



Social Issues and Teens

During the teen years, the area of socialization—friendships, dating and going out with friends in general—becomes extremely important to teenagers and strongly reflects their growing independence. Yet, as in all other areas of teens' lives, parents continue to have influence and responsibilities. This guide provides parenting information about social issues such as friendships, dating, curfews, peer pressure and driving. *Note*—this guide provides general information only. Adapt these tips to the unique personality of your child; and talk to a doctor or other professional about specific concerns you may have.

Teens' Search for Identity

During the teen years, children begin to explore their personal identities. You'll probably see the beginnings of self-awareness around age 13 or 14. Your child may start listening to different kinds of music, following sports that previously weren't of interest, and trying a variety of fashions. Younger teens may go to extremes, for example, wearing strange clothes or dyeing their hair wild colors. In doing these things, teens are trying on different identities—or ways of presenting themselves to the world—to discover which ones feel comfortable. While it can be upsetting to watch your child experiment with different identities, it is seldom anything to worry about. Not only do the extreme displays usually fade in time, but for the vast majority of teens, trying on a variety of images is nothing more than an early demonstration of a healthy search for identity.

Teen Friendships

There are pronounced changes in what friendships mean to children as they go through the teen years. During the early teenage years, children are typically most interested in belonging to the crowd. They want to dress the way the others do, use the same expressions, wear their hair in the same style and generally be alike. This is part of the developmental pattern teenagers follow in order to break away from emotional dependence on their family. Children may feel more secure taking that big emotional leap if they have a safety net of friends around.

Once children hit the mid-teen years, however, some of the pressure to fit in with the crowd lessens. In fact, some children take pride in their developing individuality. For instance, older teens continue to care about things such as being fashionable, but in a slightly different way—they may be more aware of what fashions look good on them rather than wearing exactly what the crowd is wearing. Teens start to have a more acute sense of what pleases them individually—be it movies, music or sports—than going along with something simply because others like it. Being well-liked also remains important, but teens generally temper their need to be liked if the price is going along with the crowd at all costs.

Many teens also like to befriend one or two kids who are different than they are. Having a friend who is wilder, or who dresses outrageously, might reflect nothing more than the opportunity to see what it would be like to be that way. These friendships can be a safe route to discovering more about other identities and characteristics. For the same reason, teens may also make friends with others who have abilities and achievements that seem out of reach; it gives them a chance to observe closely what it's like to be an honor roll student or an athletic star, for example.

Teens base much of their self-acceptance on who their friends are and how they are accepted, and it can be extremely painful to watch when your child's social life isn't going well. You'll need to be supportive and especially loving when times are rough.

Although many teens begin to value individuality, there is still a good deal of pressure to fit into a group. While multiple high school cliques allow just about every child to find a niche, it is still painful when teens want to be accepted by a group they are not part of. Should this happen to your child, don't dismiss his or her concerns. Your sympathy is what your child needs most at this time. In addition, these tips may also help your teen:

- **Ask your teen why he or she wants to be part of a particular group.** It may be for reasons that, on reflection, he or she will realize aren't as important as once thought. Explain that friendships should be based on good values, shared interests and commitments.
- **Help your teen think about what kind of friends he or she would most enjoy.** Bring up areas your child clearly likes and does well in, and ask about others in the school who share similar interests and talents. Emphasize that having a few good friends is often better than having many superficial relationships.
- **Help your teen develop new interests.** Learning a new skill or playing a new sport helps open doors for teens, just as they do for adults. Encourage your child to join sports teams or group activities that will interest your child and invite new friendships as well.
- **Praise your teen's positive qualities frequently.** Your sincere words of approval can ease hurt feelings that your teen may have about peer relationships.

Bullying

Unfortunately, some teens may be the victims of bullying. Bullying includes a wide variety of behaviors, such as direct attacks (e.g., hitting, threatening or intimidating, maliciously teasing and taunting, name-calling, making sexual remarks, and stealing or damaging belongings) or more subtle, indirect attacks (such as spreading rumors or encouraging others to reject or exclude someone). In the United States, bullying among children and teenagers has often been dismissed as a normal part of growing up. In recent years, however, students and adults around the country have begun to make a commitment to stop bullying in their schools and communities.

