

RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER



SO, YOU'RE HAVING A TEENAGER.

Believe it or not, the teen years are good years. *(Read this phrase again for positive reinforcement.)* Contrary to the popular image of teens throwing wild parties and doing battle with parents, most parents and teens navigate “teenhood” quite well, with relatively few problems.

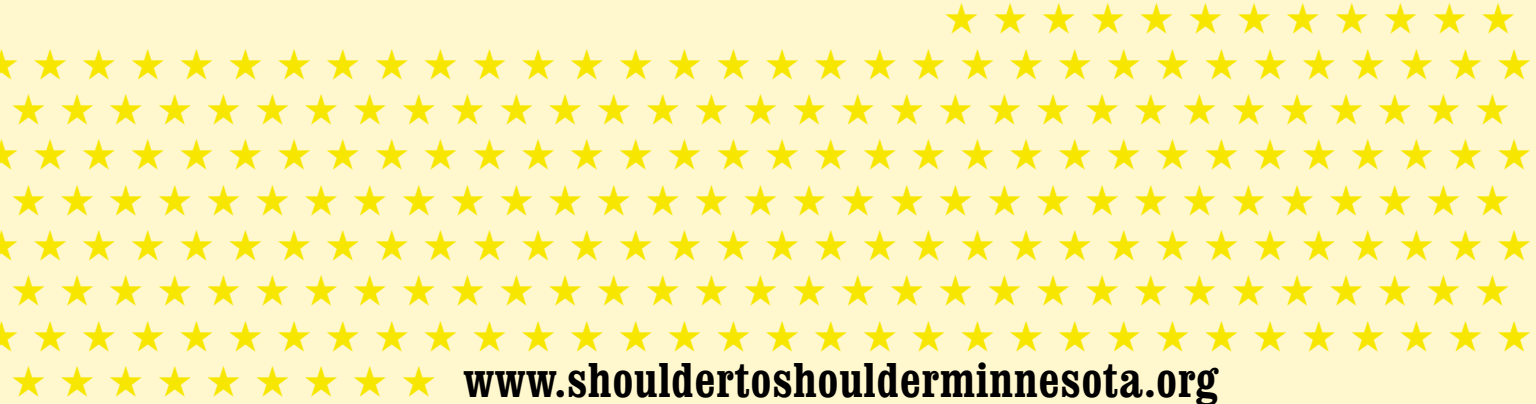
The key? The way in which you raise kids can make a difference. This is true whether you're a two-parent, single-parent or other family type. Folks who study parenting say teens do better when parents:

- Are warm and supportive.
- Provide clear expectations for behavior.
- Model the respect they expect from their teen.

To get there, communication is essential. We should take time to connect, to listen and keep the bond strong with our teens. It can be as simple as eating together regularly. Teens want us in their lives – and we need to be there.

There is no one way to parent teens – each teen is unique. In this booklet, you'll find ideas to try *(from real parents who survived the teenage years!)* and read about strategies that may work well for you. The bottom line? You know your teen best. The information here can affirm your wisdom, as well as provide you with support as you guide your teen into young adulthood.

Welcome to the ride (and buckle up).



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Partners in the **Positive Parenting for Adolescent Health** Consortium include:
Bloomington Health Division with the cities of Edina and Richfield, Dakota County Public Health, Hennepin County Community Health Department, Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support, Saint Paul–Ramsey County Department of Public Health, Scott County Public Health, and University of Minnesota Extension Service.

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RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

10 TIPS TO STAY AHEAD OF THE GAME

BE A PARENT, NOT A PAL.

Let's face it: the teen years can be bumpy. As parents, we need to be our teen's anchor, not their best friend. Set clear boundaries, yet approach your teen with love and respect. So figure out those limits that work best for your family, and then enforce them. All the time. While it may feel like we're "losing our kid" during the teen years, we're really just a few years away from forming a true friendship as our teen enters adulthood.

