



Solving Problems Together:

*Helping Our
Teenage Children
Succeed*

The White House Council on Youth Violence was established by President Clinton in October, 1999, to coordinate the federal government's efforts in the research and prevention of youth violence. The Council is chaired by Bruce Reed, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, and the Council members are the Attorney General, and the Secretaries of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Treasury.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, we have much to celebrate about our nation's young people. They are far healthier, more prosperous, and look forward to more promising lives than ever before in our history. Teens of all ethnicities are completing high school and enrolling in college at record rates, and more teenagers than ever before are volunteering to serve through community service. In addition, many harmful behaviors are on the decline, including youth violence, homicide, suicide, teen pregnancy, and, in the last couple of years, drug use. Nonetheless, the rates of youth violence, smoking, alcohol and other drug use, and unintended pregnancy are still far too high in our country. Despite a marked decline in teen homicide over the past several years, far too many communities are scarred by violence.

We know that the best approach to the problem of youth violence is a comprehensive one requiring the collaborative efforts of students and parents, teachers, health care providers, police officers, judges, counselors, and religious leaders. That is why my Administration created the Safe Schools Healthy Students Initiative, to support effective, collaborative responses to violence, bringing together school nurses, counselors, teachers and police, to make a difference in the lives of our children and our communities.

At the same time, we know that young people continue to need support and guidance from their parents, as they grow into adulthood. Recent studies tell us that teens view their parents as the best source of information and guidance on serious life issues, and teenagers rate not having enough time with their parents as their top concern. That is why I directed my White House Council on Youth Violence to develop tools for parents. This guide helps parents talk to their teenagers. It helps parents discuss difficult issues such as violence, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and sex, and helps parents identify the warning signs of harmful behaviors. In some instances, parents may need professional guidance to help them deal with the challenges of raising a teenager, and this guide provides some helpful resources.

The great American author and champion of human rights, Pearl Buck, once said, "If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all." In our national struggle against youth violence, we must not fail our children. All of us, especially parents, share responsibility to keep our children safe. We've all got to do our part, and this guide will help.

President William Jefferson Clinton

Many individuals contributed to the development of this document. The White House Council on Youth Violence wishes to thank Dr. Robert Schwebel, the primary author of this guide, for his substantial contribution to this document. The Council would also like to thank Teddi Fine, Anne Mathews-Younes, Louise Peloquin, Farris Tuma, and Bill Modzeleski for their editorial assistance. Carolyn O'Connor also provided invaluable assistance with the formatting and graphics of the guide.

**White House Council on
Youth Violence**

Sonia G. Chesson
Director

Marie E. Burke
Deputy Director

Nicholas J. Lewin
Associate Director

RADM Susan Blumenthal, M.D.
U.S. Assistant Surgeon General
Senior Public Health Advisor and
Scientific Editor

This is an exciting time to be a teenager in America. Young people today are growing up in a rapidly changing technological society, with hopes for a very promising future. Survey results show that 84% of high-school students plan to attend a four-year college. Teens overwhelmingly share their parents' values of honesty and hard work, and are engaged in positive activities. More than half of all teenagers volunteer with a community organization, attend a house of worship weekly, read the newspaper twice a week or more, and attend cultural events or visit museums.

In spite of this positive outlook, however, adolescence—the transition between childhood and adulthood—is still one of the most difficult times for children and parents alike. Growing up is more than the physical changes that occur, such as getting taller or more muscular. This passage is a time for establishing independence, testing limits, trying on different roles, exploring new feelings, having new experiences and fostering intellectual growth. Above all, adolescence is a process that takes time to happen.

We have all heard the frightening and heart-breaking statistics about youth violence, depression, tobacco, and drug use. Even the best-informed young people are constantly being tested by social pressures, emotional needs, and their peers. The push and pull between right and wrong can become a tug of war between adolescent and parent.

Being a parent, grandparent, foster parent, or caregiver of a teen is both rewarding and challenging. Caring adults can make all the difference in a child's life. This booklet provides some useful tools to improve your communication with your teenager, and help him or her get through adolescence as successfully as possible. Read it all or select the sections that help you the most.

- **Getting the conversation started**—tips for opening up the dialogue, even after it has been shut down.
- **Increasing freedom and responsibility**—ideas for how to set the limits that protect your teens while still giving them room to grow and develop.
- **Managing anger: theirs and yours**—anger-management skills that you can use, and that you can share with your adolescent.
- **Handling tough situations**—examples of difficult situations, identification of warning signs of trouble, and advice on how to handle certain problems.
- **When parents need help first**—helping your spouse, or yourself, deal with issues that are affecting your child.
- **Getting help for your teen**—suggestions about how to get help for your teen and your family.

Many parents worry when their teenagers don't want to spend as much time with the family as they did when they were younger. It can hurt; it can be frightening. You worry about their safety and about their future. It is normal for children to want to spend more time with their friends during the teen years, but it shouldn't mean that teens ignore their families. Parents and teens need to take action to stay connected or to reconnect.

I used to be close with my daughter. She would talk with me about everything. Now she's 14 and avoids me. She is quiet at dinner, and then goes to her room or talks with friends on the phone all evening. Sometimes she gets moody and angry. I want to reach her the way I used to, but I don't know how to start.

Sometimes the solution is easy. Spend more time together. Suggest doing things that you both enjoy. Talk more. Dinnertime is a good time for that kind of exchange. Talk about your day. Ask your teen about his or her day. Be sure the television is turned off and you and your teen are tuned in.

Why do teens close down?

Sometimes they're trying to be independent. Sometimes they're embarrassed about their own thoughts and feelings, such as anger, or their sexual desires. Sometimes, teens shut down because of pressures they feel at home, at school, or in the community. One of the most important reasons teens close down is that they're afraid to speak honestly with their parents. They believe if they talk openly about things they have done that might be wrong, they'll be given a lecture, punished, or criticized.

Most teens agree they want to spend more time with their parents. You may be surprised to learn that a recent study indicated that most teenagers rate "not having enough time together" with parents as their top concern. Many will be glad that their parents care enough to make the effort to spend time with them. Some teens have a hard time expressing anger and upset feelings. They keep it bottled inside. Parents need to draw such children out. Try to start a conversation by saying "I can see you've been upset. Let's talk about what's happening."

Some teens, however, may give parents the cold shoulder. If that happens, be patient, and be persistent until you break through. If you can't break through, maybe your child has closed down.

How do you get your teenager to open up?

The best way to help teens open up—or stay open—with parents and other adults in their lives, is by showing your acceptance of them. When they make mistakes or misbehave, you can lovingly help them learn from their experience. Make sure they know that you love them, even when you may be deeply troubled by their behavior.

LISTENING TO YOUR TEEN.

Let teens know you will listen and try to understand their point of view, without putting them down or trying to control them. Being open-minded sometimes can be difficult for adults. But to communicate with teens, parents need to do more than just talk; they also need to listen, and really hear what their teens are saying. They also need to notice which issues are not being discussed and have the courage to start a dialogue about those issues.

When disagreements arise, listening does not mean that you give up your authority as a parent. It *does* mean giving teens a voice in matters that concern them. Through family dialogue, parents get to know what their teens are thinking and feeling, and the teens get to know where their parents stand. Sometimes parents and teens can reach agreements when none seemed possible. Even when agreement cannot be reached, teens are more likely to do what their parents wish if they feel that their parents listened with an open mind.

TOUGH TOPICS

Parents can become frustrated when they try to start a conversation with their teenager and he or she just isn't interested. There are tough topics, however, that need to be discussed. Teenagers face pressures and temptations about drugs, alcohol, sex, and tobacco, and about guns and violence. They need and deserve adult support. Don't wait for a crisis. Ideally, parents should find times and ways to talk with their teens *before* serious problems occur, preferably early in the lives of their children. But it is never too late to start.

Sometimes, you can simply start a dialogue about these issues as part of normal conversation. Often, "teachable moments" happen during day-to-day activities. For example, you could discuss

underage drinking when someone gets intoxicated in the presence of your family, or in a movie, or when you see a newspaper story about an accident caused by teenage drinking. You could discuss violence, and better ways of solving problems, after watching a TV show or movie that portrays violence as a solution to a disagreement.

PRESSURES ON

TODAY'S TEENS

The pressures you felt as an adolescent have been magnified for teens today. You will recognize some of these issues that make it difficult for youth today as issues that concerned you during your youth. Others are unique to today's teens.

- Wanting to be part of a group
- HIV/AIDS
- Changing family structures
- Gangs and violence
- Insecurity about the future
- Money pressures
- Teen sexuality and pregnancy
- Media influences
- Body image
- School pressures
- Ready access to alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs and guns

If your teen doesn't want to talk, try to be clear that your purpose is to build understanding and to be supportive, certainly not to find fault or to punish. If you can't nudge your child into a dialogue, try backing off. This show of respect can be disarming. Then, give your son or daughter some time to think it over. A

few days later, you can try again to start the discussion. Parents can be flexible in getting the discussion going, but cannot give up on the need for this discussion to eventually begin. Although it can be harder to get boys to open up, parents should engage in dialogue with their sons and daughters alike.

Breaking the Ice

Why can't I get a discussion started with my son about sex, drugs or other tough issues? He just tells me "Everything is fine" or "It's my life" and walks off.

Below is an example of one good way to open a dialogue about tough issue, and some roadblocks you might encounter:

You: As a family, we've never talked about alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. I'd like to know what you think and feel about drugs —and I want to tell you what I think. I promise I won't punish you for what you think, or have done. I just want us to talk.

Teen: It's my life; I'm old enough to make my own decisions.

You: You're right. This is your life and you have to make your own decisions about what you do. I don't want to control you. But we do need to talk. I want to hear your thoughts, and I want to tell you mine. I promise to listen with an open mind, and ask that you do the same. We may disagree, but at least we will understand each other.

Teen: Forget it. You always end up lecturing me.

You: If our discussions have ended with me lecturing you, then I apologize. But, I won't lecture you now. I want to talk with you, not at you, and I want to hear what you have to say. I'm willing to hear your complaints, too. Tell me what keeps you from talking with me. Even someone as old as I am can change.

Teen: Maybe later. Not now.

You: OK, I can wait a little. Today is Monday. Let's both think about it for now, and we'll talk on Thursday, because we do need to discuss these issues together.

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

Today's teens, more than ever before, need to connect with adults—if not a parent, then a coach or teacher, grandparent or foster parent, clergy member, or other trusted adult in their lives. Teens need at least one adult with whom they can talk openly. They should not be left to rely only on other teens for important information, conversation, and help with problem solving about how to grow up wisely.

FIND

SOMEONE YOUR TEENS CAN TALK TO

Try to establish strong communication with your teen, but remember that some teens may talk more openly about sensitive topics with someone who is not their parent or guardian. If you are a parent, try not to let this hurt your feelings; remember that your child will respect you more in the long run if you encourage him or her to talk with someone else, if that is what works best.

**You don't trust me...
But they're my friends...
Everyone else is doing it...**

Teens need their independence, but how do you make sure they are safe? It's tough to decide when to give your teen more freedom. Do you hang on to the kite string for as long as you possibly can, or give the kite free air? The decision isn't easy. One parent's decision for his or her teen may not be right for other parents and their teens.

Although every adolescent is different, there are many experiences common to the teenage years. The most common may be the pull and push between dependence and independence. Parents can give their children increased independence, but still have rules and set limits, and must respond to the limit-testing of their children.

Teens, at younger and younger ages, are putting themselves at risk for sexually transmitted diseases—including AIDS—and for pregnancy. And some teens, and even younger children, smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, use other drugs, or commit acts of violence and other crimes. No won-

THE CHALLENGE: To help teens learn about the world and accept new challenges with the least amount of danger and harm.

Parents must walk a fine line between controlling too much and being too relaxed about rules. When parents are too restrictive, they can push teens toward rebellion. When they are too permissive, teens can get out of control. It's a balancing act.

der so many parents are concerned, even frightened; no wonder so many try to control the behavior of their teenage children.