How Do You Know if Your Teen is Being Bullied?

The following signs may indicate that your child is being bullied:

- Your child comes home with torn, damaged, or missing pieces of clothing, books or other belongings;
- Your child has unexplained bruises, cuts or scratches;
- Your child seems afraid of going to school, walking to and from school, riding the school bus or taking part in organized activities with peers;
- Your child appears sad, moody, teary or depressed when he or she comes home;
- Your child frequently appears anxious and/or suffers from low self-esteem.

If you are concerned your child is being bullied, consider the following tips:

- **Focus on your child.** Be supportive and gather information about the bullying. Tell your child you are concerned about him or her and ask questions.
- **Contact your child's teacher and/or principal.** Ask the teacher to talk to other adults who interact with your child at school to see if they have observed students bullying your child.

- **Take quick action.** There is nothing worse than doing nothing, and bullying can have serious effects.

Source: Stop Bullying Now, HRSA.

Tips For Teenagers Who Are Being Bullied

Provide your teen with the following tips about bullying and discuss them together:

1. **Talk to your parents or an adult you can trust, such as a teacher, school counselor, or principal.** Many teens who are targets of bullies do not talk to adults because they feel embarrassed, ashamed, or fearful, and they believe they should be able to handle the problem on their own. Others believe that involving adults will only make the situation worse. While in some cases it is possible to end bullying without adult intervention, in other more extreme cases, it is necessary to involve school officials and even law enforcement. Talk to a trusted adult who can help you develop a plan to end the bullying and provide you with the support you need. If the first adult you approach is not receptive, find another adult who will support and help you.
2. **Stay calm.** Do not retaliate against a bully or let the bully see how much he or she has upset you. If bullies know they are getting to you, they are likely to torment you more. If at all possible, stay calm and respond evenly and firmly or else say nothing and walk away. Sometimes you can make a joke, laugh at yourself, and use humor to defuse a situation.
3. **Act confident.** Hold your head up, stand up straight, make eye contact, and walk confidently. A bully will be less likely to single you out if you project self-confidence.
4. **Try to make friends with other students.** A bully is more likely to leave you alone if you are with your friends. This is especially true if you and your friends stick up for each other.
5. **Avoid situations where bullying can happen.** If at all possible, avoid being alone with bullies. If bullying occurs on the way to or from school, you may want to take a different route, leave at a different time, or find others to walk to and from school with. If bullying occurs at school, avoid areas that are isolated or unsupervised by adults, and stick with friends as much as possible.
6. **Rebuild your self-confidence.** Bullying can affect your self-confidence. Finding activities you enjoy and are good at can help to restore your self-esteem. Take time to explore new interests and develop new talents and skills. Bullying can also leave you feeling rejected, isolated, and alone. It is important to try to make new friendships with people who share your interests. Consider participating in extra-curricular activities or joining a group outside of school, such as an after-school program, church youth group, or sports team.
7. **Do not resort to violence or carry a gun or weapon.** Carrying a gun will not make you safer. Guns often escalate conflicts and increase the chances you will be seriously harmed. You also run the risk that the gun may be turned on you or an innocent person. And you may do something in a moment of fear or anger you will regret for the rest of your life. Finally, it is illegal for a teen to carry a handgun; it can lead to criminal charges and arrest.

If Someone Else is Being Bullied ...

1. **Refuse to join in if you see someone being bullied.** It can be hard to resist if a bully tries to get you to taunt or torment someone, and you may fear the bully will turn on you if you do not participate, but try to stand firm.
2. **Attempt to defuse bullying situations when you see them starting up.** For example, try to draw attention away from the targeted person, or take the bully aside and ask him/her to “cool it.” Do not place yourself at risk, however.
3. **If you can do so without risk to your own safety, get a teacher, parent, or other responsible adult to come help immediately.**
4. **Speak up and/or offer support to bullied teens when you witness bullying.** For example, help them up if they have been tripped or knocked down. If you feel you cannot do this at the time, privately support those being hurt with words of kindness or condolence later.
5. **Encourage the bullied teen to talk with parents or a trusted adult.** Offer to go with the person if it would help. Tell an adult yourself if the teen is unwilling to report the bullying. If necessary for your safety, do this anonymously.