IGNORE THE ATTITUDE. SAVE YOUR ENERGY FOR THE BIG STUFF.

Choose your battles. Is it really worth arguing about blue hair? If your teen's challenging or general attitude gets under your skin, decide whether it's a battle you want to tackle. Of course you want to stand your ground on issues that are important, but not all issues are monumental. Be selective.

TALK THE TOUGH TALKS.

Sex. Cigarettes. Drugs. Alcohol. Guns. Gangs. Definitely uncomfortable topics of conversation with your teen. But teens need to hear your perspective on these topics, understand why you feel the way you do, and know you are someone they can come to with questions.

COMPLIMENT YOUR TEENS.

Make it a habit to say at least three positive things to your teen every day (*even if it's just, "hey, thanks for feeding the dog."*) It's easy to notice the negative, but no one has yet to complain about receiving a compliment – even a teen.

GET TO KNOW TEEN FRIENDS AND THEIR PARENTS.

Friends are a big deal. And you can learn a lot about your teen through their friends, but connecting with the parents of these friends is your lifeline. By checking in with the parents, you'll have your finger on the pulse of your teen's activity – inside and outside the home. Talking with other parents also lets you know that you're not the only one who (*gasp!*) sets rules for your teen.

DON'T BE A MAID.

It's important for teens to have meaningful roles and responsibilities in the family. Start with household chores – mowing the lawn, making a meal or doing the laundry – and work your way up. These tasks prepare teens for independent living as young adults, and give them a sense of responsibility and accomplishment (*as long as they don't mix the white clothes with the colors, of course*).

MAKE RESPECT A TWO-WAY STREET.

If you expect respectful behavior from your teen, demonstrate it daily with your teen. And this may be difficult as teens roll their eyes at you in exasperation or give you the cold shoulder. But grit your teeth and get through it. Respect will be the foundation for building good relationships and getting teens to accept their family's values as their own.

LISTEN, DON'T LECTURE.

When kids are ready to talk, be ready to listen. While this undoubtedly happens when you are running late or are really tired from a busy day at work, when you stop and listen to your teen, it's amazing what you'll find out. But here's the kicker: resist the urge to offer too much advice or tell them what to do. Help them figure it out for themselves by asking questions that will guide their decisions.

AGREE TO DISAGREE.

It may seem like you disagree about everything with your teen. Don't worry; it's normal. Teens need to question "the norm" to figure out what makes sense to them and learn how to think for themselves. And while a little latitude is a good thing, you still have the final word when it comes to how your teen should behave.

HAVE FUN TOGETHER.

While the teenage years are certainly challenging, there can be plenty of fun times and good memories. The trick? Know what "fun" means to your teen. And know that it won't always be your idea of "fun." At this stage, you may be the last person your teen wants to be seen with in public, but offer to drive your teen and his/her friends to a movie or sport activity (*listen to the conversation during the drive – it will be a wealth of information on your teen*). Discovering creative ways to spend time with your teen is what's important – and makes one-on-one time enjoyable.





RAISING TEENS TOGETHER IT'S NORMAL...

Wondering what happened to the sweet kids we were raising? They've turned into teenagers. While we know there are going to be good and bad times, it's helpful to know that some of this "crazy" behavior is just part of being a teen. It's normal for a teen to:

ARGUE FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUING.

Believe it or not, teens can find arguing exciting. As they grow, they are developing new skills in thinking and logic. This means that arguments with you aren't necessarily about winning, but rather experiencing the "art" of an argument. *Fun, isn't it?*

BE SELF-CENTERED.

It's all about them. You know the whole world isn't focused on their zit, but they truly believe it is. All we can do is be patient and help them through the "disasters" as best we can.

BE DRAMATIC.

Why is everything such a big deal to teens? Jenny has a fight with her boyfriend and it's the end of the world. While it's good for teens to – *ahem* – care deeply about so many things, the drama will decline as they grow up.

JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS.