It is important for parents to make rules for their young children. As children get older, however, they need to learn to

make their own decisions and life choices. Teens need the chance to practice good decision-making skills, and to manage new life experiences. Parents need to give teens the freedom to do just that, pushing

back the fences and giving them practice. But there is a catch; teens must be ready for it. They need to agree to behave in responsible ways, and show that they can handle the freedom. They also need to keep parents informed. That way, parents know when to lend guidance and supervision, and how to support their progress.

That's where respect, responsibility and reliability come in.

Respect: Respect is a two-way street, but it starts with you. Give your teens the respect that you would like to be given. Give them credit for their knowledge and abilities; pay attention and listen to them. That means showing your confidence in your teen, and being supportive.

Responsibility: Teens are learning to take care of themselves as they prepare for adulthood. That's what growing up is all about. Give them an appropriate amount of freedom and independence.

Encourage and promote responsibility and good decision-making, offering support and gentle help with difficult decisions. Let your teens know they can gain more freedom as they demonstrate responsible behavior.

Reliability: Part of growing up is learning and adapting to rules—rules about driving and work, rules about

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

drinking and dating, social rules and family rules. Teens will test the rules, but over time most will make these rules part of their lives. This kind of reliability is worthy of discussion and praise. **When you can rely on your teens behaving responsibly, it may be time to give them more freedom.**

Above all, a parent's role is to believe in your teens. Set your standards and expectations high, keep your love for them constant—even when problems occur—and provide consistent support, including practical help, so they can achieve their promise.

Baggy Jeans/Odd-Colored Hair: Where Do I Draw The Line?

Jason is doing well in middle school. He's great with his younger brothers and helps around the house, but I'm concerned about some of his new friends. Some have dyed their hair odd colors; they wear baggy jeans with their boxer shorts showing. A few have pierced tongues and tattoos. A while ago, Jason asked about getting those baggy jeans. I said no, because the gang kids wear them. I hoped he'd forget about them, but he has asked again. Between the drugs in our neighborhood, baggy jeans, and new friends, I'm worried. I want to steer him away from problem kids. Should I let him buy the jeans? What should I do about his friends?

Adolescents are striving for independence. As their teens prepare for adulthood, parents should encourage independence, while making sure their teens don't drift too far from a positive course. How should parents react to the choices of their teenage children? In general, extend trust and give children as much freedom of choice as they can handle. Be sure to set limits, too. Your decisions about the baggy jeans and about your son's friends require careful evaluation of all the details. You need to think about your own values, look realistically at where Jason seems to be headed, understand what he is doing or wants to do, and determine how best to promote his safety and growth.

Jason is doing well in school and not getting into trouble. Success in school gives children a sense of accomplishment. They can see a positive future for themselves and are less likely to want to join a gang. These facts argue for giving

him more freedom. When it comes to his friends and his preferences in clothing, you need to gather more information if you're going to make a smart decision. You need to know more about your son's friends: What are they like? Do they use alcohol or other drugs? Are they in gangs? How does your son feel about these kids? How does he feel about drug use? How does he feel about gangs?

Get to know your son's friends. Ask him to invite his friends to your home so you can meet them. You'll show that you have an open mind. If his friends behave poorly in your presence, your son will notice.

You also need to understand what the baggy jeans mean to Jason. Are they just a style he likes? Or is wearing them as a way to "fit in" with the gang types? Sometimes teens dress differently just to harmlessly show some independence from the family. Think back to your own adolescence, and remember the fashion changes. There may be some similarities. Have a discussion with your son about his friends and about the clothing he likes to wear. Sometimes discussions can bridge differences. Maybe your son will be swayed by what you say about the jeans and gangs, or maybe he will convince you that baggy jeans have become a style that has little to do with belonging to a gang.

A conversation with your teen can help you decide whether there is a real problem or it is just a question of fashion.

Warm family relationships can help protect children from violence, alcohol and other drugs, and other risky behaviors. But family members—even in the most loving families—get angry at one another from time to time. When families communicate well and work cooperatively, anger can be resolved without a problem. Handled poorly, however, anger gets in the way of good communication between parent and child. Anger without control can sometimes be dangerous and can even become violent.

Some adults see anger as an emotion that should be suppressed, because it leads to trouble. Some grew up in families in which anger generally led to explosive behavior and even violence. Others were taught that it is not “nice” to be angry. Many adults are not good at managing anger, and expressing this emotion in a healthy way. It’s important that parents know how to manage anger successfully in family life, at work and in the community. And that same knowledge needs to be shared with children, so that they learn this important skill.

My teenage son doesn't know how to handle his intense feelings. He talks back to us and even swears at us. He doesn't do what we ask him to do. He seems to be trying to aggravate us. I get so angry I blow up. We end up screaming at each other and saying things we regret. I feel like things are out of control.

With the many changes that occur during adolescence, it's not unusual for teenagers to feel anger and resentment toward parents. Adolescents struggle to establish their own independent identities as they prepare for adulthood. Sometimes anger is their way of asserting independ-

ence. This can wear thin on parents, who may fight back with their own anger, creating a vicious circle of escalating resentment.

The best solution to out-of-control anger—whether from a parent or from a teen—is to step back, and identify more positive, healthy ways to deal with strong feelings. We do this when we can calm down and respond in a disciplined and thoughtful way. By maintaining composure, parents can be good role models and open the door to constructive communication with their children.

But how do you keep calm when you feel pushed to the limit? Here are some suggestions:

TIPS FOR CALMING DOWN

- **Pick your battles.** Sometimes the issue is not worth the anger, or worth arguing about.
- **Take a deep breath;** count to ten. Think about the issue before a single word comes out of your mouth.
- **Go for a walk.**
- **Use “self-talk” to calm down.** That is, say something soothing to yourself such as: “I need to relax and stay calm. I can't afford to blow up.”
- **Reframe the issue.** For example, when your son says something rude to you, it may be less a matter of him disrespecting you than a sign that he has a problem with his anger. “Framing” it this way, you focus on the fact that he needs your help in overcoming this problem.
- **Use humor.** Humor can be a good way to calm anger; find the silly side of the issue and find a way to laugh about it.

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

Sometimes the hardest part of helping children learn to manage their anger is that parents have to look at their own practices. Parents need to ask:

“Have I accepted my own anger and the anger of others in the family? Do I express anger in positive and constructive ways? Do I resolve conflict well? Have I taught my children to accept and express their anger?”

Resolving conflict constructively may be a huge challenge, but it's an absolute necessity for the sake of every member of your family.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

Once you are calm, you are in a better position to address the issues that caused the conflict. Here are some tips:

- **Give your point of view.** State the problem as you see it; speak clearly and calmly—don't yell.
- **Ask to hear your teen's point of view.**
- **Pay attention, listen, and consider your teen's point of view.**
- **Discuss ways to solve the dispute without a battle.**
- **Practice the art of compromise.** Find the middle ground you can both live with comfortably.
- **Assert your authority, when appropriate, but in a calm, yet firm manner.**

WHAT IF THE ANGER DOESN'T STOP?

When anger becomes a way of life—a chronic problem—for someone in the fami-

ly, the underlying issue may be larger than you or your teen can manage. If you even *think* your family is at this crisis point, or if you even *think* you or any member of your family has a serious problem with anger management, it's time to seek help from a mental health professional. Recognize that this situation necessitates counseling, and sometimes that means the entire family will need help. Refer to the section: “Getting Help For Your Teen” on page ____.



HANDLING TOUGH SITUATIONS

Teenagers, like all of us, sometimes need help and guidance, but it can be difficult for parents to recognize when to intervene in their teenager's life. You know about the challenges that today's teenagers face—some of which are different than those you faced as a teen. Understanding these challenges, and knowing when and how to intervene to help your child overcome them, is an essential role for parents.

It is also a difficult role. Being able to tell the difference between normal teenage behavior and self-destructive, hurtful behavior can be very difficult. The following examples are designed to help you understand some of the warning signs that your teenager may need help. Read through these examples and see if any sound familiar.

Remember, though, that every teenager is different and there is often no clear answer to your specific situation. If you are concerned, talk to your teenage children. At a minimum, let them know that you are worried about them and tell them that you would like to talk. If you are still concerned, or if you think that your teenagers may hurt themselves or others, you should get help immediately. Read the final section "Getting Help For Your Teen", for assistance in finding the right resources.

BULLYING

I was called to my 13-year-old son's school today because he stole some money from another boy during lunch. This wasn't the first incident. A few weeks ago the principal called because Keith made another boy take the blame for graffiti he wrote on the school bus. No matter what we tell him, he seems to get himself in trouble. What can I do?

You certainly have reason to be concerned about your son's behavior. He is acting like a bully and needs your help to put on the brakes. It's good the principal has called. The school can set a clear standard—no bullying—and make sure that your son understands the consequences for violations of the rule. You, too, need to be clear that you disapprove of bullying. You need to help your son develop empathy—which is the ability to see how other people feel, and to care about their feel-

ings. You will probably want to impose consequences on your son for his unacceptable behavior. Be firm, but do it in a loving way. Right now your son needs your empathy, understanding, and love. By providing this, you can show the power of caring about others in a positive way.

This still leaves the bigger part of the problem—getting to the reason for your son's behavior. You have to talk with him to determine why he is being a bully. What leads your son to behave in such hurtful ways?

With your help, or with professional help, your son must come to understand his own motives for bullying. Some young people are bullies because they are bored and crave excitement; some do it to feel powerful; some do it as a response to family problems; some do it for attention and fame. You need to ask him very detailed questions:

- Did you plan to take the other boy's lunch money beforehand, or was it a sudden urge?
- How did you pick your victim?
- What were you thinking when you did it? (Ex: I need the money; I'll look cool.)
- How did you feel when you did it? (Ex: Excited, thrilled; powerful).
- How do you think the victim felt?
- How do you justify what you did?
- What are you feeling about yourself?
- What's happening in our family and in your life?

When you understand the details of what happened, you can determine how to help your child. For example, if your son stole money because he saw it sitting on a lunch tray and had a sudden urge to grab

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

it, he will need to learn to recognize his impulses, and to stop them. If he planned to steal money, pre-selected a victim, and stole because he wanted to look like a big shot, he will need to learn positive ways to make friends and gain peer acceptance. If there's a

problem in the family, it's important to seek help. We have to help our children learn healthy and socially acceptable ways to cope with urges and satisfy their needs. A big challenge? Yes. But it's part of growing up and becoming a good citizen.

What if your teenager is being bullied?

Bullying is a serious problem, affecting many children. A recent study indicated that nearly 1 in 10 students in grades 6 through 12 have been bullied in the past year. About 1 in 3 students report that someone stole or deliberately damaged their property (car, clothing, books) in the past school year and 7% report being threatened by a weapon.

Teenage victims of bullies need help and support in responding to this aggressive behavior. Many parents give their children conflicting messages about how to respond to physical aggression. Should you encourage your teenager to "fight back" or not? We do not want to resort to violence, but we also do not want our children to be victims and to feel powerless. Most experts agree that children should not hit back, other than for self-defense and survival. Retaliation perpetuates a cycle of violence. It may also lead to escalating physical confrontation, which can be very dangerous, especially considering the possibility that weapons might be used.

Parents can help their children who have been teased or bullied learn to be powerful, without resorting to violence. You could start by letting your teenager know that you seriously disapprove of taunting and other types of bullying behavior, and that you think no one should have to put up with this. You can empower teens by asking them if they have any ideas about what might end the bullying.

Parents can teach teens some powerful, non-violent ways of responding when they are bullied:

- Demonstrate strength by using eye contact and positive self-assured body language, with their head held high and shoulders back.
- Practice "verbal self-defense", using anything from humor to clever comments to de-escalate tension.
- Proudly walk away from provocation, and ignore taunting.
- Join a social group or club, which can reduce isolation and give them a sense of pride and belonging.

