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| **Parenting Our Teenagers** |
| **Some Insights & Suggestions** |
| **Kishoge Community College** |



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**Parenting Our Teenagers**

**Some Tips & Suggestions**

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1. **Introduction**

As parents, all of us will strive to do our best in terms of providing for the needs of our children. Initially, we attended to their needs as babies and then adapted and changed as they progressed to infanthood and beyond. As our children move from childhood to adolescence, we need to adapt our parenting again to accommodate the many changes associated with the teenage years and indeed, adapt and change to meet the challenges that the different stages of adolescence presents.

This booklet examines some of the academic research that has been carried out into adolescence and uses this learning to provide insights and suggestions we as parents, may find useful in dealing with the constantly changing needs of our children as they begin the journey of becoming an independent adult. Some of the suggestions are obvious and seem logical and easy, but, at the same time, can be very difficult to implement. With this in mind, it is hoped that some of the practical examples used may help us do the best we can for our teenagers as they navigate their adolescent years.

This book makes use of some of the academic concepts and phrases that the experts use in their work. Their work can help us understand why teenagers sometimes behave in a negative way either towards themselves or others. Their work can give us the insights needed to understand the underlying causes of negative behaviours and help us to help our teenagers address the emotions that are the root causes of their behaviours. Some of the key ideas used in this book are what the experts refer to as ‘positive negative behaviour’ [1] and ‘internalised behaviours’ and ‘externalised behaviours’ [2]–[4] that teenagers can exhibit. Here is an explanation of these concepts.

Most human behaviour - be it positive of negative – has a purpose. Teenagers take part in positive behaviours to obtain positive feelings for themselves. They play a sport to gain positive feelings. They sing or play a musical instrument to gain a positive feeling. They socialise to obtain positive feelings. They interact with those around us in a positive way to gain something positive. These are positive activities that produce positive feelings. However, there are also negative activities that can produce positive feelings for teenagers. Someone can steal a car to gain positive feelings. Someone will take drugs to gain positive feelings. Some negative behaviours facilitate the avoidance of negative feelings which, in itself, can be viewed as a positive outcome. Someone will self-harm or refrain from eating, or eat excessively, or isolate themselves to gain, from their perspective, what is a positive outcome. The experts refer to this concept as ‘positive negative behaviour’ [1]. All behaviour leads to positive payback; otherwise, it is simply not worth the effort’ [5].

For our teenagers, positive negative behaviours can manifest themselves in two ways, ‘internalised behaviours’ or ‘externalised behaviours’ [2]–[4]. Internalised behaviours are where teenagers’ negative emotions are directed inwards at themselves and can manifest themselves as withdrawal, fearfulness, inhibition, and anxiety, avoiding school, over or undereating, depression, or self-harm. Externalised behaviours are where teenagers’ negative emotions are directed outwards at other people or situations. These externalised behaviours can manifest themselves as anger, aggression, and frustration, dropping out of school, drinking too early, drinking excessively, drug taking, anti-social behaviour or criminal behaviour.

The ideas, insights, and suggestions made in this booklet are presented in an incremental manner, in that the ideas in one section build on the ideas in the previous section. There is a lot of information, so you will need to persevere. If needs be, read this book sequentially over a period of time rather than in one sitting, and revisit at intervals as the need arises. Those who are caring for young people may be parents, step-parents, grandparents, foster parents, co-parents or guardians. For ease of reading, the term ‘parent/s’ is used throughout this booklet and is intended to cover all those who find themselves looking after teenagers. In addition, to avoid the use of he/she and him/her the colloquial terms they/their are used.

**2. Teenagers & Control**

**2.1 Behavioural Control**

As parents, all of us will acknowledge the need for control over how our teenagers behave. We realise the need for discipline, limits, and regulation in relation to how they behave at home, in school and outside school, and the need to be aware of where they are, whom they are with, and what they are doing [3]. It is interesting to examine the positive outcomes of behavioural control and the negative consequences for our teenagers of too little or too much control.

Behavioural controls can foster compliance and self-regulation [6] and result in fewer behavioural problems and, importantly, stronger attachment to parents [2]. Optimum levels of behavioural control and monitoring of adolescent behaviour are related to low levels of externalising problems such as antisocial behaviour[3] and has been found to be the strongest deterrent against adolescent substance use [7]. In contrast, the research shows us that if we exercise low parental monitoring we risk our teens behaving impulsively [8], stimulating friendships with deviant peers [9], using substances, and engaging in other forms of problematic behaviour [10]. Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, when we adequately supervise an adolescent’s relationships with peers it is thought to stimulate positive relationships with other well-adjusted friends.

However, it is interesting to note that researchers have found that there are two distinct types of control, behavioural control – as discussed above - and what is referred to as psychological control. The next section discusses psychological control and can help us understand the differences between this type of control and behavioural control and help us avoid our behavioural controls becoming psychological controls.

**2.2 Psychological Control**

Behavioural control involves us setting limits, monitoring of teens’ activities and behaviours in the physical world [6]. However, we may inadvertently be exerting psychological control. This type of control controls a teen’s thoughts and feelings and can intrude upon our teenager’s sense of self and individuality [11]. Psychological control ignores our teenager’s opinions and involves threats or punishment if they do not comply. It can also involves using intrusive and manipulative strategies such as guilt-induction [12] and shaming to direct their behaviour [1] or an expectation that they will obey without question [13]. The withholding or restricting approval, praise, or acceptance for the times when they only do what we want, can also be deemed as psychological control.

Researchers have concluded that there can be several negative outcomes as a result of psychological control. Strong psychological control from us, may communicate an inconsistent message of approval and love to a child [3], and may impair self-regulation skills [6] as well as hurting a teenager’s emotional functioning [11] and can result in internalising and externalising behavioural problems [3]. It is interesting to note that it has been found that psychological control can also negate and undo the positive effects of our behavioural controls [6] as it prevents our teenager’s developing a sense of autonomy and independence.

**2.3 Independence and Autonomy**

The period of childhood is marked by a high level of dependence on us as parents. As our children start their teenage years they feel a strong need for autonomy and independence in both a physical and psychological or emotional sense [8]. When this phase begins we can feel that their desire and push for self-direction may reflect how they feel towards us and that our children may be slipping away from us and no longer needing our advice and support [14]. Therefore, we need to reassure ourselves that what is happening is perfectly normal and that it is integral to adolescent development [10], and is perfectly healthy and, indeed, necessary in order for our teenager to become an independent and self-sufficient adult. After all, when we were their age, we did it because we needed it.

When our children moved from being babies to toddlers we helped them to feed themselves and walk for themselves. Then later we adapted our parenting to allow them develop the skills to socialise with other children. Similarly, we need to adapt and change our parenting again to allow them develop a sense of autonomy and independence as they become their own independent adult. To help us understand the need for us to allow our teenagers develop in this way, it is useful to look at the benefits of granting the appropriate level of independence, and the negative impact of granting too much autonomy too soon or not being granted sufficient autonomy as they develop. Researchers have found that the relaxation of parental authority, while maintaining warm involvement, enhances their self-esteem and can result in teenagers mastering the skill to regulating their own emotions allowing them to develop the skills to manage social situations on their own, and acquire the skills they will need to work independently in school, college, and the work place [6].

We may find ourselves granting too much autonomy too soon. This can have unintended, detrimental outcomes such as spending too much time with their peers which can increase chances of these peers affecting each other’s behaviour [9], and which, in turn, can result in engaging in more adult type activities too early, or to engagement in anti-social behaviour. These observations may make us want to hold back on the amount of independence we give them. However, we need to remind ourselves that researchers have found that there are other negative outcomes that may occur as a result of holding back on the granting of independence. Not allowing an appropriate level of autonomy will not delay or remove their need to feel a sense of independence and they will find other means to allow them feel they are growing up and becoming adults. Remember, it is natural, normal and indeed necessary for our teenagers to need independence and autonomy. If we do not fulfil their need for autonomy and independence in a progressively age appropriate way they can ‘kick-back’ at us and break our boundary restrictions. They can do this in such a way that they let us know, or they can do this without us knowing. As the researchers have discovered, if behavioural control is too restrictive, or if behaviour controls become psychological controls, they will seek freedom elsewhere and turn away from their family and search for increased - and potentially premature - independence and autonomy within their peer group [9].

As parents, we need to recognise that we should not grant the same independence to an eighteen-year-old as we would to a thirteen-year-old, and visa-versa. Therefore, the challenge for us as parents is to strive for an optimum, age-appropriate, and ever changing balance when granting autonomy that matches our teenagers’ developmental needs as they move through the teenage years [6], [9].

**2.4 Control & Granting Independence & Autonomy: A Summary**

**Positive outcomes**

* Develops the ability to monitor emotions.
* Develops compliance.
* Increases the chances of making friends with other well-adjusted teenagers.
* Decreases chances of engaging in anti-social behaviour.
* Decreases the changes of using substances.
* Develops a stronger parent-teen relationship.
* Decreases the chances of developing internalised or externalised behaviours.
* Teaches them the skills to manage relationships on their own.
* Teaches them the skills to manage social situations on their own.
* Teaches them the skills to engage in school.
* Teaches them the skills to engage in college/further training after school.
* Teaches them the skills to engage in the world of work when we are not around.

**Negative outcomes**

* Becoming impulsive.
* Increases the chances of making friends with other teenagers who are from homes that also lack appropriate levels of control.
* Increases the chances of being influenced by peers.
* Engaging in adult behaviours too soon.
* Increases the chances of using substances.
* Increases the chances of engaging in anti-social behaviour.
* Increases the chances of developing internalising and externalised behaviours.
* Decreases opportunities to acquire the skills needed to manage their own emotions, relationships, and social situations, in school and in the workplace and later life.

**Some Suggestions**

* Give them space and privacy.
* Allow them to express their opinion.
* Negotiate curfew times.
* Within reason, allow them pick their own clothes and hairstyles.
* Allow them shop on their own or with friends.
* Provide them with their own house key.
* Facilitate their own A.T.M. card.
* Facilitate them saving and spending their own money.
* Facilitate them buying their first mobile phone.
* Include them in decisions about decorating the house or their room.
* Allow them the freedom to decide what hobbies to pursue, and how they spend their spare time e.g. voluntary work, employment etc.
* Include their options when deciding on family meals, outings and holidays.
* Encourage them to cook for themselves and the family.
* Encourage them to do their own laundry.
* Allow them learn from their mistakes, including in school, rather than trying to fix things when they do not go their way.

