

# me! me me! living with your teenager

For generations parents of teenagers have been looking for answers to seemingly unanswerable questions. Why are teenagers such hard work? What happened to my lovely child? Where did they go? Parents often feel drained, hurt and puzzled by the changes in their child, which happen with brutal suddenness, when puberty comes crashing into their lives. Many parents worry that they are to blame for things going wrong and they start to criticise themselves, trying hard to work out exactly where they went wrong.

**t**he teenage years are a time for change, radical change, and the main cause of all these upheavals is in fact due to developments in the brain. We used to think that the hard-wiring of the brain was completed very early on in life, but we now realise that this is not true. In fact, brain development is massively accelerated in the teens when a second phase of development takes place. Amongst other things, synapses are being pruned and parts of the cerebral cortex are being activated. What does this mean? Put quite simply these developments explain some of the more challenging aspects of teenage behaviour such as egocentricity – me! me! me! – as well as a frequently impaired ability to exercise judgment, show insight or reason effectively. Teenagers simply are not ready to do these things in the way that adults can. But they don't recognise this, believing instead that they can. Separating from the family, becoming independent and taking control of their own lives are some of the big issues for a young person. Feeling totally in control is very important in the struggle to achieve this, alongside always being right and always knowing best. Young people are rarely as self-confident as they act, but behaving as if they are super-sure of themselves is a form of bravado that helps them 'act cool' when inside they may be feeling scared, anxious and unsure.

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO WHEN FACED WITH SUCH A COMPLICATED SITUATION?

First and foremost, remember that what young people say and do is not really personal even when the rudeness, rebellion and provocations come thick and fast and you feel really hurt or even scared by them. Pushing parents away is top of the list of essential tasks for an adolescent who is beginning the journey of leaving the nest. It helps the separation process because if what is being left behind is 'ancient history... boring ... and stupid', leaving it is made less difficult. As a parent, hold onto the fact that this is not usually about you. Like a young bird, they are at the fledgling stage. The struggles are about your child's often clumsy attempts to develop the capacities and the strength to feel their wings and fly the nest with ease, grace and self esteem.

Never, never shame a young person, no matter how angry or upset you are. Deep down they are hiding from their own self doubts and fears. Ripping away their vulnerable defences will probably force them to be even more rejecting and hostile. All you would achieve, ultimately, would be to wound your own struggling offspring and probably make yourself feel guilty at the end of it all. Parents need lots of opportunities to replenish their batteries away from the front lines of these family struggles, immersing themselves in the soothing balm of good adult time out. Plan ahead how to look after your own needs so that you give yourself some respite and the loving care that you need, too.

## JAMIE

At 15, Jamie wanted lots of freedom. He resented many of the boundaries his parents tried to put in place, especially the time they expected him to be back home from a night out at weekends. He felt like they treated him as a 'baby' and he was resentful that his friends had more freedom. Things reached a head when he felt his father 'humiliated' him in front of his girlfriend by telling him what time he had to be back. Jamie was enraged. He grabbed the keys of his father's car from the table in the hall and stormed off shouting 'I'll show you who's the man round here!' The next thing his parents heard was the revving of the car engine, a screech of tyres and then silence. They panicked. Neither of them knew what to do. Jamie's father wanted to call the police because he was worried about his son's safety. He thought it was the only sensible thing to do. 'He could kill himself!' he reasoned with Jamie's mother. But she pleaded with him not to do it because she feared Jamie would end up with a police record. A heated argument followed with Jamie's mother in floods of tears whilst her husband called the police.

Did Jamie's father do the right thing? There are many ways to think about this. Certainly, his response was made out of care and concern and not in anger. He felt it was one of very few options open to him in the circumstances. By alerting the police Jamie's father could be seen to be acting as a responsible parent.

Jamie would need help to understand the impact of his impulsive and dangerous behaviour, no matter how justified he had felt in driving off. At the bottom line, Jamie had been 'playing' with dangerous adult machines, not kids' toys. Many people could have been hurt by what he did, not just Jamie himself. His parents would need to listen sensitively to his point of view and find a way to support him in understanding how dangerous his actions had been. Jamie would need to look at why he had felt this was his only option in dealing with things. Helping him look at other options for managing any future times when he might have a similarly strong emotional response would be an important outcome in protecting him from repeating his mistake.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NORMAL TEENAGE BEHAVIOUR AND THINGS THAT HAVE GOT OUT OF HAND?

Teenagers are prone to low moods and anxiety from time to time. These are normal and result from the tensions and stresses of navigating the challenges that litter the pathway from childhood to adulthood. Young people often find it hard to calm and soothe themselves and become easily upset and distressed when things go wrong. They live on an emotional precipice and they are sometimes easily unbalanced by things which to the grown-up eye seem trivial. They should normally be expected to recover their equilibrium fairly easily as long as they feel understood, taken seriously and listened to. You will know your child and will have a good sense of how long they normally take to feel okay again. If a low mood or anxiety seems to have taken hold and shows no sign of shifting this is the time to look more closely at whether their reaction has gone beyond what is normal. Follow your own emotional barometer in making up your mind about whether or not there is something unusual about their behaviour.

Alcohol and drugs is another minefield in these years. Drugs are a definite 'no!' But many parents are anxious to be reasonable about alcohol and want to encourage responsible social drinking. The golden rule where alcohol is concerned is that 'Less is more'. Studies show that alcohol affects the brain of a teenager differently from that of an adult. Repeated over-use may have adverse affects on learning and memory. Alcohol is often seen as the royal road to adulthood by many teenagers. So you will need to tread carefully if you think your teen is exceeding what is good for them.

The same sensible approach applies if there are concerns about eating patterns getting out of hand or other potentially self-harming behaviours. Always start by calming any anxieties you may feel. Think first. Take time to assess the problem. And tread lightly when you do respond. Young people are generally resilient and respond well to the right approach, often in quite a short time.

However hard we try, the teenage years are always turbulent and as parents the only thing that we can be sure of is that we will make mistakes and get things wrong. These ups and downs are usually a sign that your child's development is progressing normally. Parents and their teenagers do their best to ride those waves together. If in doubt, get support

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