Young people are entitled to a safe learning environment in their school. **Another way to empower your teenagers can be to encourage them to speak with school administrators about the problem.** In part they may want to raise the issue of their own situation, and their own safety fears. Sometimes, it is most empowering to discuss the situation as a school-wide problem, without focus on particular perpetrators. Parents should back up their children by also voicing the same concern. School/community partnerships can lead to effective programs that reduce bullying behavior.

If teenage children have been picked on for a long time, they probably have some intense emotions from that, and could benefit from talking about them. **Victims of bullies may experience anger, anxiety, and even depression. Being the victim of a bully can also be a risk factor for violent behavior. Your teens need and deserve help coping with these feelings.** You or a mental health professional could give them opportunities to express themselves, and resolve these feelings.

DRUG USE AND FAILURE IN SCHOOL

Our 16-year old daughter, Julia, was caught drinking at a party. We suspect that she has smoked marijuana, too. She's been doing poorly in school—in fact, now she's neglecting her schoolwork and failing one subject. We set up required study time, but it hasn't helped. She misses curfews and hasn't been doing her chores. We've talked with her about alcohol, drugs, and sex and we've been clear about the rules and given her consequences when she has broken them. Obviously, it hasn't worked. She says I'm a nag. What else can I do?

ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Julia's drinking and possible drug use are probably the tip of the iceberg. Alcohol and drug use often occur along with other serious problems.

You need to talk with Julia about the details of her use of alcohol and other drugs. You need to talk about, and help her think through, her drug use—what drugs she is using, how often she uses them, how much she uses; why she is using; and how she may be harming herself or may be headed for trouble. Make sure she understands that there are problems that concern you, and that you and she can work together to turn things around.

If you see these signs, something is wrong, whether or not it is caused by alcohol or other drug abuse. Your child needs help. Start a dialogue with your teen about the problems. If you are still confused about whether alcohol or other drugs are part of the problem, or if you recognize that your child has a serious alcohol or drug problem, get professional help.

SCHOOL FAILURE

Failure in school is another serious issue, but nagging is the wrong approach. Enforcing study times usually doesn't work, either. Parents often assume that school problems are caused by lack of effort, and that making kids study more will improve their performance. Usually there is much more to it. For example, children may be having trouble with academic work and need tutoring. Or they may need help with study skills (understanding how, when, and where to study). They may also be upset about something at home, at school, or with peers, that is interfering with their concentration. Even when the amount of effort invested in schoolwork is deficient, usually the underlying cause is discouragement,

Signs of possible alcohol or other drug abuse:

School:	truancy; drop in grades; behavior problems
Social life:	dropping old friends and activities; new friends use alcohol or other drugs; strange-sounding phone calls with covert communication, possibly about drugs
Emotional life:	basic personality changes; inexplicable and sudden mood changes; apathy; appearing listless and "hung-over"; increased forgetfulness
Family:	very secretive (more than a need for privacy); estrangement; less responsible at home; more conflict at home
Physical:	red eyes; deterioration in personal hygiene; sleep disturbances; slurred speech; fatigue or apparent "hyper" behavior
Physical evidence:	disappearance of beer or liquor supply; money or valuables missing; drug paraphernalia; use of incense; prescription drugs missing; use of glue, paint thinner, or other chemicals that may be inhaled

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

rather than laziness. The remedy is support, not more pressure. We need strategies to get teens thinking and solving problems for themselves. Dialogue is the most effective way to get them started.

How long ago did Julia start slacking off in school? What do you think has been holding her back? You need answers to these questions to determine how to correct the problem. Encourage Julia to consult with her teachers or the school counselor, and offer to participate in these meetings. If need be, you can consult with the school or get other professional help. Using all available resources, you and your daughter should be able to determine the causes of the problem. Once you know the causes, the solutions may become clearer. Your daughter will still have some obstacles to overcome, but at least she will be headed in the right direction.

SADNESS/DEPRESSION

Sarah has never had much confidence. High school is harder than she expected. My husband and I are divorced, and this has been very hard on her. Now, she looks and acts absolutely exhausted, doesn't sleep, and just sits in her room crying with her door closed. When she goes out, she dresses all in black clothing and wears heavy black eye shadow. I have tried to talk to her, but she acts angry and won't say a word to me. I can't tell if Sarah is just "going through a phase" or is truly depressed.

The teen years offer new experiences and challenges that can be exciting, but also stressful. The stress of adolescence is one of many factors that can make young peo-

ple unhappy. Teenagers are also experiencing hormonal changes which can make them moody or sad. Some sadness and mood swings are normal—they're a part of life. But when the "blues" last for weeks, or interfere with school, home, or other activities, your teen may be suffering from clinical depression, a mood disorder that is a real medical illness that is often unrecognized, but can be effectively treated.

SYMPTOMS OF

DEPRESSION

If a number of these symptoms persist for two weeks or more, a person may be diagnosed as clinically depressed. Parents should talk with children if any of these symptoms occur:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Restlessness, irritability, or excessive crying
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, pessimism
- Sleeping too much or too little, early-morning awakening
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

Source: National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health

When teens, or anyone, are very upset about things, they need to talk with someone who cares and can help. Parents should be concerned, and talk with their child about his or her unhappiness, whether it is a temporary state, or a case of clinical depression. We should set an example of confronting problems, head on.

It is sometimes hard to tell when teens are depressed, because the symptoms may be hard to read. For example, you may mistake a sleep disorder for a late-night television habit, or your teen may only reveal her sadness in writings that contain morbid themes. Teens may say they are "bored" when actually they're depressed. In addition, signs of depression may vary among cultural groups: Teens in some groups experience sadness or guilt; while others experience more physical symptoms, such as headaches and nervousness.

Clearly, Sarah is unhappy and may be suffering from depression. What is going on in her life to make her feel this way? **Think about past and present problems.** When did this crying begin? Did it coincide with family tension, or the divorce, or her problems in school? How is she getting along with friends? How are things in your family, now? Are there any other problems or symptoms? The answers to these questions provide clues about what is wrong, and how to help her.

Depression does increase the risk of suicide. Many teens think about suicide, and some of them follow through. Parents should be especially concerned and get professional help immediately if additional warning signs are evident, such as when a child has a history of previous suicide attempts, hints at not being around in the future, expresses a desire to die, gives away prized possessions, has experienced a recent loss, or makes threats of suicide.

Sarah needs to talk with someone who cares and can help. Give her an opportunity to discuss her feelings and what is causing them. If she won't open up with you, find an adult with whom she can talk, perhaps a family physician or a mental health professional.

SYMPTOMS OF SUICIDE

People most at-risk for committing suicide are those who have several of the following characteristics. It is important to note that many people experience one or more risk factors and are not suicidal.

- attempted suicide in the past
- a family history of suicide
- a firearm in the home
- consume alcohol and/or abuse other substance
- are depressed (changes in sleeping patterns and appetite, feeling worthless)
- experienced violence (physical, sexual, domestic, or child abuse)
- are experiencing unusual stress due to adverse life events, such as separation or divorce
- spent time in jail or prison
- a medical condition
- move frequently from one location to another
- experience poor parent/child communication
- feel socially isolated

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ANGER AND VIOLENCE

My 16-year-old son, James, is failing in school. He is often angry, has no interest in his family, and sometimes doesn't come home until 4 a.m. I have no idea what he's doing and worry he might get into trouble. At home, he spends most of the time in his room playing violent video games and listening to music that has violent lyrics. I've heard him plotting "revenge" with friends and he seems to always be talking about different weapons. This worries me, but I don't really believe he would hurt anyone. What can I do?

You are right to be worried. Although it is difficult to predict who will become violent, there are certain risk factors that warn of possible danger. The more of these warning signs we see, the more we believe that children are "at risk" for violent behavior. No single factor indicates a problem, but if we see a pattern of several risk factors, it's time to take precautions.

James exhibits many of these warning signs. He is isolated from his family, failing in school, and staying out much too late at night. He has discussed weapons, has a problem with anger, and you heard him plotting revenge. Children who have been bullied, mistreated by others, or feel they have been mistreated, are at higher risk for violence. The same is true for children who feel rejected or alone. Has James been bullied, or excluded, or teased by peers or family members? This would be another warning sign.

An obsession with violent video games may also be a warning sign. You should closely monitor and discuss the entertainment choices of your children. Take some time to watch television with James, and

use the time to discuss what you see, especially emphasizing positive behavior and positive problem-solving, as opposed to violent ways of settling conflict. If there are violent moments, discuss the real consequences of violence. Notice if the presentation fully reveals the harm and anguish of victims, or whether the impact of the violence is minimized.

Bear in mind, however, that risk factors are **not** predictors of violence, just warning signs of possible trouble. After some of the recent high profile shootings in schools, the media has publicized lists of warning signs. These lists can be used to unfairly label non-violent students as dangerous, because many adolescents who will never become violent will show some of the 'red flag' behaviors.

Still, parents should recognize these warning signs, and use them as a cue that a child needs help.

When parents are stuck and can't make progress with a child's problem, they should connect with someone who can. To help James, you should look for a child/family mental health professional who is well-respected in your community and experienced in working with adolescents and their families. When a teen exhibits a number of warning signs for violence, as James does, parents should act promptly—for safety's sake. As a precaution, parents should make sure their children do not have access to firearms, and remove other dangerous materials or objects from the home. Read the section "Getting Help for Your Teen" for guidance.

Parents can do much to help their teenage sons or daughters through a variety of different situations. Depression, violence, substance abuse, and bullying are all serious issues that parents and teens can work together to help resolve. Sometimes, however, parents need to confront their own problems before they can help their teenager. Children who live in violent households, or homes where one of the caretakers uses drugs or abuses alcohol, often sustain severe emotional trauma that can last a lifetime. Even if a parent's violence or substance abuse occurred when a child was small, he or she may still suffer during his or her adolescent years.

Intimate partner (or domestic) violence, and parental alcohol or other drug abuse, affect both the victim, and the child. Research shows that approximately 90 percent of children who live in homes where there is intimate partner violence see or hear the abuse. Further, children who are exposed to family violence are much more likely to become violent than are children from nonviolent families. Studies also show that if a parent uses alcohol or drugs, his or her children are more likely to drink or use drugs.

Below are examples of situations where children have been affected by current, or even prior, parental behavior. If these situations sound familiar and if you need some help deciding what to do, read through the resources listed at the end of this section and reach out for help for yourself or your partner.

I was called to school by my daughter's principal. Apparently, when her math teacher corrected her in class, Deirdre threw a book at him and stormed out of the classroom. Deirdre's explanation was that "no one else cares, so why should I?" Today was a wake up call. I have to admit it:

My wife has a serious problem with alcohol. I'm not home much. I'm always avoiding the chaos. I know this is serious. What can I do now?

It sounds as though you recognize that your wife's alcohol abuse is affecting Deirdre. This is the first step. Parents with serious alcohol and other drug problems are often overly absorbed in their own needs and problems. They may not prepare meals, or be present at them. They may not carry their share of the household responsibilities. They may not properly supervise their children's homework and other aspects of their lives. Often their moods dominate the family. Their anger leaves other family members fearful and anxious. Roles may be confused and children end up taking care of the parents. Communication is often muddled.

Children in these families feel isolated and alone, with no one to talk to. Their hurt and angry feelings may lead to depression, their own abuse of drugs, or may even erupt in violent behavior, as in your situation with your daughter. Children also sometimes seek attention and/or act out their feelings by shoplifting or committing other crimes.

So what can you do? First, children should not feel alone and abandoned, nor should they be caretakers for their parents. Deirdre needs a parent who will take responsibility and act as a parent should. Let her know that you are assuming this responsibility. She also should know that you are aware that her mother has a problem, and that it is affecting the whole family. Second, you should encourage your wife to get help (see box for suggested steps).

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

If an alcoholic is unwilling to seek help, is there any way to get him or her into treatment?

