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## Parents Are the Best Mentors for Adolescents

Donna G. Albrecht, Medical Writer



### Introduction

Your teen is a confusing bundle of conflicting attitudes--most of which seem to involve you being wrong.

You may also have read reports that he or she is probably more influenced by peers and the media than by you.

Does this mean it's time to back off and stop actively parenting your teenage son or daughter? The experts answer a resounding No!

"You must understand that what you say does have an impact on your teenager," says Anthony E. Wolf, PhD, in his book, *Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* He notes that anger, fights, and behavior problems often stem from

the physical and emotional changes teens are experiencing.

On the one hand, they are reaching out for independence. On the other hand, they still need their parents for guidance and support. So when your relationship with your teen is stressed, you must stay involved, even when (and especially when) that relationship gets rocky.

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"Adolescents with a secure base with their parents have a 'launching pad' that gives them confidence in themselves and their ability to try new relationships," says Joseph P. Allen, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. In a recent study that was published in the journal *Child Development*, Allen found that teens who were close to their parents tended to be more popular and to suffer less depression, and were much less likely to become delinquent than those whose relationships with their parents were more distant.

### What Really Influences Teens?

At Ohio State University, researchers set out to discover whether the common wisdom that teens ignored their parents and looked to their peers and school for direction was really true. Their 5-year study, published in the August 1999 issue of the journal *Criminology*, followed 1,725 youths between the ages of 11 and 17. The results showed that the influence of their school and their peers grew until it peaked at mid-adolescence but then began a slow decline. Their parents' influence, however, held steady throughout all the teen years.

According to the study's author, Sung Joon Jang, then assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State and now associate professor of sociology at Louisiana State University, "People tend to perceive parents as likely losers in the competition with their children's friends over influencing adolescent behavior. But this study shows parents still have an impact throughout adolescence."

Diana Mendley Rauner, a senior research associate at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and author of *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall*, agrees: "I think a lot of our opinions about adolescents are formed by things like *Rebel Without a Cause* and other images of adolescence as a time of self-identification, a time when a young person needs to leave the family to go find himself.

"That's a really strong image in our culture," she says, "but it's not an entirely accurate one. I think kids at this age

are desperately searching for guidance. The parent relationship is still the strongest and most important. They need it!"

A 2000 study done by the Gallup Organization clearly shows the hierarchy of influence. They found that when teens were asked what had a "great influence" on them, home won hands down. The order was

- Home 71%
- School 68%
- Friends 59%
- Religion 55%
- Music 32%
- Television 15%
- Movies 10%

## Show Them You Care

Teens report that home and parents are the greatest influence on them, but the Gallup study did not measure the quality of that relationship. Parents (and other adults who work with and care for teens) can take very simple steps to strengthen the relationship.

Communication is the key. Communication must involve really listening to your teen and attempting to understand what he or she needs from you, Rauner says. Lecturing, she adds, is counterproductive.

Rauner recommends fostering communication by taking time to be in their world. Listen to their music and watch their favorite programs and movies with them.

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Then talk about what you've shared. What is it that they liked? What did they dislike? Why? Share your reactions with your teen. This can be a non-threatening way of sharing your values and learning where your teen's values are different from yours.

"It does no harm even to offer support: *'If there ever is something that you want to talk to me about, I will listen,'*" suggests Wolf. "Many adolescents may never take their parents up on these offers. But letting your teenage children know that you are available to listen can be invaluable to them."

## How to Reconnect

Convincing teens that you care about them is a situation where what you do is more important than what you say. Use these tips to reconnect with your teen.

- Listen to them.
- Respect their opinions and property.
- Make rules and stick to them (and be willing to explain the reasons).
- Know where they are and who they're with.
- Reward good behavior.

Caring for teens is a long-term project. When parents feel tired and stressed, they must focus on long-term goals along with the short-term needs.

"So much of what we write about and talk about is preventing the next school shooting or keeping kids safe from drugs. Of course, we all want that," Rauner says, "[but] we need to keep the focus on what we want them to be. We want them to be good people."

Jang concludes, "Parents shouldn't give up providing influence and support to their adolescents. Parental attempts to provide support may not always be welcomed by teens, but even when they appear to reject their parents' support, teens seem to still be listening to what their parents say."

## Warning Signs

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The following types of behavior are often a call for help from a distressed teen:

- Social or academic problems at school.
- Run-ins with the law.
- Drug abuse.
- Sexual activity (especially if the teen is young or not using protection).
- Dropping old friends and taking up with undesirable new ones.
- Dramatic changes in eating and sleeping habits.

If your teen is showing any of these warning signs, talk with a psychologist, school counselor, or religious counselor to learn techniques that will help in your specific situation.

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