**The Challenge**

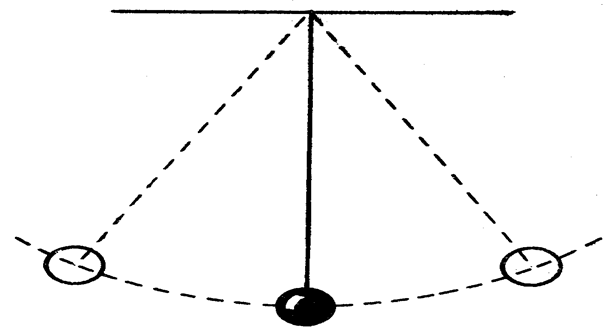
* Getting the balance right at particular stages in adolescence between behavioural controls and healthy and necessary positive freedoms.
* Adjusting this balance as our teenagers’ progress through the different years of adolescence.
* Avoiding behavioural control becoming psychological controls.

Remember, adolescence is a time when we need to let go of their hands, and instead, look over their shoulders.

**3. The Peer Group Influences**

**3.1 Introduction**

When our teenagers were young babies they were 100% dependent upon on us for all their emotional and physical needs. As they grew, this dependence became less. One of the characteristics of the transition from childhood to adolescence is a decrease in the reliance they have on us as parents and a corresponding increase in the influence of their peers. The timing of this transition can vary from child to child but it usually corresponds with the onset of puberty. This shift in reliance from parents to peers can be represented by a pendulum.



***Parental***

***Influence***

***Parental***

***Influence***

***Peer***

***Influence***

***Healthy Balance***

**3.2 Positive Peer Influence**

The changing dynamic in relations between teens and parents and that of their peers is a normal part of growing up. Indeed, it can be viewed as a necessary step for teenagers becoming independent adults. As well as being natural and normal, this helps adolescents add to their sense of autonomy and independence, and helps them develop relationships outside the family. When these relationships outside the family unit are positive and healthy, they allow teenagers to feel liked and accepted by others who are experiencing the same developmental changes. This acceptance helps them to develop a positive sense of self-worth and provides emotional support and a sense of security [15]. In addition, positive peer relationships allow for the development of key social skills that are necessary for their overall social development [14]. Indeed, researchers have found that positive peer-to-peer friendships correlates with a teenager’s overall level of happiness [16]. However, we can’t ignore the fact that peer relationships can also have detrimental outcomes.

**3.3 Negative Peer Influence**

We have to acknowledge that adolescent peer groups can also be a source of negative outcomes. Peer groups can engage in adult activities too soon, or antisocial behaviour or delinquency [2]. However, despite being contrary to commonly held views, studies have indicated that attachment to parents is a stronger predictor of adolescents’ behaviours than their attachment to peers [16]. Therefore, we need to be mindful of the parenting practices that will enable us as parents to have a greater influence than their peers and to be aware of the fact that we have the power and influence to override any potential involvement with negative peer behaviour.

The researchers have confirmed what is obvious to us; antisocial youths appear relatively free from their families and seem to make their own rules in life, and seem to do whatever they please [9]. However, this should not lead us to conclude that the greater the control we exert the less likely it is that our teen will find friends who engage in anti-social behaviour [9]. As stated earlier, too much control can prevent teens developing the sense of autonomy and independence that they need. Remember, they need to feel they are developing into their own adult and if they are not provided with this opportunity within the home they will seek it elsewhere. This has been confirmed by researchers who found that being too strict and being prohibitive and disapproving of friendships is more likely to direct teenagers towards delinquency [17], and that mixing with other teenagers in the same situation may in an adolescent’s mind, be a release or counterfoil to an over-controlling home environment [17]. This would reinforce the conclusion discussed earlier that we need to strive towards finding that difficult and ever-changing balance between granting freedom, autonomy, and independence while still exerting a certain amount of control. However, is it all about getting the right balance of controls or is there something the research can teach us?

**3.4 Balancing the Pendulum**

As parents, we would like as situation to develop whereby our teenagers allow us to be involved in their lives and allow us to guide and influence their behaviours and friendships [10] [9]. We want them to inform us of how they are spending their time outside the home, to unilaterally and spontaneously self-disclose what they have been doing and who they are with [18]. The researchers tell us that these characteristics are brought about by promoting autonomy in a healthy way, creating an atmosphere in which our teens feel confident and respected, as well as exerting balanced behavioural control that avoids psychological controls [18]. This unilateral and spontaneous self-disclosure is also brought about when parent-teen interactions are characterised by reciprocity [19] and these interactions are not hierarchical or unidirectional [10]. This parent-teen dynamic enhances parent-teen closeness [18] were they are not just loved, but feel and know they are loved feel loved, and valued, and have sense of belonging and attachment with us, with their siblings, and the wider family [3]. Remember, if we as parents do not provide for teenagers’ needs they are more likely to seek to have them satisfied elsewhere, potentially with peers who lack similar closeness in their homes. In other words, if we do not facilitate our teenagers’ fundamental human needs being fulfilled the pendulum of influence will swing away from the home and more towards the influence of peers.

**3.5 Our Teenagers’ Needs: A Summary**

*Feel loved and valued*

*Feel a sense of belonging & attachment*

*Feel respected as an individual*

*Feel independent & autonomous*

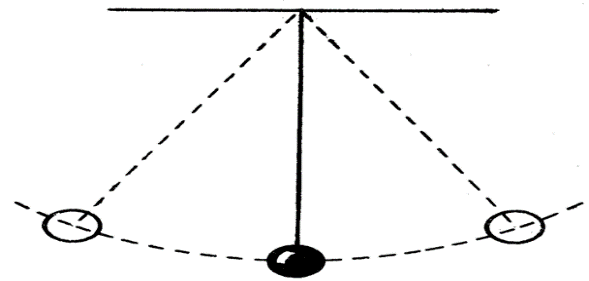
*No psychological controls*

*If these needs are not fulfilled by us*

*They will seek to have them fulfilled elsewhere*

***Parental***

***Influence***



*Peer Influence*

*Parental Influence*

This leads to the question of how can we as parents can enhance parent-teen closeness that will enable our relationship with them be more influential than that of peer-to-peer relationships.

**4. Maintaining Emotional Bonds with Our Teenagers**

*The strength of the relationship is ultimately the only*

*real control you have over your child* [20].

**4.1 Nurturing Bonds**

Think about how the strength of our relationship with our elderly parents can influence what we do for them. Think about how the bond with our partner drives us to do things for them and take their needs and feelings into account. Also, think about how we fell in love. It might be said that falling in love was as a result of going on dates, going to the cinema, or going away together. However, if we examine it more deeply, it was actually sharing our emotions and feelings during these times we spent together that create the bonds between two people. What creates a bond between two people is a sharing of our values, sharing our inner thoughts, sharing our feelings about what make us happy, sharing our feelings about what makes us sad. It is this sharing of emotions and feelings that creates closeness between people. This is true for all human relationships be it; partners, siblings, friends, and of course, parents and child and parents and teenagers.

Best practice would suggest that parents should share conversations about what is going on in our teenager’s life if we want to continue the bond we had with them when they were year 6 years old into adolescences. However, too often we fall into the trap of talking to teenagers about facts and events only; how much homework have you, when is your next rehearsal, what time is the match at, what happened last night? As parents, it is instinctive for us to satisfy teenagers’ physical needs such as food and clothing. However, when do we devote time to their emotional needs? When do we spend time being an emotional parent as well as their parent that provides for their physical needs? When do we take time to talk about their feelings and emotions? When do we help them explore and articulate their emotions? Let’s find the time to do this, and let’s remind ourselves how to.

**4.2 Giving Them a Nudge & Reflecting Back**

Sometimes teenagers find it difficult to find the words to express how they feel. This is where they might need help. This can be in the form of suggestions around feelings they might be experiencing. These suggestions need to be rooted in the clues they give us. Figuring out these clues can be helped by using the following approach. Ask them open-ended questions that do not have a yes or no answer and actively listen to the emotions behind their responses. Reflecting and reframing back to them their responses by paraphrasing or summarising and, if necessary, using the same words they have used. As well as using the appropriate words, it is also important to mirror the emotions and feelings behind the words used without adding to, or decreasing, the emotional feeling expressed by them.

Reflecting back means that you accept how they feel. It does not include our evaluation or our casting judgment on their feelings. Never dismiss their feelings or encourage them to balance that their feelings are wrong. This can compound negative feelings. It can make them feel there is something wrong with them because they are told by us they should not feel the way they do. Acceptance of their feelings is everything because being listened to and understood by another person makes us feel accepted and valued [21].

**4.3 Empathy**

A prerequisite for to talking about feelings and emotions is empathy. Empathy is understanding and feeling what another person is experiencing. Establishing empathy is a continuous process not one event or action. It is listening thoughtfully to the feelings expressed and allowing our teenagers to tell their story. Empathy involves listening in an active, not passive, way. Active listening requires us to listen fully. This means avoiding formulating a response or thinking about how we might respond while they are speaking. If we are trying to figure out how we should respond when they are telling us something, we are not fully listening. If we are just waiting for them to finish so we can get our point across – we are not listening.

We should listen for emotions, not just facts, while watching out for non-verbal behaviours such as eye contact, facial expression, and posture. We should stay out of their way when they are talking and not give in to the temptation to interrupt. Listening actively allows them feel they can talk freely without judgment and allows us to see their world, and allows us to perceive the world as they see it – whether we agree with it or not [22] [23] [21].

If they say something with which we disagree, we often put a counter point to what they have said. We sometimes prefix this counter point with the word ‘but’. This needs to be avoided as the word ‘but’ acts like an eraser, wiping away what they have said and can be heard as a contradiction or correction to what they have just said. This can make them feel dismissed, not listened to, and isolated. Simply replace the word ’but’ with the word ‘and’ – this allows both points to be seen as valid. After all, their viewpoint is valid to them [24] [25].

**4.4 The Value of It All**

Relationships are about emotional experiences [26]. Sharing of our feelings with another person make us connect and bond and feel a sense of closeness. It is interesting to note that researchers have found that in a study of 400 teenagers, adolescents’ positive regard for their parents were related to less smoking and less drinking among teenagers and that a good quality parent-teen relationship is associated with both delayed alcohol initiation and reduced levels of later alcohol use [27] [14]. Remember, the stronger the bond the greater the influence we have over them and what they do – even when – and particularly when - we are not with them.