This can be a challenging situation. An alcoholic cannot be forced to get help except under certain circumstances, such as when a violent incident results in police being called or when it is a medical emergency. This doesn't mean, however, that you have to wait for a crisis to make an impact. Based on clinical experience, many alcoholism treatment specialists recommend the following steps to help an alcoholic accept treatment:

Stop all "rescue missions." Family members often try to protect an alcoholic from the results of his or her behavior by making excuses and by getting him or her out of alcohol-related jams. It is important to stop all such rescue attempts immediately, so that the alcoholic will fully experience the harmful effects of his or her drinking—and thereby become more motivated to stop.

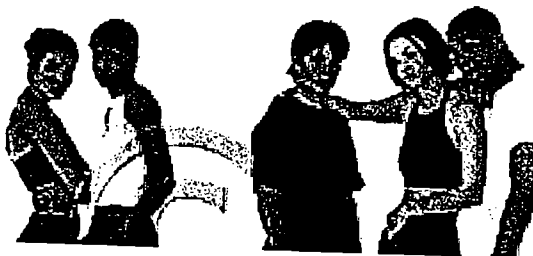
Time your intervention. Plan to talk with the drinker shortly after an alcohol-related problem has occurred—for example, a serious family argument in which drinking played a part or an alcohol-related accident. Also choose a time when he or she is sober, when both of you are in a calm frame of mind, and when you can speak privately.

Be specific. Tell the family member that you are concerned about his or her drinking and want to be supportive in getting help. Back up your concern with examples of the ways in which his or her drinking has caused problems for you or your teenagers, including the most recent incident. Tell the family member that until he or she gets help, you will carry out consequences—not to punish the drinker, but to protect yourself from the harmful effects of the drinking. Do not make any threats you are not prepared to carry out.

Be ready to help. Gather information in advance about local treatment options. If the person is willing to seek help, call immediately for an appointment with a treatment program

counselor. Offer to go with the family member on the first visit to a treatment program and/or Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Call on a friend. If the family member still refuses to get help, ask a friend to talk with him or her, using the steps described above. A friend who is a recovering alcoholic may be particularly persuasive, but any caring, non-judgmental friend may be able to make a difference. The intervention of more than one person, more than one time, is often necessary to persuade an alcoholic person to seek help.



Find strength in numbers. With the help of a professional therapist, some families join with other relatives and friends to confront an alcoholic as a group. While this approach may be effective, it should only be attempted under the guidance of a therapist who is experienced in this kind of group intervention.

Get support. Whether or not the alcoholic family member seeks help, you may benefit from the encouragement and support of other people in your situation. Support groups offered in most communities include Al-Anon, which holds regular meetings for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic's life, and Alateen, for children of alcoholics. You can reach them by calling 888-4AL-ANON. These groups help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking and that they need to take steps to take care of themselves, regardless of whether the alcoholic family member chooses to get help.

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health

After too many years of accepting my husband's abuse, I finally stood up to him about three years ago. He used to hit me, yell, and pound on walls. I lived in terror. He would always be very sorry afterwards, apologizing to me, and promising things would change. He never abused the children, but I'm afraid they saw too much of this. Finally one day I packed, took the kids, and left for a women's shelter. But now my 15-year old daughter, Emily, has nightmares about her Dad, and gets very nervous and jumpy at times. My 17-year old son, Eric, has been getting loud and aggressive, just as his father used to get. I think he may even be abusing his girlfriend. I feel as though I'm reliving the nightmare through Eric. Is there any hope?

You were brave to stand up to your husband, and wise to get the protection of a women's shelter.

There is likely a connection between your husband's past behavior, and the present situation. Children who witness violence are more at risk for a variety of mental health problems, including depression, and are more likely to become violent themselves.

Your husband was the male role model for Eric, who saw aggressive behavior patterns that he may be copying.

Many children who witness violence in the home suffer from anxiety problems, including what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You may have heard about soldiers who return from war

and suffer from PTSD. Emily surely has issues with anxiety and may well be feeling the impact of the trauma of what she witnessed. PTSD has a number of symptoms, such as re-experiencing traumatic events in ways through nightmares or flashbacks; avoiding people and places associated with the trauma; becoming detached from loved ones; and by being highly aroused, as manifested by problems concentrating and being quick to fly into a rage.

Have you been in family therapy? This treatment could help everyone. It gives children an opportunity to identify and express feelings honestly. Emily could get help dealing with her anxiety and working out her feelings toward her father. Eric

could get help for his own aggressive tendencies, learn anger management, and find healthy ways of expressing his feelings. If he is abusing his girlfriend, it is even more essential that he get help immediately. The tragedy of violence between adult family members is that children who witness family violence

are more at risk of becoming violent themselves, and the cycle may continue from one generation to the next. If you are still in a violent relationship, but need help, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.



GETTING HELP FOR YOUR TEEN

Getting help for your teen is a major step in bringing him or her back from the edge of harm's way, and promoting a healthy future. You should also know that sometimes when a member of your family is having serious difficulties, it may be a way of letting parents know that the whole family needs help. When seeking help for your teen, consider whether the rest of the family may need counseling as well.

IF THERE ARE PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

If your teen is having difficulty at school, such as poor grades, behavior problems, or being bullied, it is important to reach out to school officials. They can provide support, and also may be able to give you additional information about what has been going on with your child.

Connect with Your Child's School

Research has shown that students whose parents are involved and connected with them and their schools are more likely to succeed in school. It can be difficult to find the time to volunteer, but just building a relationship with your child's teachers, and the school itself, can go a long way in preventing your child from feeling the isolation that can lead to other problems.

You can start with your child's teacher. If the school has a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist, you can contact this person. The school principal is also a good

resource and may be able to pull together appropriate staff members to talk to you about your child. If you have concerns about contacting school personnel, most school districts have designated a parent advocate or have a parent resource center to help parents navigate the school system.

School personnel are also a good source of referrals for mental health services.

Children Exposed to Violence or Abuse

Young people exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect, may be traumatized by their experiences, and are more likely to be at risk for mental health problems, for drug abuse, and for committing acts of violence

Experiencing or witnessing traumatic events is painful and can hurt your teen as much as a physical injury. But your teen can recover successfully from trauma. Effective treatment is available.

IF YOUR TEEN APPEARS DEPRESSED OR ANXIOUS

Depression is more than the blues or the blahs; it is more than the normal, everyday ups and downs. When that "down" mood, combined with other symptoms (see box on page __), lasts for more than a couple of weeks, the condition may be clinical depression. Clinical depression is a serious health problem that affects the total person.

Anxiety disorders are illnesses that fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear that doesn't go away, and often gets

WHEN PARENTS NEED HELP FIRST (CONT'D)

worse. In addition to feelings, these disorders can change your teen's behavior, physical health and appearance, school performance, social activity and the ability to handle everyday decisions and pressures.

If you think your child has an emotional problem (whether or not it involves mental illness) that requires more help than you can give, the sooner he or she gets the needed help, the sooner he or she may feel better.

Mental disorders are real illnesses, just like diabetes or other physical ailments. Having a mental illness does not mean a person is weak, or a failure, or is not really trying. It means they need treatment. Untreated, mental disorders can result in damage to self-esteem, poor school performance, problems with relationships, and have tragic consequences, like suicide. Mental health treatment works. Treatment helps reduce the symptoms of the mental disorder, improve relationships, strengthen coping skills, and promote behaviors that make a person's life better.

Neither parent nor teen should be afraid of what people might say or think about seeking treatment. You can draw upon many available resources and may even be surprised by how supportive your friends and your teen's friends can be.



I want to get help for my teen, but I don't know how to find someone good.

In picking a mental health professional, it's important to identify a person who is experienced in working with youth, and highly respected in the community. School administrators, counselors, and teachers often know mental health providers with this expertise. Family doctors or your local mental health association can also point you in the right direction. Ask other parents as well—they are among the best referral sources.

Skilled mental health professionals understand that adolescents may be slow to embrace professional help, and perhaps were brought for help against their will. They carefully build trust and an effective therapeutic relationship. They help young people understand that much of their conversation is kept confidential—and also spell out the limits of confidentiality.

If you haven't found a good referral in your community, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration runs a Knowledge Exchange Network (KEN) which can provide help in finding a mental health professional. You can find them on the web at www.mentalhealth.org or call their toll-free number at 1-800-789-2647 (Mon-Fri 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. EST).

There are so many different kinds of mental health providers. What's the difference? How do I know what is right for my child?

Social workers, mental health counselors, psychiatric nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists among others, all have different kinds of training and skills. In psychotherapy sessions, mental health professionals help people talk about their

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

experiences, thoughts, and feelings, in order to solve personal and family problems and treat mental illness. There are different types of therapies. Some therapists focus on changing behaviors, and others deal more specifically with changing thinking patterns that can lead to troublesome feelings and behaviors.

Psychologists and psychiatrists can also conduct tests to diagnose problems. Psychiatrists and other medical doctors can determine if there are other physical illnesses that may be contributing to the problem and they can prescribe medicine when this is determined to be an important part of the treatment. Medications are available that effectively treat mental illnesses that are severe or disabling.

Support groups can also be helpful for individuals and families. Your family physician or school guidance counselor can often help you assess what type of professional help you need.

I know this is all going to be expensive—how will I afford it?

You may have some mental health coverage in your health insurance plan. But if your ability to pay is limited, you should be able to access community-based services. Your state department of mental health, and local community mental health center can direct you to these resources. City and county mental health

services are often offered on a sliding fee scale, based on your financial resources, and some health centers in universities and other mental health professionals in the community may also provide for a sliding scale fee to those who cannot afford the full fee.

WHAT ABOUT SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

Teachers, doctors, sports coaches, clergy members, and others involved with youth have roles to play in helping to recognize and get help for teens who are using alcohol or other drugs. But usually parents are the first line of defense against substance abuse. Set a good example by not using illicit drugs, and if you drink alcohol, do so responsibly, and only in moderation. Know your family's history of alcohol and drug abuse, and talk to your children about it. If you have a drug problem (alcohol, prescription drugs, or illicit drugs), get help for yourself. Teach your child or teenager that it is okay to get help. Learn the signs of drug abuse and take action to help your children if they have a problem. (See box on page ____.)

To find the right help, you should start by getting information about services in your community. Ask your health care professional for a referral, or contact local hospitals, state and local substance abuse agencies, school counselors, or community

mental health centers. You can also contact national or local substance abuse treatment help-lines, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment National Helpline at 800-662-HELP.

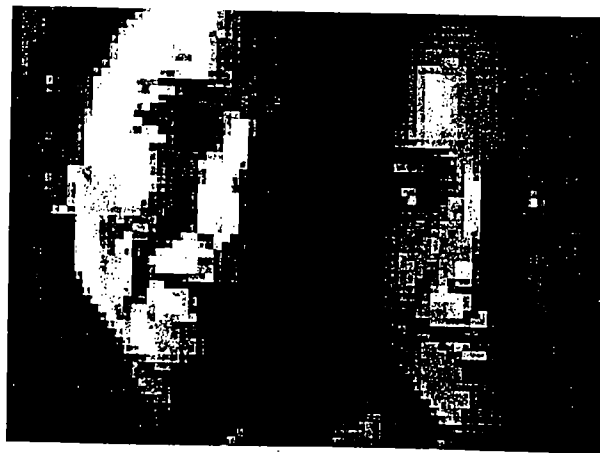
GENERAL TIPS WHEN GETTING HELP FOR YOUR TEEN AND YOUR FAMILY

Here are general tips on getting help for you and your teen:

- **Make sure the whole family is involved.** Family stress and turmoil contribute to the problems of teenagers. Teens' problems add to the family stress. The whole family must work together to solve those problems. Ideally, the entire family should participate in counseling. The priority, however, is to that your teen get counseling. He or she might first want to meet privately with a counselor and may agree to family involvement later. Or, if your child prefers to go individually, find a second counselor to work with the whole family together.
- **Be patient.** Understand that experienced counselors take their time with young people who enter counseling against their will. It may take a while to develop rapport, and a while longer for teens to be ready to make changes. Parents should ask counselors to keep them informed on what to expect and to discuss progress as it is made. Counselors also can help parents understand what to look for in terms of changes, and approximately when these changes might occur. If your child is prescribed medication by a physician, be informed about the side

effects and understand that medications may take several weeks to work.