As teens develop the capacity to think logically, they sometimes make leaps in judgment and come to bizarre conclusions. Resist the urge to correct. Listen to what they are saying, and let them think out loud. When asked, offer your perspective.

FIND FAULT.

Can we ever do anything right in the eyes of teens? We can't take it personally (*even though we could do no wrong when they were younger*), and this isn't a sign of failure. It's just a normal part of the teen years. And yes, we really do a lot of things right.

Adapted from: Developing Adolescents, American Psychological Association, Washington DC, 2002.



TALKING WITH TEENS

When talking with teens, keep the following in mind:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE APPROACH.

- Don't blast teens with "20 questions" when they first walk in the door. Catch them when they are genuinely ready to talk. However, you may have to create that moment by going out for ice cream, taking a bike ride or working on a project together.
- If you're upset with your teen, you can't solve a problem effectively. Give yourself some time to cool down before addressing the issue.
- Keep the situation in perspective. It's normal for teens to push the boundaries. Let them experience how to question what they see, and to develop skills in reasoning with you. That way, they will learn to think for themselves to deal with peer pressure and other teen issues.

ARE YOU READY TO TALK?

- Avoid telling teens "this is how it's going to be." Be respectful by asking for their perspective of the situation – and really listen to them. Try to find a solution together.
- Pose your questions as open-ended questions instead of yes-no questions.
- Don't accept "I don't know" as a response. Instead try, "Tell me how you see it."
- Tell a joke or humorous story to relieve a tense situation, but don't make fun of teens. Their self-esteem can be fragile.

- Don't solve problems for them. Our teens will not be living with us forever. To let them grow, we should look for opportunities for them to make their own decisions.
- Get right to the point and be clear about your concerns. Explain why you feel the way you do, and then describe what you want or need in the future. Be ready to listen to what your teen needs, too.
- If you already know the answer, don't ask the question. For example, if you clearly disapprove of your teen's outfit, don't ask, "What are you wearing?!" Instead, you might try, "I'm concerned about that outfit. It's revealing and I don't want others to get the wrong idea about you. Please choose something else."
- Teens know they can wear down most adults with sheer repetition and persistence. When a discussion has reached the "wheel spinning" point, end it. To continue is to ask for trouble, as frustration may cause things to be said that we'll regret.
- Listen up. If teens see us as adults that will not listen to them, they will stop talking to us. Force yourself to listen. If necessary, count to 100 before responding and avoid giving unwanted advice or lecturing.
- Tell them often how much you love them.

Source: "Positive Parenting of Teens" University of Minnesota Extension Service & University of Wisconsin – Extension, 1999.

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RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

AVOID THE “FREAK OUT” ROUTE

Most parents and teens do battle, and these “power struggles” test everyone’s patience. You casually ask your daughter if she is going to wear that shirt, and she retorts, “Don’t freak out mom!” What’s a parent to do? While these challenges are a normal part of every day life with teens, there are steps to take to avoid (or at least reduce) the “freak out” route.

STAY COOL.

If we overreact or lose our cool, we diminish our control with teens and escalate the conflict. Parents show they are in charge by staying calm and dealing with an issue even-handedly. (Yes, it’s easier said than done.)

STICK TO THE GROUND RULES.

Decide on a few non-negotiable rules. These can be as simple as “no television until homework is finished,” or “put dirty clothes in the hamper.” When a teen pushes back, don’t argue over details or negotiate. Simply say, “Sorry, that is against the family rules.” Teens will try and outwit us or start an argument. Don’t over-explain, and don’t renegotiate. Just remind them of the rule.

IGNORE THE “SMALL STUFF.”

Many conflicts are not worth your time and energy. Does it really matter if their bedroom is clean for a sleepover? Would it be the end of the world if they play one more CD? Probably not. The key to successful parenting is to know which battles are worth tackling. Concentrate only on those issues that genuinely need your attention to protect your teen’s well-being.

KNOW WHEN TO LET IT GO.