Source: National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.

Curfews for Teens

A curfew is a predetermined time at which your child is required to be home. A curfew establishes a boundary, giving your child a sense of structure—something teens are not often able to provide on their own. It also allows you to recognize and respond to your

child’s age and growing maturity. By increasing the length of time he or she is allowed to be out as your teen gets older and more responsible, you are acknowledging that he or she is indeed growing up. Finally, a curfew can be the “out” a teenager needs to remove him or herself from uncomfortable situations—“Sorry, I have to be home now,” can provide a needed escape. The exact hour of the curfew should depend on a number of factors including whether it’s a school night or the weekend, a special event, or your child’s maturity level.

When you discuss curfews with your child, talk about what will happen if he or she is late or misses a curfew. Knowing that being late means no evenings out for two weeks, for example, can be a powerful motivator for a teen to stay within the limits. Of course, if your child breaks the curfew excessively, you may need to increase the punishment accordingly. As your child gets older, it is reasonable for him or her to have the privilege of later hours as long as the child has proven to be responsible and trustworthy. A good time to review the curfew is at the beginning of each school year.

Once you have established a curfew, you should also make sure you know where your child is, and who he or she is with. Consider setting rules ahead of time in which your child agrees to report:

- Who he or she is going out with
- Where he or she is going
- What time he or she will check-in
- Any change in plans

Additionally, make it clear what activities are off-limits; for example, clubs you don’t approve of or parties without adults present, and the consequences for breaking the rules.

Teen Dating

Younger teenagers tend to stick with their own gender before gradually spending their time in mixed groups—at parties, going to the movies or simply being together. Although girls generally start to date around age 14 or 15, and boys around age 15 or 16, typical “dating” still takes place largely as a group function. Eventually, boys and girls in their later mid-teens prefer one-on-one time with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Whenever dating starts, parents should remember that, for most teenagers, dating has more to do with their search for self-identity and developing social skills than it does with finding a meaningful relationship. Indeed, few teenage relationships, no matter how intense in high school, become lasting ones.

Don't be surprised if your child attempts to hide any kind of romantic interest from you at first. Many teens feel awkward about these new feelings, and they want to keep this part of their life—no matter how innocent it may be—private from their parents. However, you do have a right to know where your child is going and with who at all times, especially on a date. Once your teen starts to see someone on a regular basis, get to know this person just as you would any of your child's other friends. Arrange for your teen to bring his or her girlfriend or boyfriend to the house on a casual basis so you may be introduced.

For the most part, dating is an exciting time, and a wonderful opportunity for teens to understand themselves better, become more socially skilled, and learn to become comfortable with members of the opposite sex. Admittedly, this can be an anxious time for all concerned, but if you focus on the healthy, fun aspects of dating, you can help your child do the same. Consider the following tips on teen dating.

- **Don't push your child into dating.** Teens mature at different rates, and it is best to allow them to take on this important social development when they feel ready, even if it seems later than you think is best. However, your guidance may be required if your teen wishes to date before you feel he or she is emotionally ready. If your teen expresses an interest in dating too soon, talk with your teen about why you feel he or she should wait. Typically, less mature, easily impressionable and less responsible teens should hold off on dating. Stress that your decision will not be permanent—and agree to review the decision with your teen at regular intervals. Be sure to also listen to your teen's views on why he or she wishes to date.
- **Be sensitive to your child's awkwardness.** This area of social development is often one of the most trying for teens, and your supportive attitude will be soothing to your child. Be careful not to make any remarks your child might interpret as poking fun at him or her; your child may already be feeling self-conscious and teasing may just make him or her feel more unsure.
- **Remind your child not to do anything that makes him or her uncomfortable.** Teens must know to speak up and say no to an activity, a destination or anything else that makes them feel uncomfortable. This is good preparation for protecting themselves from dangerous situations and unwanted sexual encounters.
- **Tell your child about your early dating experiences.** Knowing that you too went through some exciting and/or awkward times can be a source of relief to a child just starting out in the dating world.