- **Evaluate your counselor** as you would any other professional you work with: You should feel good about the person, but you should also get results.
- **Monitor progress.** When you are unhappy with progress, talk it over with the counselor. Sometimes parents are impatient and expect quick results. Counselors should explain their timetable and perhaps point out progress that may not be so obvious. If progress is not being made, parents should ask how the counseling approach might be modified. If the modified approach doesn't work, parents should consider getting a second opinion or transferring to another professional.
- **Be your child's advocate.** Whether you have private health coverage or you rely on public programs for health care, find out what treatment services are covered and for how long. Let your health care professional, insurance



company, social worker, case manager, and anyone else involved in your child's treatment, know what you think your child and family need. Make sure you are involved in decisions about your child's treatment.

CONCLUSION

Parents matter when it comes to helping their children successfully navigate the teenage years to ensure a safe and healthy passage from childhood into adulthood. Being knowledgeable and keeping communication open, recognizing warning signs of problems and seeking help when you think it's needed are important contributions that can support your teens development.



Above all, never give up on your teen.



Never relinquish your love and your hope.



Keep the conversations going—
Raising children is a lifetime of learning.

Solving
Problems
Together:

*Helping Our
Teenage Children
Succeed*

The White House Council on Youth Violence was established by President Clinton in October, 1999, to coordinate the federal government's efforts in the research and prevention of youth violence. The Council is chaired by Bruce Reed, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, and the Council members are the Attorney General, and the Secretaries of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Treasury.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, we have much to celebrate about our nation's young people. They are far healthier, more prosperous, and look forward to more promising lives than ever before in our history. Teens of all ethnicities are completing high school and enrolling in college at record rates, and more teenagers than ever before are volunteering to serve through community service. In addition, many harmful behaviors are on the decline, including youth violence, homicide, suicide, teen pregnancy, and, in the last couple of years, drug use. Nonetheless, the rates of youth violence, smoking, alcohol and other drug use, and unintended pregnancy are still far too high in our country. Despite a marked decline in teen homicide over the past several years, far too many communities are scarred by violence.

We know that the best approach to the problem of youth violence is a comprehensive one requiring the collaborative efforts of students and parents, teachers, health care providers, police officers, judges, counselors, and religious leaders. That is why my Administration created the Safe Schools Healthy Students Initiative, to support effective, collaborative responses to violence, bringing together school nurses, counselors, teachers and police, to make a difference in the lives of our children and our communities.

At the same time, we know that young people continue to need support and guidance from their parents, as they grow into adulthood. Recent studies tell us that teens view their parents as the best source of information and guidance on serious life issues, and teenagers rate not having enough time with their parents as their top concern. That is why I directed my White House Council on Youth Violence to develop tools for parents. This guide helps parents talk to their teenagers. It helps parents discuss difficult issues such as violence, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and sex, and helps parents identify the warning signs of harmful behaviors. In some instances, parents may need professional guidance to help them deal with the challenges of raising a teenager, and this guide provides some helpful resources.

The great American author and champion of human rights, Pearl Buck, once said, "If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all." In our national struggle against youth violence, we must not fail our children. All of us, especially parents, share responsibility to keep our children safe. We've all got to do our part, and this guide will help.

President William Jefferson Clinton

Many individuals contributed to the development of this document. The White House Council on Youth Violence wishes to thank Dr. Robert Schwebel, the primary author of this guide, for his substantial contribution to this document. The Council would also like to thank Teddi Fine, Anne Mathews-Younes, Louise Peloquin, Farris Tuma, and Bill Modzeleski for their editorial assistance. Carolyn O'Connor also provided invaluable assistance with the formatting and graphics of the guide.

**White House Council on
Youth Violence**

Sonia G. Chessen
Director

Marie E. Burke
Deputy Director

Nicholas J. Lewin
Associate Director

RADM Susan Blumenthal, M.D.
U.S. Assistant Surgeon General
Senior Public Health Advisor and
Scientific Editor

This is an exciting time to be a teenager in America. Young people today are growing up in a rapidly changing technological society, with hopes for a very promising future. Survey results show that 84% of high-school students plan to attend a four-year college. Teens overwhelmingly share their parents' values of honesty and hard work, and are engaged in positive activities. More than half of all teenagers volunteer with a community organization, attend a house of worship weekly, read the newspaper twice a week or more, and attend cultural events or visit museums.

In spite of this positive outlook, however, adolescence—the transition between childhood and adulthood—is still one of the most difficult times for children and parents alike. Growing up is more than the physical changes that occur, such as getting taller or more muscular. This passage is a time for establishing independence, testing limits, trying on different roles, exploring new feelings, having new experiences and fostering intellectual growth. Above all, adolescence is a process that takes time to happen.

We have all heard the frightening and heart-breaking statistics about youth violence, depression, tobacco, and drug use. Even the best-informed young people are constantly being tested by social pressures, emotional needs, and their peers. The push and pull between right and wrong can become a tug of war between adolescent and parent.

Being a parent, grandparent, foster parent, or caregiver of a teen is both rewarding and challenging. Caring adults can make all the difference in a child's life. This booklet provides some useful tools to improve your communication with your teenager, and help him or her get through adolescence as successfully as possible. Read it all or select the sections that help you the most.

- **Getting the conversation started**—tips for opening up the dialogue, even after it has been shut down.
- **Increasing freedom and responsibility**—ideas for how to set the limits that protect your teens while still giving them room to grow and develop.
- **Managing anger: theirs and yours**—anger-management skills that you can use, and that you can share with your adolescent.
- **Handling tough situations**—examples of difficult situations, identification of warning signs of trouble, and advice on how to handle certain problems.
- **When parents need help first**—helping your spouse, or yourself, deal with issues that are affecting your child.
- **Getting help for your teen**—suggestions about how to get help for your teen and your family.

Many parents worry when their teenagers don't want to spend as much time with the family as they did when they were younger. It can hurt; it can be frightening. You worry about their safety and about their future. It is normal for children to want to spend more time with their friends during the teen years, but it shouldn't mean that teens ignore their families. Parents and teens need to take action to stay connected or to reconnect.

I used to be close with my daughter. She would talk with me about everything. Now she's 14 and avoids me. She is quiet at dinner, and then goes to her room or talks with friends on the phone all evening. Sometimes she gets moody and angry. I want to reach her the way I used to, but I don't know how to start.

Sometimes the solution is easy. Spend more time together. Suggest doing things that you both enjoy. Talk more. Dinnertime is a good time for that kind of exchange. Talk about your day. Ask your teen about his or her day. Be sure the television is turned off and you and your teen are tuned in.

Why do teens close down?

Sometimes they're trying to be independent. Sometimes they're embarrassed about their own thoughts and feelings, such as anger, or their sexual desires. Sometimes, teens shut down because of pressures they feel at home, at school, or in the community. One of the most important reasons teens close down is that they're afraid to speak honestly with their parents. They believe if they talk openly about things they have done that might be wrong, they'll be given a lecture, punished, or criticized.

Most teens agree they want to spend more time with their parents. You may be surprised to learn that a recent study indicated that most teenagers rate "not having enough time together" with parents as their top concern. Many will be glad that their parents care enough to make the effort to spend time with them. Some teens have a hard time expressing anger and upset feelings. They keep it bottled inside. Parents need to draw such children out. Try to start a conversation by saying "I can see you've been upset. Let's talk about what's happening."

Some teens, however, may give parents the cold shoulder. If that happens, be patient, and be persistent until you break through. If you can't break through, maybe your child has closed down.

How do you get your teenager to open up?

The best way to help teens open up—or stay open—with parents and other adults in their lives, is by showing your acceptance of them. When they make mistakes or misbehave, you can lovingly help them learn from their experience. Make sure they know that you love them, even when you may be deeply troubled by their behavior.

LISTENING TO YOUR TEEN.

Let teens know you will listen and try to understand their point of view, without putting them down or trying to control them. Being open-minded sometimes can be difficult for adults. But to communicate with teens, parents need to do more than just talk; they also need to listen, and really hear what their teens are saying. They also need to notice which issues are not being discussed and have the courage to start a dialogue about those issues.

When disagreements arise, listening does not mean that you give up your authority as a parent. It *does* mean giving teens a voice in matters that concern them. Through family dialogue, parents get to know what their teens are thinking and feeling, and the teens get to know where their parents stand. Sometimes parents and teens can reach agreements when none seemed possible. Even when agreement cannot be reached, teens are more likely to do what their parents wish if they feel that their parents listened with an open mind.

TOUGH TOPICS

Parents can become frustrated when they try to start a conversation with their teenager and he or she just isn't interested. There are tough topics, however, that need to be discussed. Teenagers face pressures and temptations about drugs, alcohol, sex, and tobacco, and about guns and violence. They need and deserve adult support. Don't wait for a crisis. Ideally, parents should find times and ways to talk with their teens *before* serious problems occur, preferably early in the lives of their children. But it is never too late to start.

Sometimes, you can simply start a dialogue about these issues as part of normal conversation. Often, "teachable moments" happen during day-to-day activities. For example, you could discuss

underage drinking when someone gets intoxicated in the presence of your family, or in a movie, or when you see a newspaper story about an accident caused by teenage drinking. You could discuss violence, and better ways of solving problems, after watching a TV show or movie that portrays violence as a solution to a disagreement.

PRESSURES ON

TODAY'S TEENS

The pressures you felt as an adolescent have been magnified for teens today. You will recognize some of these issues that make it difficult for youth today as issues that concerned you during your youth. Others are unique to today's teens.

- Wanting to be part of a group
- HIV/AIDS
- Changing family structures
- Gangs and violence
- Insecurity about the future
- Money pressures
- Teen sexuality and pregnancy
- Media influences
- Body image
- School pressures
- Ready access to alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs and guns

If your teen doesn't want to talk, try to be clear that your purpose is to build understanding and to be supportive, certainly not to find fault or to punish. If you can't nudge your child into a dialogue, try backing off. This show of respect can be disarming. Then, give your son or daughter some time to think it over. A

few days later, you can try again to start the discussion. Parents can be flexible in getting the discussion going, but cannot give up on the need for this discussion to eventually begin. Although it can be harder to get boys to open up, parents should engage in dialogue with their sons and daughters alike.

Breaking the Ice

Why can't I get a discussion started with my son about sex, drugs or other tough issues? He just tells me "Everything is fine" or "It's my life" and walks off.

Below is an example of one good way to open a dialogue about tough issue, and some roadblocks you might encounter:

You: As a family, we've never talked about alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. I'd like to know what you think and feel about drugs—and I want to tell you what I think. I promise I won't punish you for what you think, or have done. I just want us to talk.

Teen: It's my life; I'm old enough to make my own decisions.

You: You're right. This is your life and you have to make your own decisions about what you do. I don't want to control you. But we do need to talk. I want to hear your thoughts, and I want to tell you mine. I promise to listen with an open mind, and ask that you do the same. We may disagree, but at least we will understand each other.

Teen: Forget it. You always end up lecturing me.

You: If our discussions have ended with me lecturing you, then I apologize. But, I won't lecture you now. I want to talk with you, not at you, and I want to hear what you have to say. I'm willing to hear your complaints, too. Tell me what keeps you from talking with me. Even someone as old as I am can change.

Teen: Maybe later. Not now.

You: OK, I can wait a little. Today is Monday. Let's both think about it for now, and we'll talk on Thursday, because we do need to discuss these issues together.

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

Today's teens, more than ever before, need to connect with adults—if not a parent, then a coach or teacher, grandparent or foster parent, clergy member, or other trusted adult in their lives. Teens need at least one adult with whom they can talk openly. They should not be left to rely only on other teens for important information, conversation, and help with problem solving about how to grow up wisely.