Conflict carries different meanings and feelings for parents and teens. When teens blow up about something we feel is “insignificant,” teens tend to forget about the issue soon afterwards. For us, the tension can linger and make us more upset. Sometimes, we just have to let it go. Learn to ignore the “attitude,” the flip remark or the threat of disobedience from your teen.

WHY ALL THE FREAKING OUT?

“Because I’m the parent” doesn’t work anymore. Teens know they can reach conclusions on their own, think independently and question and debate (*this may also mean arguing*). Their world has expanded, and they can go to other adults and friends for advice and answers. Like it or not, it’s natural for a teen to question adult authority, and it’s ok if they don’t agree with us all the time.

IT’S NOT “COOL” TO BE WITH PARENTS.

Teens are developing their sense of identity – and it can be an anxious time for them. The bad news? Teens will go to great lengths to distance themselves from us so they can establish their identity and independence. The good news? Questioning the rules and re-examining beliefs we taught them is the norm. And while teens may disagree with adults sometimes for no other reason than to be different from us, they may also have a logical reason for coming to their own conclusion. It’s a challenge, but we must try to better understand how teens weigh decisions.

Adapted from “Positive Parenting of Teens” University of Minnesota Extension Service & University of Wisconsin – Extension, 1999.



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RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

“TOUGH TALKS” WITH TEENS

It’s not easy talking about sex, drugs, gangs and violence with our teens. But it’s a “must do.” Here are a few pointers and tips for talking with teens about the very real issues they face.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING.

Know that teens will catch us off guard when they decide to ask questions about sex or other “tough” topics. Resist the urge to flee. Try saying, “I’m glad you came to me with that question.” This gives us time to think of a response, and will let teens know they can come to parents for advice. It’s important to answer the question right away, rather than put off a teen by saying something like – “you’re too young to know that!” Chances are, the subject has already come up at school and they’re already getting “advice” from their friends. When teens ask questions, look at it as an opportunity to help them learn by sharing our thoughts.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

As parents, anticipation is our best friend. Anticipate what teens’ questions may be about sex, drugs or alcohol, then think about your responses ahead of time. What to say? It’s different for each family, but become familiar with typical questions and behaviors that occur during the teen years. Do a little digging around popular teen Web sites to find out what’s hot in a teen’s world.

IS IT HOT IN HERE?

If you’re feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable about a question your teen asks, say so. Acknowledging your own discomfort allows your kids to acknowledge theirs – and may make everyone feel a little less awkward all around. It’s also ok for parents to set limits. For example, you do not have to give specific answers about your own teen behaviors.

STICK TO THE BASICS.

Teens know hundreds of names for various body parts that would make us blush. We shouldn’t try to be cool by using these “hip” terms when talking to teens about tough topics. It won’t work. Stick with specific and correct terminology that everyone understands.

INITIATE THE CONVERSATION.

When our kids were young, we didn’t wait until they asked if they should look both ways before crossing a busy street. We taught them. Now it’s our job to teach teens how to grow into adulthood by educating them about possible risks – sex, drugs, racial profiling and more. Decide what is important for your teens to know, and then teach them early and often. Use everyday, naturally occurring events to initiate conversations with teens about tough topics. For example, books, news articles and TV shows can be good discussion starters.

WATCH FOR HIDDEN MEANING.

Be aware of the “question behind the question.” For example, a question such as “Does this look ok?” may often be a teen’s first attempt at trying to solve a specific problem such as feeling “normal.” Keep your radar up and trust your instincts – if you sense your teen is dealing with a larger issue, you’re probably right. Learn about organizations that can help at www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR VALUES.

This doesn’t mean “be judgmental.” Teens (*although they will protest*) want to and should know their family’s values around sexual issues, alcohol use, dating, etc. They also should know that their opinions and feelings are respected.

RESEARCH THE SOURCES.