- **When a break-up occurs, be sympathetic, but don't crowd your child with advice.** Respect your teen's feelings, and encourage him or her to talk about them. Try not to give advice that makes light of the situation. Keep in mind that your child is hurting.
- **If you object to the person your teen is dating, gently voice your concerns.** Before you share your feelings with your teen, make sure they are valid concerns. For example, if you simply don't like the boyfriend's or girlfriend's personality, try to keep your feelings to yourself. If, on the other hand, you feel strongly that your teen's boyfriend or girlfriend is a bad influence on your teen, you may want to gently voice your concerns. Your teen may get angry or upset but encourage your teen to share his or her feelings with you. Perhaps he or she will convince you otherwise. If you suspect your child may be in an abusive relationship, whether emotionally or physically, get your child out of the situation as soon as possible. If the relationship persists, seek professional help from your child's doctor or a school counselor or therapist.

Peer Pressure and Teens

Social issues often involve peer pressure. While some peer pressure can be healthy, too much can be a negative force in the lives of children and adolescents, often resulting in experimentation with tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs. Though parents often believe that their children do not value their opinions; in reality, studies suggest that parents have tremendous influence over their children, especially teenagers. Here's what you can do:

- **Teach your child how to refuse offers for cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.** Making your child comfortable with what he or she can say goes a long way. For instance, a shy child or adolescent

might be more comfortable saying, "No thanks," or "I have to go," while one who is more outgoing might prefer to say something like, "Forget it!" or "No Way!" No matter what approach your child chooses, it is important to role-play peer-pressure situations with him or her.

- **Talk to your child about how to avoid undesirable situations or people who break the rules.** A child or adolescent who is not in situations where he or she feels pressure to do negative actions is far less likely to do them. Likewise, a child who chooses friends who do not smoke, drink, use drugs, steal, and lie to their parents is far less likely to do these things as well.
- **Remind your child that there is strength in numbers.** When a young person can anticipate stressful peer pressure situations, it might be helpful if he or she brings friends for support.
- **Let your teen know that it is okay to seek an adult's advice.** While it would be ideal if a child sought the advice of his or her parents, other trusted adults can usually help him or her avoid most difficult situations, such as offers to smoke, drink, or use drugs.
- **Nurture strong self-esteem.** Strong self-esteem helps your child make decisions and follow them, even if his or her friends do not think some choices are "cool." Some ways you can do this include being generous with praise, teaching your child how to perceive him or herself in positive ways, and avoiding criticism of your child that takes the form of ridicule or shame.

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center.

Helpful Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016
202-966-7300
www.aacap.org

This organization helps parents and families understand developmental, behavioral, emotional and mental disorders affecting children and adolescents. The web site offers fact sheets for parents and caregivers and information on child and adolescent psychiatry.

Family Education Network

www.familyeducation.com

This web site offers message boards, as well as tips and articles on a variety of family subjects, including advice from parenting, health and medical experts on school violence, education values, discipline, date rape, sex education and more. It also provides links to related web sites.

Keepkidshealthy.com

This web site offers parenting advice, online forums, info product recalls and pediatric news for parents of infants to teens.

The National Parenting Center

www.tnpc.com

This web site offers online articles written by parenting authorities, live chat and a list of book reviews and related web sites. Topics addressed include body image, communication, drug use, sex, suicide, education and family relationships. Members receive a monthly newsletter.

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (NYVPRC)

www.safeyouth.org

Although the focus of the NYVPRC has shifted from serving as an information portal for the public to a resource for community professionals involved in youth violence prevention the site still maintains an archive of helpful articles and resources about violence and how to prevent it.

Stop Bullying Now

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

This web site provides tips, games and information for parents, children and educators on how to prevent bullying in our society.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center

800-789-2647

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

This organization provides information about mental health via a toll-free telephone number and web site, including information on how to prevent bullying.

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