When our children were 6 years old, they snuggled up with us on the sofa for both emotional and physical comfort. Now that they are teenagers they may not need that physical comfort but certainly still need that emotional comfort. We all do, no matter what age. It is this continuous process, week in week out, that will allow us to maintain the bonds with teenagers. This process of sharing how we feel is very simple while at the same time very difficult – yet also very natural. After all, we do have the emotional ability to fall in love.

It is also worth remembering that it is the strengthening of the emotional bond between us and our teenagers that that will help make it easier to enforce boundaries and behaviour control. A strong emotional bond is the most powerful influence that can determine how they behave, and can counteract the influence of peers and decrease the chances of engaging in adult behaviour too soon, or getting involved in anti-social behaviour. This can be brought about by the most powerful and effective reason; they know we don’t want them to.

**4.5 Summary: Establishing Emotional Bonds** [28]

* Don’t just talk about facts and event, talk about the feelings and emotions produced by these events.
* Ask open questions – This mean questions that don’t have a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, questions that start with ‘how’, ‘when’, ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘why’.
* Summarise – Summarise what you have understood: “*So, you’re saying that you feel like an outsider when everyone else is drinking’?”*
* Reflect – Repeating a word or phrase can encourage them to carry on talking: “*Yes, it’s difficult”*.
* Clarify – Ask more details: “*Tell me more about that*”, “*How exactly did that happen?*”
* Give words of encouragement: “*Go on*”, “*Ah I see*”.
* Leave open moments – Don’t feel you have to fill the silence. Staying quiet while keeping your attention on them can encourage them to say something else.
* React – Show that you’ve understood how they are feeling: “*That’s really hard*”. “*It must be very difficult to cope with that*”.
* Use non-verbal encouragement – Smiling and respond to the feelings they show with facial expressions or mirroring their facial expressions and keeping eye contact to show they have our full attention.
* Check – Check that the emotions being expressed are primary or secondary emotions. If it is the latter, gently search for the former. Also, check that the people or situation the emotions are attached to as not displaced. If they seem they are, gently search for the real source. This concept is explained in section 7.5
* Hearing their own words reflected back to them - accurately and without criticism or bias – is a very powerful in making an emotional connection between two people. Let’s listen to our teenagers, really listen – if we don’t, someone else will. There are some useful examples at the back of this book.

See appendix at the back of this booklet for more examples.

**5. What Puts Them in Good Form, What Puts Them in Bad Form**

*Quality relationships are rock-bottom fundamental to our well-being* [30]*.*

**5.1 Introduction**

Remember the last time you were in bad form. This bad mood may have been brought on by things not going well in work, an appliance breaking down at home, being caught in traffic or being late for an appointment. This type of bad form can be considered to be transient or temporary because it passes in a few hours or a day or so. However, there are times when we are in a different type of bad form. This type of bad form is not transient and can last days, weeks, months, or even longer. How does this happen?

**5.2 Their Relationship with Those That Matter To Them**

Imagine you had the following experience. On Monday, you go to work and you enjoy the tasks you are doing. On Tuesday evening your favourite programme is on T.V., and you really enjoy it. On Wednesday evening you partake in your favourite pastime and you have a great evening. On Thursday evening there is a family get-together and you really enjoy yourself. On Friday evening you go out with friends and have great fun. On Saturday evening you have a family meal together and it is really enjoyable. However, on Sunday evening you have a row with somebody who really, really, matters to you. Someone you really like/love. Someone you want to like/love us. This might be your partner, Mum, Dad, a sister, a brother, a friend, or group of friends, or someone else. This row is really upsetting and the resulting feelings can really hurt. These feelings hurt you emotionally and sometimes even physically – in the pit of your stomach. These feelings can linger for some time. These feelings can dampen your spirits throughout the day. These feelings can stop you enjoying other things in your life. As the next week begins, you carry all of these feelings around with you like a heavy concreate brick and the following happens. On Monday, you go to work but do not enjoy the tasks you normally enjoy. On Tuesday evening your favourite programme is on T.V., but it isn’t really enjoyable as it normally is. On Wednesday evening, you partake in your favourite pastime, but the enjoyment is not there. On Thursday evening you are invited out by friends and you don’t feel like going. On Friday evening you go out to an event but there is no enjoyment in it. On Saturday evening you have a family get together but you feel distanced and distracted. Also, during that week you get annoyed at simple things that would not normally make you ‘snap’, and you get annoyed at what other people do or say when you wouldn’t normally get annoyed.

Then, on Sunday evening, you sit down and fix the row with that person. Instantly, the cloud lifts. A switch is flicked, and you feel normal again. You feel whole again. The negative feeling in the pit of your stomach goes away. The bad mood dissolves away and is replaced by the warm feeling that the relationship gives you. You feel in good form, feel happy in yourselves, and that all is well with the world and you now start to enjoy all those other things going on in your life that you use to enjoy.

* What does this tell us about what makes us happy?
* What does this tell us about the things in life that make us feel whole as a person?
* Does it tell us how important some relationships are in our lives?
* Does it tell us how some relationships make us feel complete as a person?
* Does the negative feeling brought on when these relationships are damaged show us how important these relationships are to us?

In other words, what puts us in real bad form is when we have a difficulty with a person that really matters to us**,** a person we really like/love, a person whom we want to like/love us back. This tells us that our relationships with those that matter to us have an enormous impact on us because these relationships make us feel wanted, needed, and liked/loved and can impact on our sense of well-being and happiness. Now apply all of this to our teenagers. The biggest influence on our teenagers’ well-being is the relationships they have with those that matter to them; us as parents, their siblings, their wider family, and their close friends. However, is there one other relationship that is equally, if not more important, for their well-being – their relationship with themselves?

**5.3 Their Relationship with Themselves**

*The worst loneliness is not to be comfortable with yourself*.

Mark Twain

For some teenagers there can be a situation where all their relationships with those that matter to them are intact and normal. However, there is something within them that makes them feel not quite as whole or complete as a person. What might be wrong? Experts talk about two concepts in human psychology, the real-self and the ideal-self[23]. The real self refers to who they are, how they are, what they have in their lives, and what their lives are like at a given period in time. They may be short or tall, they may be good academically or not so good. They may be musical or not. They may be sporty or not. They may be part of a particular group of friends, which may be a small group or a larger group. They may have a particular body shape and consider themselves good-looking or not so good-looking. This is their real-self. It is who they are, what they have in their lives, and what their lives are like at a particular period in time.

The second concept is referred to as the ideal-self. This is about who or what they want to be, or things they want to have in their lives. They might want to be taller, slimmer, have a different body shape or be more confident. They might want possession in their lives that they do not have. They might want other friends in their lives instead of the ones they have. They might want a boyfriend or girlfriend that they do not have. They might want to be better in school or at sport or music. This ideal-self is about things they want to have in their lives or ways in which their lives might be different.

Psychologists have studied what enables teenage happiness, their sense of wholeness as a person, and their sense of being at ease with themselves and the world in which they live. These psychologists argue that the greater the difference between the real-self and ideal-self the greater the unease within the person and that the greater the impact on their sense of well-being. Of course, this applies to all individuals regardless of age, and not just teenagers.

Sometimes teenagers can constantly put all their energies and thoughts into trying to be someone they are not. and to put all their efforts into trying to have the things they cannot have. In doing this, they are trying to bridge the gap between their real-self and their ideal-self. It is argued that the more they focus their energies into trying to bridge this gap the greater their sense of unease with themselves and the world around them. If the things they want and the type of person they want to be is unrealistic or unobtainable, they are unlikely to feel a sense of ease within themselves or wholeness as a person or, indeed, a sense of happiness or enjoyment with their lives. This would therefore imply that if there is no gap or difference between their real-self and ideal-self they would be content and happy with themselves and the world around them. Well, not quite. If this happened, would they study for that next exam? Would they bother training for that next sporting event? Would they rehearse to do their best at that next performance? Indeed, if the real-self and ideal-self were exactly the same, would they bother getting out of bed in the morning?

Therefore, it is normal for there to be a difference between the real-self and ideal-self, and normal for this to continue throughout their lives. It is the extent of the difference that matters. If the difference between their real-self and the ideal-self is unobtainable and unrealistic, the less likely they are to be happy and content in themselves and with the world around them. If the difference is healthy, realistic, and obtainable it keeps them striving to improve themselves. This is a healthy state to be in.



Which is more important,

their relationship with themselves

or their relationship with those that matter to them?

**5.4 Which Relationship is More Important?**

Imagine a teenager who, over time, begins to think that they might be gay. It is quite understandable that they may not want to tell anyone. This may be because they fear the reaction of others. They may be anxiety about how this will impact on their relationships with those that matter to them. However, after a period of time has passed, they may eventually tell others. What has changed? Have those that matter to them changed? Let’s assume they have not. Therefore, what has changed that has allowed them to tell others?

* Is it that initially the idea of being gay made them feel uncomfortable about themselves?
* Is it that the idea of being gay was something they did not like about themselves?
* Did the idea of being gay cause a conflict between the real-self and the ideal-self?
* When they eventually told others, was it because they themselves began to accept the idea of being gay?
* Did they become used to, and comfortable with, how they felt about themselves?
* Did they begin to accept it as part of who they are?
* Did they accept it as part of their real-self?

Gay or not – we can all learn something from this. Is the lesson here that our relationship with ourselves may be at the core of who we are? Is it that our positive relationships with those that matter to us enhances how we feel about ourselves, which in turn, further enhances those relationships with those around us.

How can we as parents make them feel good about themselves and

at ease with who they are?

**6. Being Comfortable With Themselves**

**6.1 Confidence & Self-Esteem**

Academics have provided us with several definitions of self-esteem. One definition states that self-esteem is the extent to which teenagers prize, value, approve, or like themselves [31]. In common parlance, the term ‘esteem’ refers to something positive or admirable and therefore implies that self-esteem is purely a positive construct. This definition could lead to the interpretation that teenagers’ feelings of self-esteem is only derived from the things that makes them feel good about themselves. Another definition states that self-esteem is the negative or positive attitude that teenagers have of themselves [31]. This definition could lead to the conclusion that self-esteem is binary, in that it is either positive or negative. However, there are more helpful definitions of self-esteem. One such definition states that self-esteem is derived from an *overall* evaluation of their feeling of self-worth [32] and another definition states; self-esteem, also called *global* self-esteem, refers to the positive or negative feelings teenagers may have about themselves *as a whole* [33].These definitions make use of the terms ‘*overall*’, ‘*global*’, and ‘*as a whole*’. The inclusion of these terms implies that it is the *summation* of teenagers’ positive and negative attributes that produce their overall feelings of self-worth. These definitions take into account that all teenagers encounter shortcomings in their abilities to deal with life’s experiences and it is these shortcomings that, if they outweigh their positive attributes, can result in an overall feeling of low self-esteem.