Know what is taught about teen issues in your schools, churches, temples and youth groups – and use this information as a way to talk with teens about your family’s values. Are topics on sexuality, drug and alcohol use covered? Are they talking about depression, racial profiling or gang violence in these programs? If not, you should be filling in the holes as you see fit.

ACT NOW.

Better “too much, too soon” than “too little, too late.” Talking to teens about tough issues in an open, honest and loving manner shouldn’t cause fear, nor does it lead to experimentation among teens. Teens are hearing about sex, drugs and violence everywhere else. They deserve to hear it from us.

Adapted from “Kids Need to Know,” Family Sexual Education, Eugene, OR, and “Now what Do I DO?” by Robert Selverstone, Ph.D.



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WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS.

The teen years can be tough for both parent and child. Teens face numerous pressures: be popular, do well in school, get along with the family and make important life decisions. On top of this, teens are experiencing physical, sexual, social and emotional changes. (*This explains all the “freaking out...”*) Many of these pressures are unavoidable for teens, and worrying about them, as parents, is natural.

Most kids get through the teen years with success. Other teens may face obstacles that weaken their physical and emotional well being, discourage their motivation and ability to succeed in school, and damage personal relationships. With all this going on, teens can engage in risky behaviors – harming their physical and mental health and chances for future success.

SOME WARNING SIGNS ARE SUBTLE, WHILE OTHERS ARE VERY CLEAR.

If a teen is in trouble, there are warning signs to watch for that signal help is needed. You might notice a change in your teen’s behavior. You may learn that your teen has experimented with a risky behavior for the first time. It may simply be that you “sense” that something isn’t quite right. Take these signs seriously.

TALK TO YOUR TEEN ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS.

Pay attention to what your teen is doing and how they are feeling. Talk to them about it – and not just when you notice something different. Talk to them on a regular basis. By doing so, you help your teen avoid more difficult problems down the road. For support, talk to parents whose advice you trust.

LEARN ABOUT ISSUES.

Take the time to read about issues by visiting www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org, or other sources of factual information related to teens and risky behaviors. Find information at your library, school counselor’s office, medical clinic or faith-based organization.

GET HELP FROM PROFESSIONALS WHEN YOU NEED IT.

Professionals can help you get the right support you need, and determine whether your teen is in crisis. Discuss your concerns with your teen’s teacher, school counselor, doctor or other people you trust. They can refer you to more information or provide professional care to keep your teen safe.



STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING TEENS SAFE

Monitoring teens is an art form. Too much and teens will rebel or not learn the skills they need to function on their own. And too little monitoring can result in behaviors that spell trouble. What to do? Here are some strategies to consider for keeping track of teens.

MONITORING TEENS.

- Know where our teens are – especially on evening and weekends.
- Let teens know that using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs is illegal and unacceptable, and that it would upset you – very much.
- Monitor television programs teens watch.
- Set rules about the music teens listen to.
- Know how teens are doing in school. Don’t blow off parent-teacher meetings.
- Monitor Internet use. This is a big one. Keep computers in “public” rooms of the house.
- Try to eat together on a regular basis (without the TV, please).
- Curfews are good. Enforce them. And know the curfew laws in your community.
- Check in when teens come home from school.
- Have family routines.

RESPECT OUR TEENS BY:

- Explaining why we need to know about their activities.
- Acknowledging their need for independence.
- Recognizing as teens mature, our expectations should change accordingly.
- Nurturing their self-sufficiency. Build trust by giving more freedom gradually.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS...

Sometimes the best plans don’t work and teens find themselves in over their heads. Have a family code word like “blue fish.” When a teen calls to say “there are a lot of blue fish here,” it means something is wrong. Go get them, no questions asked.