FIND

SOMEONE YOUR TEENS CAN TALK TO

Try to establish strong communication with your teen, but remember that some teens may talk more openly about sensitive topics with someone who is not their parent or guardian. If you are a parent, try not to let this hurt your feelings; remember that your child will respect you more in the long run if you encourage him or her to talk with someone else, if that is what works best.

**You don't trust me...
But they're my friends...
Everyone else is doing it...**

Teens need their independence, but how do you make sure they are safe? It's tough to decide when to give your teen more freedom. Do you hang on to the kite string for as long as you possibly can, or give the kite free air? The decision isn't easy. One parent's decision for his or her teen may not be right for other parents and their teens.

Although every adolescent is different, there are many experiences common to the teenage years. The most common may be the pull and push between dependence and independence. Parents can give their children increased independence, but still have rules and set limits, and must respond to the limit-testing of their children.

Teens, at younger and younger ages, are putting themselves at risk for sexually transmitted diseases—including AIDS—and for pregnancy. And some teens, and even younger children, smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, use other drugs, or commit acts of violence and other crimes. No won-

THE CHALLENGE: To help teens learn about the world and accept new challenges with the least amount of danger and harm.

Parents must walk a fine line between controlling too much and being too relaxed about rules. When parents are too restrictive, they can push teens toward rebellion. When they are too permissive, teens can get out of control. It's a balancing act.

der so many parents are concerned, even frightened; no wonder so many try to control the behavior of their teenage children.

It is important for parents to make rules for their young children. As children get older, however, they need to learn to

make their own decisions and life choices. Teens need the chance to practice good decision-making skills, and to manage new life experiences. Parents need to give teens the freedom to do just that, pushing

back the fences and giving them practice. But there is a catch; teens must be ready for it. They need to agree to behave in responsible ways, and show that they can handle the freedom. They also need to keep parents informed. That way, parents know when to lend guidance and supervision, and how to support their progress.

That's where respect, responsibility and reliability come in.

Respect: Respect is a two-way street, but it starts with you. Give your teens the respect that you would like to be given. Give them credit for their knowledge and abilities; pay attention and listen to them. That means showing your confidence in your teen, and being supportive.

Responsibility: Teens are learning to take care of themselves as they prepare for adulthood. That's what growing up is all about. Give them an appropriate amount of freedom and independence.

Encourage and promote responsibility and good decision-making, offering support and gentle help with difficult decisions. Let your teens know they can gain more freedom as they demonstrate responsible behavior.

Reliability: Part of growing up is learning and adapting to rules—rules about driving and work, rules about

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

drinking and dating, social rules and family rules. Teens will test the rules, but over time most will make these rules part of their lives. This kind of reliability is worthy of discussion and praise. **When you can rely on your teens behaving responsibly, it may be time to give them more freedom.**

Above all, a parent's role is to believe in your teens. Set your standards and expectations high, keep your love for them constant—even when problems occur—and provide consistent support, including practical help, so they can achieve their promise.

Baggy Jeans/Odd-Colored Hair: Where Do I Draw The Line?

Jason is doing well in middle school. He's great with his younger brothers and helps around the house, but I'm concerned about some of his new friends. Some have dyed their hair odd colors; they wear baggy jeans with their boxer shorts showing. A few have pierced tongues and tattoos. A while ago, Jason asked about getting those baggy jeans. I said no, because the gang kids wear them. I hoped he'd forget about them, but he has asked again. Between the drugs in our neighborhood, baggy jeans, and new friends, I'm worried. I want to steer him away from problem kids. Should I let him buy the jeans? What should I do about his friends?

Adolescents are striving for independence. As their teens prepare for adulthood, parents should encourage independence, while making sure their teens don't drift too far from a positive course. How should parents react to the choices of their teenage children? In general, extend trust and give children as much freedom of choice as they can handle. Be sure to set limits, too. Your decisions about the baggy jeans and about your son's friends require careful evaluation of all the details. You need to think about your own values, look realistically at where Jason seems to be headed, understand what he is doing or wants to do, and determine how best to promote his safety and growth.

Jason is doing well in school and not getting into trouble. Success in school gives children a sense of accomplishment. They can see a positive future for themselves and are less likely to want to join a gang. These facts argue for giving

him more freedom. When it comes to his friends and his preferences in clothing, you need to gather more information if you're going to make a smart decision. You need to know more about your son's friends: What are they like? Do they use alcohol or other drugs? Are they in gangs? How does your son feel about these kids? How does he feel about drug use? How does he feel about gangs?

Get to know your son's friends. Ask him to invite his friends to your home so you can meet them. You'll show that you have an open mind. If his friends behave poorly in your presence, your son will notice.

You also need to understand what the baggy jeans mean to Jason. Are they just a style he likes? Or is wearing them as a way to "fit in" with the gang types? Sometimes teens dress differently just to harmlessly show some independence from the family. Think back to your own adolescence, and remember the fashion changes. There may be some similarities. Have a discussion with your son about his friends and about the clothing he likes to wear. Sometimes discussions can bridge differences. Maybe your son will be swayed by what you say about the jeans and gangs, or maybe he will convince you that baggy jeans have become a style that has little to do with belonging to a gang.

A conversation with your teen can help you decide whether there is a real problem or it is just a question of fashion.

Warm family relationships can help protect children from violence, alcohol and other drugs, and other risky behaviors. But family members—even in the most loving families—get angry at one another from time to time. When families communicate well and work cooperatively, anger can be resolved without a problem. Handled poorly, however, anger gets in the way of good communication between parent and child. Anger without control can sometimes be dangerous and can even become violent.

Some adults see anger as an emotion that should be suppressed, because it leads to trouble. Some grew up in families in which anger generally led to explosive behavior and even violence. Others were taught that it is not “nice” to be angry. Many adults are not good at managing anger, and expressing this emotion in a healthy way. It’s important that parents know how to manage anger successfully in family life, at work and in the community. And that same knowledge needs to be shared with children, so that they learn this important skill.

My teenage son doesn't know how to handle his intense feelings. He talks back to us and even swears at us. He doesn't do what we ask him to do. He seems to be trying to aggravate us. I get so angry I blow up. We end up screaming at each other and saying things we regret. I feel like things are out of control.

With the many changes that occur during adolescence, it’s not unusual for teenagers to feel anger and resentment toward parents. Adolescents struggle to establish their own independent identities as they prepare for adulthood. Sometimes anger is their way of asserting independ-

ence. This can wear thin on parents, who may fight back with their own anger, creating a vicious circle of escalating resentment.

The best solution to out-of-control anger—whether from a parent or from a teen—is to step back, and identify more positive, healthy ways to deal with strong feelings. We do this when we can calm down and respond in a disciplined and thoughtful way. By maintaining composure, parents can be good role models and open the door to constructive communication with their children.

But how do you keep calm when you feel pushed to the limit? Here are some suggestions:

TIPS FOR CALMING DOWN

- **Pick your battles.** Sometimes the issue is not worth the anger, or worth arguing about.
- **Take a deep breath;** count to ten. Think about the issue before a single word comes out of your mouth.
- **Go for a walk.**
- **Use “self-talk” to calm down.** That is, say something soothing to yourself such as: “I need to relax and stay calm. I can’t afford to blow up.”
- **Reframe the issue.** For example, when your son says something rude to you, it may be less a matter of him disrespecting you than a sign that he has a problem with his anger. “Framing” it this way, you focus on the fact that he needs your help in overcoming this problem.
- **Use humor.** Humor can be a good way to calm anger; find the silly side of the issue and find a way to laugh about it.

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

Sometimes the hardest part of helping children learn to manage their anger is that parents have to look at their own practices. Parents need to ask:

“Have I accepted my own anger and the anger of others in the family? Do I express anger in positive and constructive ways? Do I resolve conflict well? Have I taught my children to accept and express their anger?”

Resolving conflict constructively may be a huge challenge, but it's an absolute necessity for the sake of every member of your family.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

Once you are calm, you are in a better position to address the issues that caused the conflict. Here are some tips:

- **Give your point of view.** State the problem as you see it; speak clearly and calmly—don't yell.
- **Ask to hear your teen's point of view.**
- **Pay attention, listen, and consider your teen's point of view.**
- **Discuss ways to solve the dispute without a battle.**
- **Practice the art of compromise.** Find the middle ground you can both live with comfortably.
- **Assert your authority, when appropriate, but in a calm, yet firm manner.**

WHAT IF THE ANGER DOESN'T STOP?

When anger becomes a way of life—a chronic problem—for someone in the fami-

ly, the underlying issue may be larger than you or your teen can manage. If you even *think* your family is at this crisis point, or if you even *think* you or any member of your family has a serious problem with anger management, it's time to seek help from a mental health professional. Recognize that this situation necessitates counseling, and sometimes that means the entire family will need help. Refer to the section: “Getting Help For Your Teen” on page ____.



HANDLING TOUGH SITUATIONS

Teenagers, like all of us, sometimes need help and guidance, but it can be difficult for parents to recognize when to intervene in their teenager's life. You know about the challenges that today's teenagers face—some of which are different than those you faced as a teen. Understanding these challenges, and knowing when and how to intervene to help your child overcome them, is an essential role for parents.

It is also a difficult role. Being able to tell the difference between normal teenage behavior and self-destructive, hurtful behavior can be very difficult. The following examples are designed to help you understand some of the warning signs that your teenager may need help. Read through these examples and see if any sound familiar.

Remember, though, that every teenager is different and there is often no clear answer to your specific situation. If you are concerned, talk to your teenage children. At a minimum, let them know that you are worried about them and tell them that you would like to talk. If you are still concerned, or if you think that your teenagers may hurt themselves or others, you should get help immediately. Read the final section "Getting Help For Your Teen", for assistance in finding the right resources.

BULLYING

I was called to my 13-year-old son's school today because he stole some money from another boy during lunch. This wasn't the first incident. A few weeks ago the principal called because Keith made another boy take the blame for graffiti he wrote on the school bus. No matter what we tell him, he seems to get himself in trouble. What can I do?

You certainly have reason to be concerned about your son's behavior. He is acting like a bully and needs your help to put on the brakes. It's good the principal has called. The school can set a clear standard—no bullying—and make sure that your son understands the consequences for violations of the rule. You, too, need to be clear that you disapprove of bullying. You need to help your son develop empathy—which is the ability to see how other people feel, and to care about their feel-

ings. You will probably want to impose consequences on your son for his unacceptable behavior. Be firm, but do it in a loving way. Right now your son needs your empathy, understanding, and love. By providing this, you can show the power of caring about others in a positive way.

This still leaves the bigger part of the problem—getting to the reason for your son's behavior. You have to talk with him to determine why he is being a bully. What leads your son to behave in such hurtful ways?

With your help, or with professional help, your son must come to understand his own motives for bullying. Some young people are bullies because they are bored and crave excitement; some do it to feel powerful; some do it as a response to family problems; some do it for attention and fame. You need to ask him very detailed questions:

- Did you plan to take the other boy's lunch money beforehand, or was it a sudden urge?
- How did you pick your victim?
- What were you thinking when you did it? (Ex: I need the money; I'll look cool.)
- How did you feel when you did it? (Ex: Excited, thrilled; powerful).
- How do you think the victim felt?
- How do you justify what you did?
- What are you feeling about yourself?
- What's happening in our family and in your life?

When you understand the details of what happened, you can determine how to help your child. For example, if your son stole money because he saw it sitting on a lunch tray and had a sudden urge to grab

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

it, he will need to learn to recognize his impulses, and to stop them. If he planned to steal money, pre-selected a victim, and stole because he wanted to look like a big shot, he will need to learn positive ways to make friends and gain peer acceptance. If there's a

problem in the family, it's important to seek help. We have to help our children learn healthy and socially acceptable ways to cope with urges and satisfy their needs. A big challenge? Yes. But it's part of growing up and becoming a good citizen.

What if your teenager is being bullied?