**6.2 Being Comfortable With Themselves**

The definitions of self-image would suggest that teenagers who have high levels of ‘self-esteem’ have high levels of ‘confidence’. Let’s examine the meaning we place on the word ‘confidence’. Using the phrase ‘build their self-esteem’ automatically instructs us to tell them how great they are, how brilliantly they can do things, how well they have performed. In short, to keep constantly telling them how great they are will boost their confidence. However, there is one very important aspect that is missing from this approach. They are not brilliant at everything – nor will they be. They are not perfect and have flaws.

The popular, and indeed instinctive thing for us to do to enable our teens feel good about themselves, is to solely tell them how good they are. However, it can be argued that it is necessary for our teenagers to acknowledge and accept that they have short-comings and vulnerabilities and cannot excel in every aspect of their lives. These shortcomings need to be accepted and improved upon, where possible - and importantly - these shortcomings should not be the dominant aspects of our teenagers’ lives that determine their overall self-worth.

Consider the following scenario. Two people are called for an interview for the same job. Neither has any experience and both are straight out of college. One interviewer decides to ask a question someone with no experience could not possibly answer. This was done - not to catch them out - but rather to see how they react in a situation where they do not know the answer. One interviewee resorts to pretending to know what to do and spoofs and does so apparently with confidence. The other interviewee, pauses, and then says, “*I don’t have enough experience to answer that question; I would have to ask my co-workers and boss for guidance and help*”. Now who is the more confident interviewee? The second interviewee is not afraid to admit - to themselves and to others - that they do not know something and they have the ability to ask for help from others. Is this interviewee a more confident person who is not afraid to expose a flaw? This scenario adds an extra meaning to the word ‘confidence’. Is the word ‘confidence’ an adequate word to describe what we want to strive towards? Would it be more accurate to use the phrase ‘being comfortable with themselves’ to describe where we want our teenagers to be? In other words, having teenagers being comfortable enough in themselves to expose their flaws and not let that exposure and the response of others to have a negative impact on what they think of themselves. Therefore, using the phrase ‘comfortable with themselves’ can be more instructive to us that the word/s ‘confidence, high self-esteem’. Also, we are often told that we need to learn to ‘*love ourselves*’. Teenagers can sometimes shirk away from this concept. For some, ‘*love*’ describes a feeling we have towards another person. For other teenagers ‘*loving ourselves*’ means being ‘*big-headed*’. So, maybe replacing ‘*love yourself*’ with ‘*being comfortable with yourself*’ might better relate to our teenagers’ world.

**6.3 Summary: Enabling them to be Comfortable with Themselves**

**Doing What Is Instinctive**

* Praise their achievements and qualities; be they academic, sporting, or musical.
* Praise their personal qualities such as kindness, being empathic towards others, or having a caring nature. This is particularly important when teenagers are not sporting or academic and may be struggling in school.
* If teenagers are good academically, it can be unhealthy to define them solely as such.
* Shift their focus away from results and praise their efforts [34].
* It is natural to express pride in them when they achieve something. However, avoid them feeling that they will only elicit pride if they do well and achieve. Let’s tell them feel we are proud of them when they are sprawled on the sofa watching T.V. and eating pizza! In other words, we are proud of them just for who they are, not just for what they can do.

**Doing What Is Not Instinctive**

* Discuss with them what they find difficult to do or what they cannot do and in such a way that they do not feel they are being defined by what they cannot do.
* Discuss that it is normal for everyone to be good at some activities and not so at others.
* Discuss in a way that makes it clear that it is the trying that matters not the result.
* Look for situations where they are not doing well and praise their persistence and effort.
* When discussing academics, discuss occasionally - not constantly, and discuss in an accepting way.
* Discuss and explore the feelings brought on by these difficult activities and discuss in a way that does not make it a big deal and discuss with a bit of humour!
* Avoid discussing in a way that it is something that needs to be ‘fixed’.
* Remind them that a low result will never be criticised if the effort was maximised.
* These points apply to all teenagers regardless of academic ability, but are especially important for those who may feel bad about themselves because of a learning difficulty.

Remember which interviewee had greater self-esteem/confidence, or more accurately, which interviewee is more comfortable with themselves.

**7. Teenage Well-Being – They Can’t Be Well All the Time**

**7.1 Introduction**

The phrase ‘well-being’ is commonly used to describe a combination of positive feelings, activities, and attitudes. However, this ignores the fact that well-being can co-exist with what is referred to as ill-being [1]. This concept of ill-being introduces the idea that our teenagers can, and will, experience negative events in their lives and the resulting negative feelings brought on by these events. Teenagers can enhance their well-being by experiencing positive emotions through involvement in valued relationships, their work and past-times. However, life can never be entirely made up of positive experiences and emotions. All teenagers will experience negative emotions as results of negative events. Some researchers argue [1] that one cause of mental health problems is the inability of teenagers to manage emotions and articulate and analyse negative emotional states, and that if we ignore the challenges of ill-being, or fail to see it as part of the challenge of helping teenagers find their way, we may too easily conclude that their well-being is solely concerned with experiencing positive activities and positive feelings.

**7.2 Adolescent Ill-being**

As our children move through the different stages of adolescence they experience many different adverse events that are common, unavoidable, and indeed normal. This can result in the activation of negative emotions. The teenage years are a time of extensive physical, social, and cognitive changes and can be, for some, an extremely difficult time [35]. Teenagers experience a myriad of different and difficult emotions associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescents are grappling with issues around the real-self and the ideal-self [23], and their desire to find autonomy and independence. Teenagers are self-conscious about their bodies and their sexual development, and struggle with insecurities around changing relationships with their parents, one-to-one peer relationships, peer group relationships, and romantic connections. The teenage years are also characterised by skirmishes around online presence, academic challenges, and the temptation of negative activities such as drinking and drug misuse, gambling, and more serious issues such as anxiety and self-harm. Moreover, adolescents may be experiencing difficulties in relationship with those that matter to them; be they peer friendships or relationships within the home or family. Indeed, difficulties at home can be exasperated by the difficulties associated with adolescent development and vice-versa, and as a result, adolescence will struggle with many negative, difficult, conflicting, onerous, and painful emotions. If these emotions are not worked through in a healthy, and overall productive way, it can destabilise their sense of well-being.

Without addressing negative emotions brought on by life events or difficult relationship in our teenagers lives, teenagers risk internalising these emotions and displacing them inwards through, for example, anxiety, withdrawal, or depression [4], or externalised behaviours where they display their emotions outwards as anger, aggression or through behaviours such as drug taking or other dysfunctional behaviours [36]. Researchers argue that there is an association between high clarity of feelings and high mood repair and with low levels of depression, anxiety, and school maladjustment, and that adolescents with high emotional awareness have fewer school problems, and fewer internalised and externalised problem [37]. This raises the question; if it is impossible to prevent our teenager experience negative events and therefore negative emotions as a result of these events, should we focus on helping them manage and process their negative emotions?

**7.3 Emotional or Mood Repair**

Our acknowledgment of the existence of ill-being and its impact on our teenagers’ well-being highlights the need for us, as parents, to help our teenagers to minimise the emotional effects of negative experiences. This can be done by developing, what the researchers refer to as, emotional or mood repair [38]. Emotional or mood repair is the skill and ability to acquire the knowledge, attitudes our teenagers need to recognise and manage their emotions and use this to guide their behaviour in a healthy way [37]. Some researchers have found that the skill of emotional repair is the most important predictor of emotional well-being and that the ability to repair negative emotions can be considered to be a powerful tool for preventing the internalising and externalising of problems and is essential to adolescents’ well-being and their overall psychological functioning [38].

**7.4 Emotional Repair & Resilience**

We constantly hear how important it is to help out teenager to develop resilience. This aim is underlined by researchers who have found that [39] teenagers with poor levels of resilience were more likely to engage in negative behaviours, while those with a strong resiliency profile are less likely to engage in destructive activities [40]. However, what is resilience? How does the concept of emotional or mood repair relate to the idea of resilience? Resilience can be defined as ‘the ability to cope with adverse circumstances’ [41] or more precisely, the emotions brought about by adverse circumstances. In other words the term ‘resilience’ and phrase ‘emotion repair’ seem interchangeable. This distinction between the word ‘resilience’ - which implies ‘toughness’ - and the phrase ‘emotional repair’ – which is more instructive - might help us as parents better understand what we can do to help out teenager cope with the inevitability of experiencing negative emotions. Simply put, developing the skills of emotional repair is the skill that gives rise to resilience.

**7.5 Self-Awareness**

How can we help adolescents develop the skill of emotional repair/resilience? Researchers suggest that the enhancing of emotional repair can be facilitated by the development of what they refer to as self-awareness. Self-awareness can described as knowing our emotions and recognising a feeling as it happens. Self-awareness is what keeps us from overreacting and amplifying what is perceived. Self-awareness is being aware of both our emotions and our thoughts and how these emotions can guide and influence our behaviours [42].

The latter part of this description, ‘influence our behaviours’, is particularly helpful when dealing with teenagers who exhibit internalised or externalised negative behaviours. This implies that negative behaviours could be altered by addressing our teenagers’ lack of self-awareness [42]–[44]. It is a lack of emotional self-awareness which, if corrected, could help our teenagers manage their negative emotions and therefore decrease their negative behaviours and help them learn to self-monitor and regulate themselves [45].

There is a wealth of research highlighting the benefits of developing self-awareness in teenagers.

* Self-awareness is fundamental to psychological insight and can act as an inner barometer, and can be an invaluable tool for changing negative behaviours [30], [42], [43].
* Self-awareness can help teenagers to explore their emotional architecture and identify thoughts prior to experiencing the emotions that produce negative behaviours [44].
* Developing self-awareness can facilitate our teenagers’ exploration and navigation of thoughts produce the emotions which fuel destructive behaviours [46].
* Developing self-awareness can help teenagers to notice and manage their automatic thoughts, understand the reasons behind the emotions they are feeling, and thereby reduce and reframe dysfunctional and destructive thoughts and consequently maintaining control over their behaviours which can have such a negative impact on themselves and others [47].
* Developing the skills of self-awareness helps teenagers regulate their own emotions, so that they are able to employ a range of coping strategies to maintain good levels of mental health [25].
* Developing the skill of self-awareness increases the ability of teenagers to managing, repair and recover from negative emotions and is associated with higher quality of relationship with friends [49], [50].
* Teenagers with a high degree of self-awareness are less likely to experience emotional difficulties and are more likely to overcome these difficulties if they occur [21].
* Developing the skill of self-awareness can result in teenagers engaging in purposeful and meaningful living including health-promoting behaviours such as physical activity and healthy eating to the point where they avoid engaging in risky behaviours [37].
* Finally, a lack of self-awareness of feelings can be ruinous for teenagers unable to recognise and put words on these feelings [43].