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KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

- **Defiance.** Not just occasionally – this is normal. We’re talking about continued disregard for your authority and rules.
- **Suspected substance use or abuse.**
- **Aggression** – fighting with and hurting others.
- **Extreme withdrawal** – teens spending an inordinate amount of time in their room.
- **Loss of interest** in activities your teen normally likes to do.
- **Change in appearance** – neat kids become unkempt, rapid weight loss or gain, etc.
- **Continued talk about death, depression and suicide.**





RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

RAISING TEENS IN A NEW CULTURE

Raising teens poses enough challenges in itself – parenting a teen in a new culture adds another level of complexity. Chances are, your teen years were very different than your child’s will be living in America. Here’s a few things to keep in mind as you guide your teen into young adulthood:

YOUR TEEN MAY TRY TO FIT THE “AMERICAN” NORM.

We may not like it, but this is normal. Sometimes it means they will dress in strange ways or “reject” their culture. Peer pressure is a big deal to kids at this age, and they’re just trying to fit in with the rest of their friends and schoolmates at this time.

PASS ON YOUR CULTURE AND LANGUAGE.

Your teen should know your family’s traditions, beliefs, religion and language, as well as the story of your journey to America. Right now, teens may not be interested or even “rebuff” their culture. As they grow up, they will learn to appreciate their language, food and customs – and take pride in these traditions.

LISTEN TO YOUR TEEN.

It’s hard to grow up in two cultures. Teens need support to help understand their roots, while you may need their help to understand what it’s like to grow up in America. Talking and listening to each other will help you both succeed.

KNOW THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.

There are many “standards” that may be different from your culture. For example, friendships outside the family may be more common than they were in your childhood. Or, you may be concerned that your children aren’t obedient or respectful. Your teens are growing up in two cultures. To help your teen succeed in America, decide what expectations you need to keep and what you can change.

TALK WITH OTHER PARENTS. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

As private as parenting is, we all need ideas – especially when we are raising our teens in a new culture. Get together with other parents to share advice and stories, and visit www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org for culturally-specific parenting resources.

Source: Helping Youth Succeed: Bi-Cultural Parenting for Southeast Asian Families, University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1999.



RAISING TEENS TOGETHER

PARENT-TO-PARENT (A.K.A. WHO IS JOHNNY HANGING OUT WITH...)

Friends are so important to our teens. As the parents, it’s our job to get to know each other. That way, we can agree on expectations about what our teens do and how they behave. Plus, it’s nice to know there is strength in numbers – we’re not the only ones raising teens.

GET TO KNOW PARENTS

- Make a point to invite parents in for coffee and a chance to chat when they bring their teen to visit our homes. If you’re the driver, stick your head in the door and introduce yourself to the parents of your teens’ friends.
- Know the address and phone numbers of your teens’ friends. Keep this information in a handy place to make quick phone calls to check teens’ plans.

GET TO KNOW TEENS’ FRIENDS

- Introduce yourself to your teen’s friends – let them know your name and learn theirs as well.
- Take interest in them. We’re not going to get juicy information, but know the basics: Where do you go to school? Do you have brothers and sisters? Do you play sports? What do you enjoy doing outside of school?
- Help teens’ friends know the rules in your house. Whether it’s leaving shoes at the door or clearing the dishes from the table after you eat, find a way to clearly and politely communicate your expectations.
- Concerned about a particular friend? Sometimes teens like to “try out” new friends who are very different from them. If you’re concerned there isn’t enough supervision or that the home of a friend is unsafe, invite the friend to your home.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN YOUR TEEN GOES TO ANOTHER FAMILY’S HOME:

- Will there be an adult at home? Will the adult be nearby the teens?
- What does the parent know about their teens’ plans?
- Will they be going anywhere? If so, how will they get there? (*Do you want an adult to drive or are you ok with the 16-year-old sister driving?*)
- What time should I pick up my teen?
- How many teens are coming over? (*Is this a raging party or just a few friends?*)
- Will they be having a meal with you?
- What are your rules about media ratings and what kids are allowed to watch?
- Do you have alcohol in the house? What are your rules about use?
- Does anyone smoke in the house? What are your rules about smoking?
- Do you have guns in the home? Are they locked away with trigger locks?