Bullying is a serious problem, affecting many children. A recent study indicated that nearly 1 in 10 students in grades 6 through 12 have been bullied in the past year. About 1 in 3 students report that someone stole or deliberately damaged their property (car, clothing, books) in the past school year and 7% report being threatened by a weapon.

Teenage victims of bullies need help and support in responding to this aggressive behavior. Many parents give their children conflicting messages about how to respond to physical aggression. Should you encourage your teenager to "fight back" or not? We do not want to resort to violence, but we also do not want our children to be victims and to feel powerless. Most experts agree that children should not hit back, other than for self-defense and survival. Retaliation perpetuates a cycle of violence. It may also lead to escalating physical confrontation, which can be very dangerous, especially considering the possibility that weapons might be used.

Parents can help their children who have been teased or bullied learn to be powerful, without resorting to violence. You could start by letting your teenager know that you seriously disapprove of taunting and other types of bullying behavior, and that you think no one should have to put up with this. You can empower teens by asking them if they have any ideas about what might end the bullying.

Parents can teach teens some powerful, non-violent ways of responding when they are bullied:

- Demonstrate strength by using eye contact and positive self-assured body language, with their head held high and shoulders back.
- Practice "verbal self-defense", using anything from humor to clever comments to de-escalate tension.
- Proudly walk away from provocation, and ignore taunting.
- Join a social group or club, which can reduce isolation and give them a sense of pride and belonging.

Young people are entitled to a safe learning environment in their school. **Another way to empower your teenagers can be to encourage them to speak with school administrators about the problem.** In part they may want to raise the issue of their own situation, and their own safety fears. Sometimes, it is most empowering to discuss the situation as a school-wide problem, without focus on particular perpetrators. Parents should back up their children by also voicing the same concern. School/community partnerships can lead to effective programs that reduce bullying behavior.

If teenage children have been picked on for a long time, they probably have some intense emotions from that, and could benefit from talking about them. **Victims of bullies may experience anger, anxiety, and even depression. Being the victim of a bully can also be a risk factor for violent behavior. Your teens need and deserve help coping with these feelings.** You or a mental health professional could give them opportunities to express themselves, and resolve these feelings.

DRUG USE AND FAILURE IN SCHOOL

Our 16-year old daughter, Julia, was caught drinking at a party. We suspect that she has smoked marijuana, too. She's been doing poorly in school—in fact, now she's neglecting her school-work and failing one subject. We set up required study time, but it hasn't helped. She misses curfews and hasn't been doing her chores. We've talked with her about alcohol, drugs, and sex and we've been clear about the rules and given her consequences when she has broken them. Obviously, it hasn't worked. She says I'm a nag. What else can I do?

ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Julia's drinking and possible drug use are probably the tip of the iceberg. Alcohol and drug use often occur along with other serious problems.

You need to talk with Julia about the details of her use of alcohol and other drugs. You need to talk about, and help her think through, her drug use—what drugs she is using, how often she uses them, how much she uses; why she is using; and how she may be harming herself or may be headed for trouble. Make sure she understands that there are problems that concern you, and that you and she can work together to turn things around.

If you see these signs, something is wrong, whether or not it is caused by alcohol or other drug abuse. Your child needs help. Start a dialogue with your teen about the problems. If you are still confused about whether alcohol or other drugs are part of the problem, or if you recognize that your child has a serious alcohol or drug problem, get professional help.

SCHOOL FAILURE

Failure in school is another serious issue, but nagging is the wrong approach. Enforcing study times usually doesn't work, either. Parents often assume that school problems are caused by lack of effort, and that making kids study more will improve their performance. Usually there is much more to it. For example, children may be having trouble with academic work and need tutoring. Or they may need help with study skills (understanding how, when, and where to study). They may also be upset about something at home, at school, or with peers, that is interfering with their concentration. Even when the amount of effort invested in schoolwork is deficient, usually the underlying cause is discouragement,

Signs of possible alcohol or other drug abuse:

School:	truancy; drop in grades; behavior problems
Social life:	dropping old friends and activities; new friends use alcohol or other drugs; strange-sounding phone calls with covert communication, possibly about drugs
Emotional life:	basic personality changes; inexplicable and sudden mood changes; apathy; appearing listless and "hung-over; increased forgetfulness
Family:	very secretive (more than a need for privacy); estrangement; less responsible at home; more conflict at home
Physical:	red eyes; deterioration in personal hygiene; sleep disturbances; slurred speech; fatigue or apparent "hyper" behavior
Physical evidence:	disappearance of beer or liquor supply; money or valuables missing; drug paraphernalia; use of incense; prescription drugs missing; use of glue, paint thinner, or other chemicals that may be inhaled

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

rather than laziness. The remedy is support, not more pressure. We need strategies to get teens thinking and solving problems for themselves. Dialogue is the most effective way to get them started.

How long ago did Julia start slacking off in school? What do you think has been holding her back? You need answers to these questions to determine how to correct the problem. Encourage Julia to consult with her teachers or the school counselor, and offer to participate in these meetings. If need be, you can consult with the school or get other professional help. Using all available resources, you and your daughter should be able to determine the causes of the problem. Once you know the causes, the solutions may become clearer. Your daughter will still have some obstacles to overcome, but at least she will be headed in the right direction.

SADNESS/DEPRESSION

Sarah has never had much confidence. High school is harder than she expected. My husband and I are divorced, and this has been very hard on her. Now, she looks and acts absolutely exhausted, doesn't sleep, and just sits in her room crying with her door closed. When she goes out, she dresses all in black clothing and wears heavy black eye shadow. I have tried to talk to her, but she acts angry and won't say a word to me. I can't tell if Sarah is just "going through a phase" or is truly depressed.

The teen years offer new experiences and challenges that can be exciting, but also stressful. The stress of adolescence is one of many factors that can make young peo-

ple unhappy. Teenagers are also experiencing hormonal changes which can make them moody or sad. Some sadness and mood swings are normal—they're a part of life. But when the "blues" last for weeks, or interfere with school, home, or other activities, your teen may be suffering from clinical depression, a mood disorder that is a real medical illness that is often unrecognized, but can be effectively treated.

SYMPTOMS OF

DEPRESSION

If a number of these symptoms persist for two weeks or more, a person may be diagnosed as clinically depressed. Parents should talk with children if any of these symptoms occur:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Restlessness, irritability, or excessive crying
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, pessimism
- Sleeping too much or too little, early-morning awakening
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

Source: National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health

When teens, or anyone, are very upset about things, they need to talk with someone who cares and can help. Parents should be concerned, and talk with their child about his or her unhappiness, whether it is a temporary state, or a case of clinical depression. We should set an example of confronting problems, head on.

It is sometimes hard to tell when teens are depressed, because the symptoms may be hard to read. For example, you may mistake a sleep disorder for a late-night television habit, or your teen may only reveal her sadness in writings that contain morbid themes. Teens may say they are "bored" when actually they're depressed. In addition, signs of depression may vary among cultural groups: Teens in some groups experience sadness or guilt; while others experience more physical symptoms, such as headaches and nervousness.

Clearly, Sarah is unhappy and may be suffering from depression. What is going on in her life to make her feel this way? **Think about past and present problems.** When did this crying begin? Did it coincide with family tension, or the divorce, or her problems in school? How is she getting along with friends? How are things in your family, now? Are there any other problems or symptoms? The answers to these questions provide clues about what is wrong, and how to help her.

Depression does increase the risk of suicide. Many teens think about suicide, and some of them follow through. Parents should be especially concerned and get professional help immediately if additional warning signs are evident, such as when a child has a history of previous suicide attempts, hints at not being around in the future, expresses a desire to die, gives away prized possessions, has experienced a recent loss, or makes threats of suicide.

Sarah needs to talk with someone who cares and can help. Give her an opportunity to discuss her feelings and what is causing them. If she won't open up with you, find an adult with whom she can talk, perhaps a family physician or a mental health professional.

SYMPTOMS OF SUICIDE

People most at-risk for committing suicide are those who have several of the following characteristics. It is important to note that many people experience one or more risk factors and are not suicidal.

- attempted suicide in the past
- a family history of suicide
- a firearm in the home
- consume alcohol and/or abuse other substance
- are depressed (changes in sleeping patterns and appetite, feeling worthless)
- experienced violence (physical, sexual, domestic, or child abuse)
- are experiencing unusual stress due to adverse life events, such as separation or divorce
- spent time in jail or prison
- a medical condition
- move frequently from one location to another
- experience poor parent/child communication
- feel socially isolated

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ANGER AND VIOLENCE

My 16-year-old son, James, is failing in school. He is often angry, has no interest in his family, and sometimes doesn't come home until 4 a.m. I have no idea what he's doing and worry he might get into trouble. At home, he spends most of the time in his room playing violent video games and listening to music that has violent lyrics. I've heard him plotting "revenge" with friends and he seems to always be talking about different weapons. This worries me, but I don't really believe he would hurt anyone. What can I do?

You are right to be worried. Although it is difficult to predict who will become violent, there are certain risk factors that warn of possible danger. The more of these warning signs we see, the more we believe that children are "at risk" for violent behavior. No single factor indicates a problem, but if we see a pattern of several risk factors, it's time to take precautions.

James exhibits many of these warning signs. He is isolated from his family, failing in school, and staying out much too late at night. He has discussed weapons, has a problem with anger, and you heard him plotting revenge. Children who have been bullied, mistreated by others, or feel they have been mistreated, are at higher risk for violence. The same is true for children who feel rejected or alone. Has James been bullied, or excluded, or teased by peers or family members? This would be another warning sign.

An obsession with violent video games may also be a warning sign. You should closely monitor and discuss the entertainment choices of your children. Take some time to watch television with James, and

use the time to discuss what you see, especially emphasizing positive behavior and positive problem-solving, as opposed to violent ways of settling conflict. If there are violent moments, discuss the real consequences of violence. Notice if the presentation fully reveals the harm and anguish of victims, or whether the impact of the violence is minimized.

Bear in mind, however, that risk factors are **not** predictors of violence, just warning signs of possible trouble. After some of the recent high profile shootings in schools, the media has publicized lists of warning signs. These lists can be used to unfairly label non-violent students as dangerous, because many adolescents who will never become violent will show some of the 'red flag' behaviors.

Still, parents should recognize these warning signs, and use them as a cue that a child needs help.

When parents are stuck and can't make progress with a child's problem, they should connect with someone who can. To help James, you should look for a child/family mental health professional who is well-respected in your community and experienced in working with adolescents and their families. When a teen exhibits a number of warning signs for violence, as James does, parents should act promptly—for safety's sake. As a precaution, parents should make sure their children do not have access to firearms, and remove other dangerous materials or objects from the home. Read the section "Getting Help for Your Teen" for guidance.

Parents can do much to help their teenage sons or daughters through a variety of different situations. Depression, violence, substance abuse, and bullying are all serious issues that parents and teens can work together to help resolve. Sometimes, however, parents need to confront their own problems before they can help their teenager. Children who live in violent households, or homes where one of the caretakers uses drugs or abuses alcohol, often sustain severe emotional trauma that can last a lifetime. Even if a parent's violence or substance abuse occurred when a child was small, he or she may still suffer during his or her adolescent years.

Intimate partner (or domestic) violence, and parental alcohol or other drug abuse, affect both the victim, and the child. Research shows that approximately 90 percent of children who live in homes where there is intimate partner violence see or hear the abuse. Further, children who are exposed to family violence are much more likely to become violent than are children from nonviolent families. Studies also show that if a parent uses alcohol or drugs, his or her children are more likely to drink or use drugs.

Below are examples of situations where children have been affected by current, or even prior, parental behavior. If these situations sound familiar and if you need some help deciding what to do, read through the resources listed at the end of this section and reach out for help for yourself or your partner.

I was called to school by my daughter's principal. Apparently, when her math teacher corrected her in class, Deirdre threw a book at him and stormed out of the classroom. Deirdre's explanation was that "no one else cares, so why should I?" Today was a wake up call. I have to admit it:

My wife has a serious problem with alcohol. I'm not home much. I'm always avoiding the chaos. I know this is serious. What can I do now?