Remember, our teenagers will always experience negative emotions and feelings brought about by negative experiences in their lives. If we don’t provide them with the skills to address, process, and deal with negative emotions [51], we may fall into the trap of not recognising the existence of ill-being and its impact on our teenagers’ overall well-being. In summary, developing self-awareness enables emotional repair which enhances the resilience that is necessary for their well-being. This gives rise to the question, how can we help them develop their self-awareness.

**7.6 Tips to Developing Self-awareness**

Here are some negative emotions that our teenagers might experience. In order to develop their self-awareness, they need to understand; *why* they are having these feelings and *how* these feeling drive them to say and do things [20], [34], [42], [44], [52]–[56]. This self-awareness does not necessarily make the feelings go away, but does make them more manageable and reduce the chances of their having a negative impact on their behaviour and overall well-being.

**Anger: Why they feel anger and what it makes them do?**

* They feel angry if they feel someone has acted badly towards them, e.g. if a sibling has taken their possessions.
* They feel angry if they have been blocked from achieving a goal, e.g. if we don’t allow them to go to a social event.
* They feel angry if they their self-esteem is threatened e.g. if someone says something that makes them feel bad about ourselves.
* Anger can make them attack back, verbally or physically.
* Anger can make them refuse to cooperate e.g. not do homework or jobs in the house.
* It is interesting to note that their anger can drive them to displace that emotion onto some*one* else. This usually takes the form of taking their anger out on someone who they perceive as less powerful than them e.g. the other parent or a sibling, and avoid taking their anger out on someone they perceive as more powerful. This is referred to as displaced anger.
* In addition, their anger can drive them to displace that emotion onto some*thing* else. This can cause them to become angry at minor issues such as a broken computer, getting caught in the rain, or missing the bus or at situations that are unrelated to the original source of their anger. This is also referred to as displaced anger.
* Anger can be viewed as a poison we drink in an attempt to hurt the other person.

**Hurt: Why they feel hurt and what it makes them do?**

* They feel hurt if their words or deeds are rejected by others.
* This feeling of hurt can drive them to sulk.
* This hurt can make them expect the other person to mind read and know they are hurt.
* Hurt can make them try to make the other person feel guilty.
* The feelings of hurt can be really profound if they feel their words or deeds have been rejected by someone who really matters to them.

**Guilt & Shame: Why they feel guilt and shame and what it makes them do?**

* They feel guilty when they do something they know they should not have done.
* They feel guilty when they don’t do something they should have.
* Shame can be added to their guilt when others know what they have done.
* Their guilt and shame can drive them to avoid taking responsibility for their words or actions. This helps them get rid of their guilt or shame.
* Their guilt and shame can drive them to blame others or point out that the behaviour of their friends or siblings was worse. This also helps them get rid of their guilt or shame.
* This analysis of guilt and shame is worth remembering if we feel our teenagers might be lying. Teenagers don’t lie because they are bad. Sometimes teenagers lie to protect their feelings or, more precisely, protect themselves from experiencing negative feelings because lying acts as a shield that prevents them from exposing themselves to guilt and shame. Also, if we confront them with their lies, they are likely to feel cornered and will be entrenched in their position even more because they now have to admit to both the original issue and also to lying about it. Put the lie to one side, deal with the guilt and shame of the original difficulty and let them see that they are not being judged. This allows them the space and security to acknowledge what they have done. Remember, it is the exposure to guilt and shame that prevents teenagers from saying sorry.

**Anxiety: Why they feel anxious and what it makes them do?**

* They feel anxious because of a fear of something that *might* happen.
* Before they cross the road they look left and right. Anxiety, or fear of getting knocked down, makes them do this. This is a healthy anxiety.
* However, if the anxiety prevents them from engaging in an activity they should do, or stops them getting on with our everyday lives, it has become an unhealthy anxiety.
* Their anxiety can drive them to avoid some situations or people. If they don’t expose themselves to certain situations or people they avoid feeling that anxiety brought on by those people or situations.
* Sometimes teenagers express an anxiety of what other people might think of them. Other peoples’ view of them can impact on how they feel about themselves. Sometimes, the latter can be the source of the anxiety rather than the former.

**Envy & Jealousy: Why they feel envy or jealously and what it makes them do?**

* Like anxiety, envy/jealousy can be healthy or unhealthy.
* Healthy envy can drive them to improve themselves. If they see others achieving something, it might drive them to want the same things or drive them to achieve success in their own way.
* If the envy makes them feel unhappy, it is jealousy. It can make them pity themselves for their lack of good fortune. It can make them feel there is something missing in their lives.
* Jealousy can make them feel bad about themselves. Their jealously can drive them to put down others and find reasons to justify why the other person’s good fortune is undeserved.
* They can say bad things about the other person. This helps them feel better about themselves and helps them get rid of their jealousy.
* Jealousy can be more about how they feel about themselves and their lives rather than how they feel about the other person?

**Anger as a Secondary Emotion**[57]

* Sometimes somebody says or does something that makes them feel hurt, guilt, shame, or jealousy. These feelings can make them get angry at the person that made them feel that way.
* If someone makes them feel hurt, they can get angry at that person.
* If someone makes them feel guilty they can get angry at that person. If this is the case, it might be that acceptance of guilt would mean they are to blame - but replacing it with anger means the other person is to blame.
* Therefore anger can sometimes be a *secondary emotion* that covers their real, underlying primary emotion.
* If we only try to deal with their secondary emotion of anger, this will ignore their primary emotion which caused the secondary anger and will therefore linger within them.

Remember, developing their self-awareness of their experiences and their resulting negative emotions enables their emotional repair and enhances their well-being. See appendix at the back of this booklet for more examples.

**8. The Dynamics of Adolescence as a Source of Ill-Being**

**8.1 Developing their Self-awareness of what might happen.**

Adolescence marks a time of psychological, social, and physical change. Their way of thinking, their interactions with family and peers start to change. In addition, their bodies start to change physical and sexually. This can cause our teenagers to worry and become very self-conscious themselves and worry about their place in the world as well as how adult they are and if their bodies are developing in the same way as their peers. Let’s help them become self-aware – in advance - of the difficulties they might face and the potential negative feelings and emotions they might experience.

**8.2 Their Changing Bodies**

Teenagers can worry about whether they are changing normally particularly if their development is the same way as their peers. To alleviate any anxiety about how they feel about themselves it might be useful to have a conversation to let them know that all teenagers start these changes at different times, proceed at different rates, but everybody will end up in the same place eventually. To further alleviate doubts they may have, you might say that your development was at a slower rate than your peers, but eventually you caught up. Remember, giving them ‘heads-up’ on this can develop their self-awareness of their experiences and their resulting negative emotions enabling their emotional repair and enhancing their well-being.

**8.3 Doing Adult Things**

Teenagers will constantly compare themselves to their friends and may worry that they are not as ‘adult’ as their friends in terms of the activities they engage in. Here again we need to pre-empt this in advance and reassure them by granting them safe autonomy and independence, and letting them engage in safe, more adult activities that make them feel grown up (see section 2.4).

**8.4 Friendships**

Early adolescence and, in particular, when staring secondary school, teenagers change and try out different friendships. If they see their friends doing this, remind them – maybe in advance – it is normal for people to have different and changing friendship circles, e.g. at home, in school, in sports clubs and that this will happen throughout their lives. Again, let’s give them ‘heads-up’ on this so that they are not taken by surprise by this.

**8.5 The ‘Cool Gang’**

One aspect of friendships that can cause our teenager to worry is the number of friends they have. They may see other very confident teenagers with a greater or larger circle of friends compared to themselves. This can cause them to worry about who, and how many people, like them. This can become particularly pronounced when they compare themselves with, or are not part of, what teenagers refer to as the ‘cool gang’. These ‘cool gang’ members are often seen by teens as; taller, better-looking, more sexually developed, more confident and outgoing, have a larger number of friends than they have, better able to talk to someone they fancy, have a girlfriend/boyfriend, have more defined physical attributes, are more accomplished e.g. in sports or academics, and engage in more adult activities. These comparisons can make them feel there is something wrong with them. This can be addressed by enhancing their own self-esteem, or more precisely, helping them ‘feel comfortable in themselves (see section 6) and by having a discussion around the different types and qualities of friendships as outlined below. This ‘cool gang’ pneumonia brings to the fore the need to teach our teenagers the about the different types of friendships and the ones that matter.

**8.6 The Type of Friendships That Matter**

In life people have two types of friendships. Let’s refer to these as A↔B and X↔Y friendships. We all only have two or three, or even one A↔B friends. These friendships are characterised by A & B able to share their inner thoughts, feelings, fears, and show each other their flaws without being judge or slagged. A & B accept each other despite their flaws. Also, A & B can disagree and still be friends. A & B friends do not hide who they are and pretend to be someone they are not in order to maintain their friendship. These friendships develop when they share experiences, e.g. being neighbours, the same school, or the same club. When they no longer share these experiences and move on, e.g. leave school, the friendship is still maintained and lasts. Compare this with X↔Y friendships. Teenagers, particularly the more outgoing popular ones, may have about twenty of these friendships. These are more superficial friendships where they do not share their inner thoughts and feelings, do not show their shortcomings and sometimes pretend to be someone they are not in order to maintain the friendships. If X↔Y friends show a flaw, they are slagged and others in the group may join in. This does not happen with A↔B friendships. These X↔Y friendships develop when they share experiences, e.g. being neighbours, the same school, or the same club. However, when they no longer share these experiences and move on, e.g. leave school, the friendship become occasional and contact becomes less or even stops over time. When our teenagers see members of the ‘cool gang’ with more friends than they have, e.g. twenty friendships, remind them that these friendships are X↔Y friendships and not A↔B friendships and that everybody only has two or three or even one A↔B friendships and nobody has twenty A↔B friends. Remind them that it is the A↔B friendships that last and are the ones that mater and the ones that we need in life. ‘*Imagine the following horrible scenario. You are at a school assembly and everybody in your year group is there. Image that for whatever reason, you pee on yourself. What will A*↔*B friends do? They will hide you, the will try to stop others seeing, they will try to get you to the toilet, they will not laugh, and they will try not to add to your embarrassment, nor will they embarrass you in the future about it. What might some of the X*↔*Y friends do? They might laugh, they might shout it to everybody else, they might add to your embarrassment, they might mention it the next day, and maybe keep bringing it up again and again, and add to your embarrassment.*’ Teaching our teenagers the difference between A↔B and X↔Y friendships can alleviate the possibility of them comparing themselves unfavourable with others who seem to have more friends and be more popular. This, in turn, can make them feel more comfortable in themselves. Here is a horrible, but helpful, example that may be used with our teenagers to illustrate the difference between A↔B and X↔Y friendships.

