice. Your teen wants to feel understood and valued by you, so maintain eye contact and keep your focus on your child, even when they're not looking at you. If you're checking your email or reading the newspaper, your teen will feel that they're not important to you.

Expect rejection. Your teen may often respond to your attempts to connect with anger, irritation, or other negative reactions. Stay relaxed and allow your teen space to cool off. Try again later when you're both calm. Successfully connecting to your teen will take time and effort. Don't be put off; persevere and the breakthrough will come.

Roadblocks to connection

If your teen is under the influence of alcohol or drugs, their ability to connect emotionally can be compromised. The same may be true of prescription medications. For example, if your teen is **taking antidepressants**, make sure the dosage is no more than absolutely needed.

Tip 2: Deal with teen anger and violence

If you're a parent of a teenage boy who is angry, aggressive, or violent, you may live in constant fear. Every phone call or knock on the door could bring news that your son has either been harmed, or has seriously harmed others.

Teenage girls get angry as well, of course, but that anger is usually expressed verbally rather than physically. Teen boys are more likely to throw objects, kick doors, or punch the walls when they're angry. Some will even direct their rage towards you. For any parent, especially single mothers, this can be a profoundly disturbing and upsetting experience. But you don't have to live under the threat of violence. **Putting up with violence** is as harmful for your teen as it is for you.

If you feel threatened by your teen

Everyone has a right to feel physically safe. If your teen is violent towards you, seek help immediately. Call a friend, relative, or the police if necessary. It doesn't mean that you don't love your child, but the safety of you and your family should always come first.

How to cope with teen anger

Anger can be a challenging emotion for many teens as it often masks other underlying emotions such as frustration, embarrassment, sadness, hurt, fear, shame, or vulnerability. When teens can't cope with these feelings, they may lash out, putting themselves and others at risk. In their teens, many boys have difficulty recognizing their feelings, let alone expressing them or asking for help.

The challenge for parents is to help your teen cope with emotions and **deal with anger** in a more constructive way:

Establish boundaries, rules and consequences. At a time when both you and your teen are calm, explain that there's nothing wrong with feeling anger, but there are unacceptable ways of expressing it. If your teen lashes out, for example, they will have to

face the consequences—loss of privileges or even police involvement. Teens need boundaries and rules, now more than ever.

Try to understand what's behind the anger. Is your teen sad or **depressed**? For example, do they have feelings of inadequacy because their peers have things that they don't? Does your teen just need someone to listen to them without judgment?

Be aware of anger warning signs and triggers. Does your teen get headaches or start to pace before exploding with rage? Or does a certain class at school always trigger anger? When teens can identify the warning signs that their temper is starting to boil, it allows them to take steps to defuse the anger before it gets out of control.

Help your teen find healthy ways to relieve anger. Exercise is especially effective: running, biking, climbing or team sports. Even simply hitting a punch bag or a pillow can help relieve tension and anger. Dancing or playing along to loud, angry music can also provide relief. Some teens also use art or writing to creatively express their anger.

Give your teen space to retreat. When your teen is angry, allow them to retreat to a place where it's safe to cool off. Don't follow your teen and demand apologies or explanations while they are still raging; this will only prolong or escalate the anger, or even provoke a physical response.

Take steps to manage your own anger. You can't help your teen if you lose your temper as well. As difficult as it sounds, you have to remain calm and balanced no matter how much your child provokes you. If you or other members of your family scream, hit each other, or throw things, your teen will naturally assume that these are appropriate ways to express their anger as well.

Red flags for violent behavior in teens

It only takes a glance at the news headlines to know that teen violence is a growing problem. Movies and TV shows glamorize all manner of violence, many web sites promote extremist views that call for violent action, and hour after hour of playing violent video

games can desensitize teens to the real world consequences of aggression and violence. Of course, not every teen exposed to violent content will become violent, but for a troubled teen who is emotionally damaged or suffering from mental health problems, the consequences can be tragic.

Warning signs that a teen may become violent include:

- Playing with weapons of any kind.
- Obsessively playing violent video games, watching violent movies, or visiting websites that promote or glorify violence.
- Threatening or bullying others.
- Fantasizing about acts of violence he'd like to commit.
- Being aggressive or cruel to pets or other animals.

Tip 3: Recognize the signs of teen depression

Many troubled behaviors in teenagers can be indications of depression. These can include:

Problems at school. Low energy and concentration problems associated with teen depression can lead to a declining attendance and drop in grades.

Running away. Many depressed teens run away or talk about running away from home, often as a cry for help.

Drug and alcohol abuse. Teens may use alcohol or drugs in an attempt to **self-medicate their depression**.