It can also be worth reminding our teenagers that if they have one or two A↔B friends who enjoy their company, value their presence, ask how they are doing, value what they have to say, like them for who they are, accept them for who they are, they are in their own ‘cool gang’. Remember, developing their self-awareness in advance of their experiences and their resulting negative emotions enables their emotional repair and enhances their well-being.

**7.7 The ‘Hard Gang’ & ‘Too Cool for School Gang’**

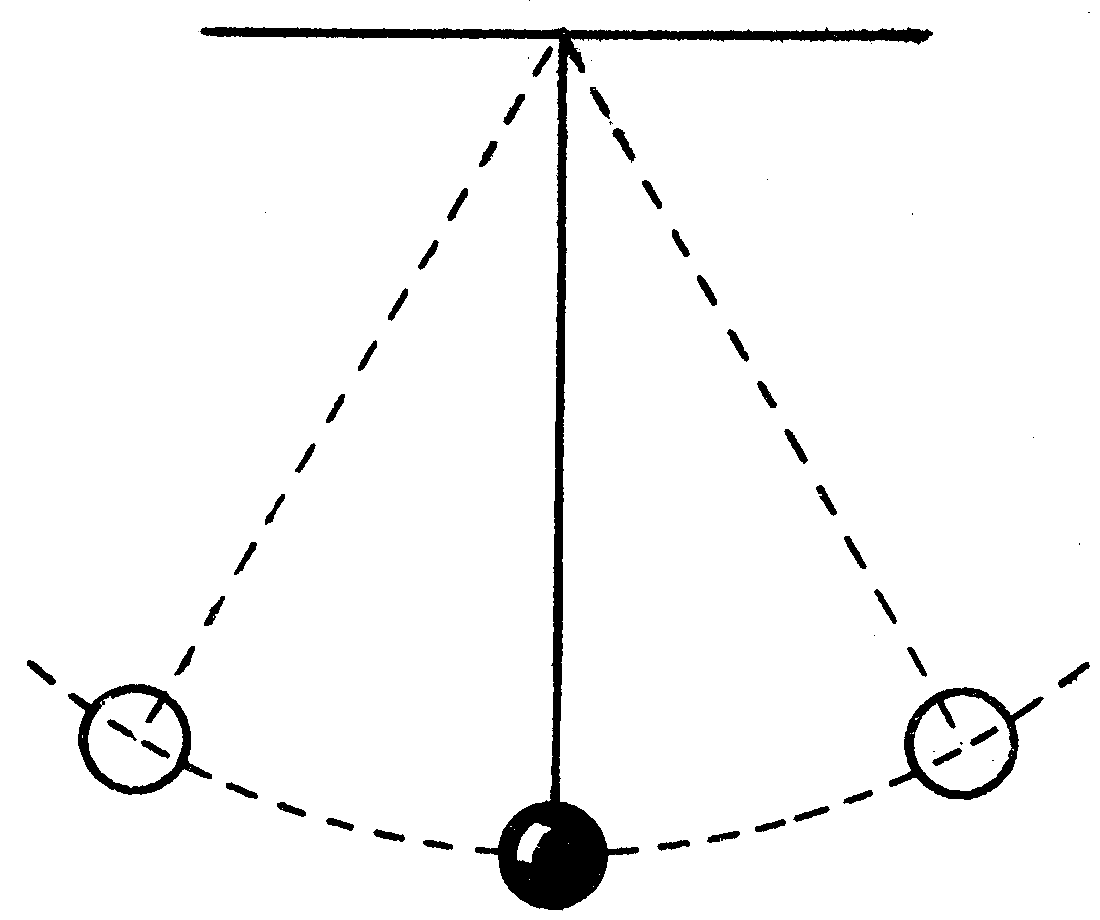
One other group of adolescents our teenagers may observe, or even be attracted to, is what is referred to as ‘the hard gang’/’too cool for school gang’.These are the teenagers who are the first to smoke, the first to drink, and possibly the first to smoke cannabis. They arrive in school on Monday morning and boast about what they got up to over the weekend and boast about the ‘adult’ activities they engaged in. This lifestyle can seem attractive to our teenagers. It might be helpful to have a discussion with our teenagers to help them understand why these teenagers with similar personality traits have become friends and why they are engaging in these activities. Why are these teenagers acting like this? Is it for emotional reasons? Are they engaging in these activities to fulfil an emotional need or an emotional void? Are they more attached to their peers than the family or home? Are they engaged in negative activities to gain positive feelings? Providing this insight and self-awareness for our teenagers may help them understand the dynamics behind these friendships and hopefully make them and their activities less attractive to our teenagers.

A cautionary note. If you find your teenager is a member or becoming a member of this group, consider the following. It can be argued that, for these teenagers, the attachment pendulum has swung too far away from the family/home and too far towards their peers. Why? Is there a difficulty within the home? Is there a difficulty in an important relationship in their lives? What is missing in their lives that they need to behave in a negative way to gain positive feelings? What emotional need are they fulfilling? If you find your teenager is attracted to this group, immediate action may be needed. If you feel your teenager is ‘easily influenced’ and is keen to impress their peers and what their peers think of them, this may be more associated with what they think of themselves and their self-esteem, and with how comfortable they are with themselves.

Remember, the vast majority of teenagers avoid this group and the types of activities they engage in because they are comfortable enough in themselves and sufficiently influenced by their parents and attached to their family that they do not feel a need to join this group. If you feel your teenager has got in with a ‘bad crowd’ remember, in such circumstances, all the parents of all those teens are likely to make such a statement. In some circumstances, parents can blame the other teenagers, but not their own. They can’t all be right! Also, sometimes parents in this situation focus their attention on hoping their teenager’s peers will change or move on, or are convinced that it is the parents of the other teenagers who need to solve the problem. This can prevent the real problem being addressed. The focus should be on *why* a teenager has chosen to associate with peers who engage in these destructive interests. Remember, in most cases, the involvement in this ‘the hard gang’/’too cool for school gang’ and the resulting negative behaviours are symptoms, not the cause.

It is a commonly held view that personal and social misbehaviour by teenagers is correlated with social class. However, there are plenty of teenagers from socially disadvantaged groups who do not engage in negative behaviours and there are also plenty of teenagers who are not from socially disadvantaged groups who do. Remember, a *correlation* does not mean a *cause*. This has been confirmed by research which who states that it is striking that social class has no net association with teenagers' well-being, educational attainment, or with risky behaviours. It is parenting style that matters and this is independent to, and not associated with, social class [57].





*Peer*

*Influence*

*Parental Influence*

**7.8 Is Social Media & the Internet Really the Problem?**

Consider the following scenario. Teenager X posts an inappropriate photograph on social media at the request of teenager Y, and X discloses this to you. Our immediate instinct might be to have a conversation with X about the following.

* The danger of such acts.
* How the acts might be illegal.
* The short and long-term consequence of such actions.
* Putting controls on the device used.
* Taking away the devisees and/or other sanctions.

However, there is another conversation that needs to take place with teenager X. This conversation may have longer-lasting and more positive consequences than having the above conversation only.

* How is your relationship with teenager Y?
* Is the relationship equal?
* Is there a power imbalance in the relationship?
* Why did you act on Y’s request?
* What would Y have thought of you if you declined the request?
* How would their opinion of you make you feel about yourself?
* What did you gain emotionally from acting on the request?
* What would have been the emotional consequences of not acting on this request?
* Why do you feel a need to fulfil your emotional needs by providing this photograph?

A conversation with teenager Y might include the following.

* What, for you, was the emotional gain in getting that picture?
* Did you feel powerful/in charge?
* If you shared the image with others, what feelings did you get from sharing it?
* Why do you feel a need to fulfil your emotional needs through these actions?

In other words, these actions, both the request and acting on this request, are emotionally driven actions, fulfilling an emotional need in an unhealthy way, i.e. a positive negative activity. If we avoid this, and focus solely on the appropriate and the inappropriate ways to use social media, we risk this action been repeated on-line or the emotional needs being fulfilled off-line in an equally unhealthy way.

For teenager X, who discloses their actions, the following might be useful. Yes, of course express your disapproval of their actions. However, they may be experiencing two very strong negative emotions; shame that you know, and anxiety that others may find out. These emotions need to be addressed otherwise they will eat away inside. Tell them that you still love them and that you don’t think anything less of them. This may need to be repeated again and again if necessary. If we fail to do this and react only with anger and disapproval, their guilt and shame will stay with them, and they may regret disclosing the information to you and may never disclose future mistakes. In terms of dealing with the anxiety of others seeing the photograph, the response will depend on individual and local circumstances and advice may need to be taken e.g. from Garda.

**OR**

* We can realise that they will be spending more and more time out in the world without us and therefore,
* Therefore, we can teach them the skills to anticipate, avoid, or navigate dangerous traffic to protect themselves on all traffic on roads and junctions when we are not with them.

**Consider the following**

* We can teach them and let them, walk and navigate the traffic on only certain roads and junctions.
* We can and let them cycle (later drive) and navigate traffic on certain safe roads and junctions and ban them for using more dangerous roads and junctions.

**OR**

* We can realise that they will be spending more and more time out in the world without us and therefore,
* We can teach them the self-awareness to distinguish between engaging in positive activities to gain positive feelings and engaging in negative activities to gain positive feelings.
* We can teach them the self-awareness to understand how their emotions drive what they might do on social media or accessing certain websites.
* We can teach them the self-awareness to manage their internet activities in a healthy way when we are not with them.
* We can enable them to be comfortable enough in themselves not to want to do what we don’t want them to do.