Low self-esteem. Depression can trigger or intensify feelings of shame, failure, and social unease and make teens extremely sensitive to criticism.

Smartphone addiction. Depressed teens may go online to escape their problems, but **excessive smartphone and Internet use** tends to increase feelings of isolation and worsen depression.

Reckless behavior. Depressed teens may engage in dangerous or high-risk behaviors, such as reckless driving, binge drinking, or unsafe sex.

Violence. Some teens—usually boys—can become aggressive and violent when they're depressed.

To learn more about the signs of teen depression...

And how you can help your child overcome the problem and get their life back on track, read our [Parent's Guide to Teen Depression](#).

Tip 4: Add balance to your troubled teen's life

No matter the exact reason behind your teen's problems, you can put balance back in their life by helping them make healthy lifestyle changes.

Create structure. Teens may scream and argue with you about rules and discipline, or rebel against daily structure, but that doesn't mean they need them any less. Structure, such as regular mealtimes and bedtimes, make a teen feel safe and secure. Sitting down to breakfast and dinner together every day can also provide a great opportunity to check in with your teen at the beginning and end of each day.

Reduce screen time. There appears to be a direct relationship between violent TV shows, movies, Internet content, and video games, and violent behavior in teenagers. Even if your teen isn't drawn to violent material, **too much screen time** can still impact brain development. Limit the time your teen has access to electronic devices—and restrict

phone usage after a certain time at night to ensure your child gets enough sleep.

Encourage exercise. Even a little **regular exercise** can help ease depression, boost energy and mood, relieve stress, regulate sleep patterns, and improve your teen's self-esteem. If you struggle getting your teen to do anything but play video games, encourage them to play activity-based video games or “exergames” that are played standing up and moving around—simulating dancing, skateboarding, soccer, or tennis for example. Once exercise becomes a habit, encourage your teen to try the real sport or to join a club or team.

Eat right. **Healthy eating** can help stabilize a teenager's energy, sharpen their mind, and even out their mood. Act as a role model for your teen. Cook more meals at home, eat more fruit and vegetables and cut back on junk food and soda.

Ensure your teen gets enough sleep. Sleep deprivation can make a teen stressed, moody, irritable, and lethargic, and cause problems with weight, memory, concentration, decision-making, and immunity from illness. You might be able to get by on six hours a night and still function at work, but your teen needs 8.5 to 10 hours of sleep a night to be mentally sharp and emotionally balanced. **Encourage better sleep** by setting consistent bedtimes, and removing TVs, computers, and other electronic gadgets from your teen's room—the light from these devices suppresses melatonin production and stimulates the mind, rather than relaxing it. Suggest that your teen try listening to music or audio books at bedtime instead.

Tip 5: Take care of yourself

The stress of dealing with any teenager, especially one who's experiencing behavioral problems, can take a toll on your own health, so it's important to take care of yourself. That means looking after your emotional and physical needs and learning to manage stress.

Take time to relax daily and learn how to regulate yourself and de-stress when you start to feel overwhelmed. Learning how to **use your senses to quickly relieve stress** and

regularly practicing [relaxation techniques](#) are great places to start.

Talk it over. It's normal to feel overwhelmed, helpless, angry, or frustrated when dealing with a troubled teenager. Talking about how you're feeling can help defuse the intensity, so share your feelings with a trusted friend or [find a therapist](#).

Don't go it alone, especially if you're a single parent. Find support from family, friends, a school counselor, sports coach, religious leader, or someone else who has a relationship with your teen. Organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, and other youth groups can also help provide structure and guidance.

Remember your other children. Dealing with a troubled teen can unsettle the whole family. It can be especially hard on other children, so make sure they're not ignored. Siblings may need special individual attention or professional help of their own to handle their feelings about the situation.

This won't last forever

It's worth reminding your teen that no matter how much pain or turmoil they are experiencing right now, with your love and support, and professional help when it's needed, the situation can and will get better—for both of you. Your teen can overcome the problems of adolescence and mature into a happy, well-balanced young adult.

Get more help

Hotlines and support

In the U.S.	Call the National Parent Helpline at 1-855-427-2736 or find resources for specific teen problems .
UK	Call the Family Lives Helpline at 0808 800 2222.
Australia	In Queensland and Northern Territory call the Parentline at 1300 30 1300 or find a helpline near you .
Canada	Call the Parent Help Line at 1-888-603-9100 or find other parent resources .

Suicide prevention

In the U.S.	Call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.
UK and Ireland	Call Samaritans UK at 116 123.
Australia	Call Lifeline Australia at 13 11 14.
Other countries	Visit IASP or International Suicide Hotlines to find a helpline near you.

More Information

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