**Consider the following**

* We can educate ourselves about the dangers of social media and the internet.
* We can block and ban them from certain social media platforms and websites.
* We can limit the internet access or the number of internet enabled devices.
* We can constantly check their devices to see what they have been up to on the internet.

**9. When Life Gives Them a Slap in the Face**

*The Individual does not fight external enemies,*

*it is with itself and its love that it fights it out*.

Danish philosopher [Søren Kierkegaard](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/S%C3%B8ren_Kierkegaard" \o "Søren Kierkegaard)

**9.1 Teenagers are Always Grumpy?**

Teenagers are sometimes characterised as being grumpy and difficult to deal with. They often respond to us using grunts and monosyllabic answers. What is all this about? Is their grumpiness a representation of their inability to express their feelings? Does their awkwardness and incoherence represent their limited ability to articulate how they feel? Are their temper tantrums their way of expressing emotions they cannot verbalise? Is their misbehaviour an expression – in a non-verbal way - of an uncomfortable feeling, like anger? We all need a release valve for our emotions and if they cannot talk them through, they will act them out. It is sometimes said that it is impossible to talk to teenagers when they are in this grumpy/awkward stage. However, it is because they are in this stage that it is all the more important to help them identify, label, and explore their feelings. Some teenagers are moody some of the time but only a few are moody *all* of the time. If you encounter the latter – it may be because there is a more serious issue going on.

**9.2 Processing Feelings**

When times get really tough for our teenagers, they may be consumed by negative feelings. These negative feelings can prevent them from enjoying activities or people they normally enjoy. These negative feelings can hold them back in life and prevent us from getting on with their lives. What can be done is very simple, but also very, very, difficult, i.e. process their feelings. Processing of feelings involves labelling feelings, and understanding them. Naming them. Analysing them. Breaking them down. Sorting them in their heads. Dissecting them. Interpreting them. Examining them. Scrutinising them. Explaining them. Evaluating them. Sifting through them. Processing feelings involves doing this over and over again, and if needs be, over and over again.

Inadvertently, when processing feelings teenagers can focus only on events and people that brought about these feelings. This should be avoided. Focusing on events or people distracts them from examining their feelings. Instead we should help them focus on the feelings and emotions that are brought about by these events or people. When helping, we should be careful about displaced feelings. Sometimes teenagers can displace their feelings from the real source onto different events or people. This may also be evident if they are blaming their feelings on sometime normal, trivial, or something they would ordinarily cope with.

It is often said ‘*it is good to talk’* or is it more nuanced than that. To talk, they have to order their thoughts, analyse them, dissect them, evaluate the, and sift through them. In other words, talking encourages them and prompts them to process their feelings. Also, sometimes people say ‘*talking does not help*’. A few questions need to be asked when that is stated. Were they focusing on events, or people, rather than on the processing of the feelings and therefore concluding it doesn’t work? Were they focusing on finding a solution? Sometimes seeking a solution needs to be avoided – as it may be a situation where there is no solution. Sometimes seeking out a solution can take away from the only possible solution, i.e. processing of their feelings. One other reason people might say ‘*talking doesn’t work*’ is that the talking and subsequent processing of feelings was painful – so painful they had to stop. Processing feelings can be painful, very painful. Let them experience this pain. Sometimes the treatment for some cancers can be more painful than the cancer itself – but in the long run – it is the only thing that works. It is also worth remembering that processing of feelings may cause them to cry. There is one simple reason why we cry. We cry because *we need to*. Crying is natural and normal. Crying is another form of processing.

**9.3 Getting Rid of the Pain?**

Processing feelings may not get rid of our teenagers’ negative feelings. Instead, processing feelings can make them more manageable. This processing can make them easier to carry. This process can make it easier for them to get on with their lives. This processing can help prevent these feelings from holding them back. The diagram below shows the outer circle on the left representing a teenager and the inner circle representing their pain. We and they instinctively want their inner pain to get smaller and go away. However, this may not happen. Instead, we should strive to enable our teenagers to grow emotionally, and get stronger emotionally so that their negative feelings have less of an impact on them and their lives. We should strive to strengthen them emotionally so that they can carry these feelings more easily and manage these feelings so that they are not held back in life.

*They grow emotionally*

*They get stronger emotionally*

*The pain has less of an impact on their lives*

*Teenager*

*Their Pain*

We often hear professional sportspeople saying they have learned to ‘*control the controllables*’. They very seldom explain what this means. What it really means is that we sometimes cannot control events and control the people around us, we can only control how we emotionally react to events and people.

**9.4 Getting professional Help**

Processing feelings is hard, difficult, and painful and can take a long time. This can result in teenagers looking for alternatives to processing by replacing the processing of feelings with internalised behaviours or externalised behaviours [2]–[4]. These behaviours where discussed at the start of this book but are worth repeating. Internalised behaviours are where negative emotions are directed inwards at themselves and can manifest themselves as withdrawal, fearfulness, inhibition, and anxiety, avoiding school, over or undereating, depression, or self-harm. Externalised behaviours are where negative emotions are directed outwards at other people or situations. These externalised behaviours can manifest themselves as anger, aggression, and frustration, dropping out of school, drinking too early, drinking excessively, drug taking, anti-social behaviour or criminal behaviour. In addition, given modern trends, it might be useful to include behaviours such as excessive time acting out friendships on-line at the expense of face-to-face relationships, and an excessive obsession with ‘sculpting’ their body shape in the gym or an excessive fitness or diet routines.

If you find that these things are happening, we may need to look for professional help. Have the courage to get professional help. Tell them that reaching out for professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength and determination to manage the situation. Seeking out professional help is a statement to themselves that they do not want to continue the way they are. It is a statement to themselves that they are determined to work through their difficulties and get on with their lives.

It is often said that there is a ‘*stigma*’ attached to mental health issues. One dictionary definition of the word ‘*stigma*’ is ‘*a*[*strong*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/strong)[*feeling*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/feeling)*of*[*disapproval*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disapproval)*that most*[*people*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people)*in a*[*society*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/society)*have about something*’. Do people really disapprove of others struggling with mental health issues? Is the word ‘*stigma*’ an appropriate word to use? Is there something else going on here? Is disclosing our inner feelings more about our relationship with ourselves and what we think of ourselves - rather than what others might think of us? If so, the word ‘*stigma*’ doesn’t fit. Also, when an individual discloses they struggle with their mental health, people find it difficult to known how to respond? Again, the word ‘*stigma*’ doesn’t really reflect what is going on here. Should we stop saying mental health issues have a ‘*stigma*’ attached? Once we put the words ‘*mental health*’ and ‘*stigma*’ in the same sentence, are we, firstly, actually reinforcing that stigma and, secondly, is it really an accurate or appropriate word to describe the nuances of what’s is actually happening?

Sometimes professional help can run in parallel with, or indeed be replaced by, a solution that might lie closer to home. All families have their ups and downs. There may be periods of difficulties with relationships between partners, between parent and child, or between siblings. Indeed, there may also be the trauma of redundancy, illness, or bereavement that may impact on the atmosphere in the home and as a result may impact on our teenagers’ relationship with a significant other person in their family. Some teenagers who experience such family difficulties can continue on and cope without these difficulties impacting on their lives. However, other teenagers can, and do, encounter situations whereby difficulties in the home have such an emotional impact that it can hinder their progress in life and cause them to engage in negative activities as a result of disharmony in the home or a relationship within the home. Sometimes when teenagers engage in negative behaviours these behaviours can result in fraught relationships. However, there is another way to view this. It could be argued that it may be the other way around; the fraught relationship may be the cause of the negative behaviour. In other words, if we can fix the relationship we may fix the behaviours – not the other way around. Most of the time negative behaviours are symptoms of another problem – not the cause. With this in mind, it is worth remembering a point made earlier, quality relationships are a rock-bottom fundamental to their well-being [30].

**10. What Can Get in Our Way of Doing the Best We Can?**

Despite our best intentions and out best efforts we, as parents, can sometimes trip ourselves up when dealing with our teenagers. Let’s use what we have learned about developing self-awareness in teenagers and apply this to ourselves as parents. Here are a few suggestions.

* We need to develop our own self-awareness to check that our desire to please them, make them happy, and show our love for them, does not result in boundaries not being applied, or being loosened too much too soon.
* We need to develop our own self-awareness to check that our desire to protect them does not become the dominant emotion in ourselves and result in excessively strict boundary controls and, as a result, prevents them developing their own sense of autonomy and independence that they need to become a fully functioning adult.
* We need to develop our own self-awareness to check that our desire to make them be the way *we* want them to be does not become the dominant emotion in ourselves and results in boundary controls becoming psychological controls.
* When they were six years old we had the emotional skills to enable them bond with us and the natural parental instincts to fulfil their emotional needs. We need to adapt and adjust these skills as they progress through the different teenage years to ensure that that bond continues and their new and different emotional needs continue to be fulfilled. Because this can be difficult, we need to have the self-awareness not to try to substitute fulfilling their emotional needs with satisfying their physical needs by give them what they want or buying them what they want. This can happen because the latter is easier than the former.
* We need to remind ourselves that our emotional bond with our teenagers can have a greater influence on their behaviours than their bond with their peers – especially when we are not around.
* We all want our teen to improve on what they can do and be the best they can, e.g. academics. However, we need to develop our own self-awareness to check that our desire to help them improve does not make them feel that they are not good enough or that in some way they need to be fixed.
* We need to develop our own self-awareness to check we do not compound this problem by making comparisons with other siblings, cousins, or friends. We need to remind ourselves that these comparisons can be heard by them as ‘*I’m not good enough*’ and can impact negatively on their self-esteem and how they feel about themselves, particularly in the case of academics. Also, without intending to do so, we can sometimes say things or act towards our teenagers’ siblings in a way they can misinterpret. We need to develop our own self-awareness to check we do not inadvertently allow them thinking that we prefer one sibling over another.
* If we have ambitions for them, frame them from their perspective and not from the perspective of a sibling, cousin, or other individual. Let’s make sure that these ambitions are realistic and achievable and are not solely rooted in what we want for them. If they don’t like team sports, or sports at all, that’s okay, it is just the way they are. Remember, keeping fit and being healthy can be achieved without participating in competitive sports. If they don’t want to be involved in the arts, don’t force them. If the tasks they have to do day-in and day-out as a barrister or doctor or computer programmer – which may be for the rest of their working lives – makes them unhappy and that task they have to do as a butcher or hairdresser or bus driver makes them happy – allow them to be happy.
* It is good for their well-being to be busy and engaged in activities that stimulate the mind. However, we need tap into our own self-awareness and remind ourselves that it is also good for their well-being to learn the skill to sit still, do nothing, contemplate and think. Sitting and watching the world go by in a car, bus, or train, can sometimes do more for them than keeping their heads stuck in a screen.
* It hurts us when we see our teenagers upset over negative events and our immediate instinct is to fix it and take their pain away. As a result we want to shield them, avoid them being exposed to negative experiences, or take the negative experience away. However, we can forget that negative experiences will continue to happen to them throughout their lives when we are not around. We therefore need to teach them the skills of self-awareness to manage and deal with negative emotions brought on by negative experiences, i.e. the skill of emotional repair. Remember, developing their self-awareness enables emotional repair and enhances their well-being.
* If our teenagers are engaging in negative activities – be they externalised or internalised – we need to remind ourselves that these activities are emotionally driven and are fulfilling an emotional need. We need to remember that these activities are symptoms not causes and that we need to take the harder and more difficult approach by addressing the emotions behind their activities rather than solely addressing their behaviours only.
* We need to develop our own self-awareness to remind ourselves that what may have worked for our parents with us, or what may have work for us with other siblings, may not necessarily work for what is a different teenager.
* The earlier discussion around A↔B and X↔Y friendships also apply to us as adults. X↔Y friendships may cause us to adjust what we say or do as parents when we have an audience or constantly have conversations about how great our teenagers are. This is not authentic and cannot be maintained over a long period of time. We need to develop our own self-awareness to allow our A↔B friendships help us with the difficulties we can encounter when parenting teenagers and not let what our own X↔Y friend think of us determine what we think of ourselves.
* As parents, we can sometimes forget that we are our own individual with our own difficulties. As a result of our own emotions from past or present experiences or both, we as adults, can have our own internalised and externalised behaviours - be they mild or otherwise. We need to develop the self-awareness within ourselves to recognise when we may be letting our own emotions influence our behaviours and how to parent our teenagers.
* Finally, we all love our teenagers. However, we need to develop our own self-awareness to check that, not only do they know this, but that they feel it.

# 11. Conclusion

*As parents we may only ever be as happy as our unhappiest child.*

Some parents may feel that the suggestions made in this booklet are an attempt to preach a certain parenting style. However, this is not the case and it is suggested that the suggestions made be taken in the spirit in which they are intended; that is, to be helpful and to provide understanding, insights, and skills that may assist you as your child transitions into being and independent adult.

This booklet does not pretend to have all the answers. Indeed, this booklet does not contain the perfect solution to the difficulties associated with adolescence. There is no perfect answer or simple answer. In fact, it would be easy to dismiss the suggestions made because they actually don’t provide perfect or easy solutions. Human nature dictates that when we encounter a problem we seek out one act or event or set of words that will fix the problem. Because there is none, we should remember that parenting teenagers is a *continuous process* that lasts over a period of years and that to seek out a quick fix only serves to cause frustration. Consider the issue of losing weight. To lose weight we often seek out a simple quick fix solution that never works long term. However, there is one proven sure-fire very simple approach to losing weight, i.e. less food/more healthy food and more exercise. Why do we seek alternative to this – because the best approach is very hard work. Similarly, the enhancing of our relationship with our teenager is hard work, but it should also be seen as the approach that optimises the chances of our teenagers developing into content and resilient independent adults. With this in mind, let’s remember the following. The time that passed from when they were born to the age of six passed very quickly. This is the same amount of time that will pass from the start of the teenage years to them becoming a legal adult at the age of eighteen. That time will pass equally quickly.

Parenting our children can be the most rewarding thing we do in our lives. But sometimes the price we pay is that as parents, we may only ever be as happy as our unhappiest child. Therefore, it is worth reminding ourselves that the vast majority of teenagers will develop into fine, healthy, independent adults. As the journey that is adolescence progresses, there will inevitably be bumps along the road. The cautionary notes made in this book are designed to reduce the severity of those bumps, and to minimise the chances of those bumps having a lasting impact on either your child’s ability to live an independent life or on our long term relationship with them. When they took their first steps we celebrated. When they learned to feed themselves, use the bathroom, and speak their first words we experience a sense of joy at their new found independence and their ability to do things for themselves. In contrast, when they became older we tended to worry about where things might go wrong rather than see where things were going right. It might be worth remembering this as they travel the new journey from being your child to being an adult. Finally, remember that nobody can be a perfect parent – but being the best we can be is usually enough.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Appendix: Targeting Emotions & Feelings in Teenagers** | | |
| **Things teenagers**  **might say** | **Responses that should be avoided.**  **These responses dismiss how the teenager feels.** | **Reponses that target the emotions.** |
| They just keep nagging me with questions. It does my head in. I don’t trust my Mum, she lies all the time. | Your Mum is trying to help you. | That’s tough.  Give me some examples of why you don’t trust her. How does that make you feel about your Mum? Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| I am stuck in the middle. They say bad things about each other to me. It’s not fair. Why can’t they talk to each other? | Why don’t you just ignore it? | That must feel really unfair. It must be difficult for you. When it’s happening what are you feeling? |
| I’m afraid that I’ll start to cry in school. | Ah, you will be grand. Sure we are all like that sometimes. | I can well understand that. Would you be able to describe some of the times that you feel upset in school, what triggers your upset? |
| They don’t talk to each other. I hate the silence in the house. It’s like walking on egg shell. | Why don’t you go for a jog to distract you? | That must be really stressful and suffocating. You must feel anxious about that when you are coming home to the house? Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| My Mum has a new baby girl with her boyfriend. It’s embarrassing. | Great you have a new step-sister. | What do you mean by embarrassing? How else do you feel about your step-sister? Are there other things you feel about having a step-sister? How do you now feel about your Mum? Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| I hate my Mam’s boyfriend. He thinks he is now my Dad and can tell me what to do. | Why don’t you try and get on with him? | I’d say that messes with your head and makes you angry. How do you feel when he tells you what to do? Catch the emotions/feelings in the responses. |
| Christ, I keep having to go forward and back to my Mum’s house and Dad’s house. I hate it. They keep giving out to me because I forget my stuff. I hate the changing. | Get more organised and plan ahead. | I’d say you miss the routine and stability? What do you miss? How do you feel about what you miss? Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| Why can’t people mind their own business? I don’t ask them about their parents. | People can be very nosy and hurtful. | It can make us angry when people asks questions which have answers that can hurt us to talk about. What would it be like if you told them? Catch the feelings about why it is difficult to talk. |
| I hate my Dad. He can’t be bothered with us. He has a new girlfriend now. | Don’t say that about your Dad. | He has a new girlfriend. How has that changed things for you? How has that changed how you interact with your Dad? Catch the feelings from how things have changed, e.g. rejection. |
| Everything goes wrong for me, I can get nothing right. | Don’t be silly, it’s not true. | I’d say that doesn’t feel good. Tell me some examples. Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| I get very angry at everything. | Don’t get angry. Learn to control it. Take a deep breath. | Can you tell me about some examples? Pick a few examples and delve deeper for the emotions behind them. Keep your ear attuned for secondary anger or displaced anger. |
| You (to a parent) are just selfish and only think of yourself. | That can’t be true. I love you. Look at all I have done for you. | What makes you feel that way? Watch for rejection and loneliness. |
| You (to a parent) just love Jack (the older brother). He’s the golden boy. | How dare you, that’s not true. | I’m sorry what have I said or done to make you think that? Help me understand. |
| They but some much pressure on me to do well in school because they want me to go to college. | It is important to do well in school to have a good future. | How do you feel about school? How are you performing? How does their nagging make you feel about yourself? |
| I can’t see why my parents can’t just get on and get back together, like it used to be. | You will have to get used to them being separated. | What do you miss about the times when they were together? Catch the feelings from this. Gives clues to the current/opposite feelings. |
| I feel I am all on my own. I have no friends. | Why don’t you go and make friends. | How does that make you feel? Why do you think you have no friends? How do you feel when you are around your peers in school? Catch the view they have of themselves. |
| I am under so much pressure. I have to get all As in my exams and I have to get on the first team in school. My parents don’t help by telling me to relax about it. | Can you study more or harder to get the As. | How do you feel when you do get As? How do you feel when you don’t do as well as you want to? How would you feel if you don’t get on the top team? Keep your ear attuned to how they feel about themselves and any causes. |
| My teachers hate me. They keep giving out to me for messy. I’m only having the craic with the lads. | Why don’t you just behave in class? | Give me some examples of the messing. How do your mates react? How does their reaction make you feel? If you didn’t mess, what would you miss? |
| It’s only a few drinks and some cannabis. I can’t see what the problem is. Everyone does it. | You are too young to drink. The cannabis is dangerous. Do you not know the damage you might be doing? | Why do you enjoy drinking and smoking cannabis? What do you get out of it? How are things with you mates? How are things at home? Catch the emotions and feelings in the responses. |
| If we keep asking teenagers about how they ‘*feel*’, they may eventually respond by saying ‘*stop asking me* *how I feel, it’s annoying’*. Maybe replace ‘*how do you feel about…?’* with ‘*what do you think about…?’*. This removes the mention of feelings, but when answering about what they ‘*think*’, they usually end up talking about how they ‘*feel*’.  Sometimes when reflecting back feelings we say e.g. ‘*you are angry because what he said hurt you*’. Sometimes it is productive to say back, ‘*when we are hurt, it makes us angry*’. The use of the words ‘*we*’ and ‘*us*’ (as in humans) instead of the word ‘*you*’ can help them understand that anyone in that situation would have those feelings. This can have the effect of making it Okay to feel that way because it normalising the feelings. Sometimes the word ‘*you*’ can be heard in an accusatory manner. | | |

**Children Learn What They Live**

***If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.  
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.  
If children live with***[***fear***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/fear)***, they learn to be apprehensive.  
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.  
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel***[***shy***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/shyness)***.  
If children live with***[***jealousy***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/jealousy)***, they learn to feel envy.  
If children live with***[***shame***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/embarrassment)***, they learn to feel guilty.  
If children live with encouragement, they learn***[***confidence***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/confidence)***.  
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.  
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.  
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.  
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.  
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.  
If children live with sharing, they learn***[***generosity***](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/basics/altruism)***.  
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.  
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.  
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.  
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.  
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.***

by Dorothy Law Nolte, Ph.D.

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**NOTES**