It sounds as though you recognize that your wife's alcohol abuse is affecting Deirdre. This is the first step. Parents with serious alcohol and other drug problems are often overly absorbed in their own needs and problems. They may not prepare meals, or be present at them. They may not carry their share of the household responsibilities. They may not properly supervise their children's homework and other aspects of their lives. Often their moods dominate the family. Their anger leaves other family members fearful and anxious. Roles may be confused and children end up taking care of the parents. Communication is often muddled.

Children in these families feel isolated and alone, with no one to talk to. Their hurt and angry feelings may lead to depression, their own abuse of drugs, or may even erupt in violent behavior, as in your situation with your daughter. Children also sometimes seek attention and/or act out their feelings by shoplifting or committing other crimes.

So what can you do? First, children should not feel alone and abandoned, nor should they be caretakers for their parents. Deirdre needs a parent who will take responsibility and act as a parent should. Let her know that you are assuming this responsibility. She also should know that you are aware that her mother has a problem, and that it is affecting the whole family. Second, you should encourage your wife to get help (see box for suggested steps).

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

If an alcoholic is unwilling to seek help, is there any way to get him or her into treatment?

This can be a challenging situation. An alcoholic cannot be forced to get help except under certain circumstances, such as when a violent incident results in police being called or when it is a medical emergency. This doesn't mean, however, that you have to wait for a crisis to make an impact. Based on clinical experience, many alcoholism treatment specialists recommend the following steps to help an alcoholic accept treatment:

Stop all "rescue missions." Family members often try to protect an alcoholic from the results of his or her behavior by making excuses and by getting him or her out of alcohol-related jams. It is important to stop all such rescue attempts immediately, so that the alcoholic will fully experience the harmful effects of his or her drinking—and thereby become more motivated to stop.

Time your intervention. Plan to talk with the drinker shortly after an alcohol-related problem has occurred—for example, a serious family argument in which drinking played a part or an alcohol-related accident. Also choose a time when he or she is sober, when both of you are in a calm frame of mind, and when you can speak privately.

Be specific. Tell the family member that you are concerned about his or her drinking and want to be supportive in getting help. Back up your concern with examples of the ways in which his or her drinking has caused problems for you or your teenagers, including the most recent incident. Tell the family member that until he or she gets help, you will carry out consequences—not to punish the drinker, but to protect yourself from the harmful effects of the drinking. Do not make any threats you are not prepared to carry out.

Be ready to help. Gather information in advance about local treatment options. If the person is willing to seek help, call immediately for an appointment with a treatment program

counselor. Offer to go with the family member on the first visit to a treatment program and/or Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Call on a friend. If the family member still refuses to get help, ask a friend to talk with him or her, using the steps described above. A friend who is a recovering alcoholic may be particularly persuasive, but any caring, non-judgmental friend may be able to make a difference. The intervention of more than one person, more than one time, is often necessary to persuade an alcoholic person to seek help.



Find strength in numbers. With the help of a professional therapist, some families join with other relatives and friends to confront an alcoholic as a group. While this approach may be effective, it should only be attempted under the guidance of a therapist who is experienced in this kind of group intervention.

Get support. Whether or not the alcoholic family member seeks help, you may benefit from the encouragement and support of other people in your situation. Support groups offered in most communities include Al-Anon, which holds regular meetings for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic's life, and Alateen, for children of alcoholics. You can reach them by calling 888-4AL-ANON. These groups help family members understand that they are not responsible for an alcoholic's drinking and that they need to take steps to take care of themselves, regardless of whether the alcoholic family member chooses to get help.

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health

After too many years of accepting my husband's abuse, I finally stood up to him about three years ago. He used to hit me, yell, and pound on walls. I lived in terror. He would always be very sorry afterwards, apologizing to me, and promising things would change. He never abused the children, but I'm afraid they saw too much of this. Finally one day I packed, took the kids, and left for a women's shelter. But now my 15-year old daughter, Emily, has nightmares about her Dad, and gets very nervous and jumpy at times. My 17-year old son, Eric, has been getting loud and aggressive, just as his father used to get. I think he may even be abusing his girlfriend. I feel as though I'm reliving the nightmare through Eric. Is there any hope?

You were brave to stand up to your husband, and wise to get the protection of a women's shelter. There is likely a connection between your husband's past behavior, and the present situation. Children who witness violence are more at risk for a variety of mental health problems, including depression, and are more likely to become violent themselves. Your husband was the male role model for Eric, who saw aggressive behavior patterns that he may be copying.

Many children who witness violence in the home suffer from anxiety problems, including what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You may have heard about soldiers who return from war

and suffer from PTSD. Emily surely has issues with anxiety and may well be feeling the impact of the trauma of what she witnessed. PTSD has a number of symptoms, such as re-experiencing traumatic events in ways through nightmares or flashbacks; avoiding people and places associated with the trauma; becoming detached from loved ones; and by being highly aroused, as manifested by problems concentrating and being quick to fly into a rage.

Have you been in family therapy? This treatment could help everyone. It gives children an opportunity to identify and express feelings honestly. Emily could get help dealing with her anxiety and working out her feelings toward her father. Eric

could get help for his own aggressive tendencies, learn anger management, and find healthy ways of expressing his feelings. If he is abusing his girlfriend, it is even more essential that he get help immediately. The tragedy of violence between adult family members is that children who witness family violence

are more at risk of becoming violent themselves, and the cycle may continue from one generation to the next. If you are still in a violent relationship, but need help, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.



GETTING HELP FOR YOUR TEEN

Getting help for your teen is a major step in bringing him or her back from the edge of harm's way, and promoting a healthy future. You should also know that sometimes when a member of your family is having serious difficulties, it may be a way of letting parents know that the whole family needs help. When seeking help for your teen, consider whether the rest of the family may need counseling as well.

IF THERE ARE PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

If your teen is having difficulty at school, such as poor grades, behavior problems, or being bullied, it is important to reach out to school officials. They can provide support, and also may be able to give you additional information about what has been going on with your child.

Connect with Your Child's School

Research has shown that students whose parents are involved and connected with them and their schools are more likely to succeed in school. It can be difficult to find the time to volunteer, but just building a relationship with your child's teachers, and the school itself, can go a long way in preventing your child from feeling the isolation that can lead to other problems.

You can start with your child's teacher. If the school has a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist, you can contact this person. The school principal is also a good

resource and may be able to pull together appropriate staff members to talk to you about your child. If you have concerns about contacting school personnel, most school districts have designated a parent advocate or have a parent resource center to help parents navigate the school system.

School personnel are also a good source of referrals for mental health services.

Children Exposed to Violence or Abuse

Young people exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect, may be traumatized by their experiences, and are more likely to be at risk for mental health problems, for drug abuse, and for committing acts of violence

Experiencing or witnessing traumatic events is painful and can hurt your teen as much as a physical injury. But your teen can recover successfully from trauma. Effective treatment is available.

IF YOUR TEEN APPEARS DEPRESSED OR ANXIOUS

Depression is more than the blues or the blahs; it is more than the normal, everyday ups and downs. When that "down" mood, combined with other symptoms (see box on page __), lasts for more than a couple of weeks, the condition may be clinical depression. Clinical depression is a serious health problem that affects the total person.

Anxiety disorders are illnesses that fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear that doesn't go away, and often gets

WHEN PARENTS NEED HELP FIRST (CONT'D)

worse. In addition to feelings, these disorders can change your teen's behavior, physical health and appearance, school performance, social activity and the ability to handle everyday decisions and pressures.

If you think your child has an emotional problem (whether or not it involves mental illness) that requires more help than you can give, the sooner he or she gets the needed help, the sooner he or she may feel better.

Mental disorders are real illnesses, just like diabetes or other physical ailments. Having a mental illness does not mean a person is weak, or a failure, or is not really trying. It means they need treatment. Untreated, mental disorders can result in damage to self-esteem, poor school performance, problems with relationships, and have tragic consequences, like suicide. Mental health treatment works. Treatment helps reduce the symptoms of the mental disorder, improve relationships, strengthen coping skills, and promote behaviors that make a person's life better.

Neither parent nor teen should be afraid of what people might say or think about seeking treatment. You can draw upon many available resources and may even be surprised by how supportive your friends and your teen's friends can be.



I want to get help for my teen, but I don't know how to find someone good.

In picking a mental health professional, it's important to identify a person who is experienced in working with youth, and highly respected in the community. School administrators, counselors, and teachers often know mental health providers with this expertise. Family doctors or your local mental health association can also point you in the right direction. Ask other parents as well—they are among the best referral sources.

Skilled mental health professionals understand that adolescents may be slow to embrace professional help, and perhaps were brought for help against their will. They carefully build trust and an effective therapeutic relationship. They help young people understand that much of their conversation is kept confidential—and also spell out the limits of confidentiality.

If you haven't found a good referral in your community, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration runs a Knowledge Exchange Network (KEN) which can provide help in finding a mental health professional. You can find them on the web at www.mentalhealth.org or call their toll-free number at 1-800-789-2647 (Mon-Fri 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. EST).

There are so many different kinds of mental health providers. What's the difference? How do I know what is right for my child?

Social workers, mental health counselors, psychiatric nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists among others, all have different kinds of training and skills. In psychotherapy sessions, mental health professionals help people talk about their

PARENTS MATTER: HELPING YOUR CHILDREN NAVIGATE THEIR TEENAGE YEARS

experiences, thoughts, and feelings, in order to solve personal and family problems and treat mental illness. There are different types of therapies. Some therapists focus on changing behaviors, and others deal more specifically with changing thinking patterns that can lead to troublesome feelings and behaviors.

Psychologists and psychiatrists can also conduct tests to diagnose problems. Psychiatrists and other medical doctors can determine if there are other physical illnesses that may be contributing to the problem and they can prescribe medicine when this is determined to be an important part of the treatment. Medications are available that effectively treat mental illnesses that are severe or disabling.

Support groups can also be helpful for individuals and families. Your family physician or school guidance counselor can often help you assess what type of professional help you need.

I know this is all going to be expensive—how will I afford it?

You may have some mental health coverage in your health insurance plan. But if your ability to pay is limited, you should be able to access community-based services. Your state department of mental health, and local community mental health center can direct you to these resources. City and county mental health

services are often offered on a sliding fee scale, based on your financial resources, and some health centers in universities and other mental health professionals in the community may also provide for a sliding scale fee to those who cannot afford the full fee.

WHAT ABOUT SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

Teachers, doctors, sports coaches, clergy members, and others involved with youth have roles to play in helping to recognize and get help for teens who are using alcohol or other drugs. But usually parents are the first line of defense against substance abuse. Set a good example by not using illicit drugs, and if you drink alcohol, do so responsibly, and only in moderation. Know your family's history of alcohol and drug abuse, and talk to your children about it. If you have a drug problem (alcohol, prescription drugs, or illicit drugs), get help for yourself. Teach your child or teenager that it is okay to get help. Learn the signs of drug abuse and take action to help your children if they have a problem. (See box on page ____.)

To find the right help, you should start by getting information about services in your community. Ask your health care professional for a referral, or contact local hospitals, state and local substance abuse agencies, school counselors, or community

mental health centers. You can also contact national or local substance abuse treatment help-lines, such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment National Helpline at 800-662-HELP.

GENERAL TIPS WHEN GETTING HELP FOR YOUR TEEN AND YOUR FAMILY

Here are general tips on getting help for you and your teen:

- **Make sure the whole family is involved.** Family stress and turmoil contribute to the problems of teenagers. Teens' problems add to the family stress. The whole family must work together to solve those problems. Ideally, the entire family should participate in counseling. The priority, however, is to that your teen get counseling. He or she might first want to meet privately with a counselor and may agree to family involvement later. Or, if your child prefers to go individually, find a second counselor to work with the whole family together.
- **Be patient.** Understand that experienced counselors take their time with young people who enter counseling against their will. It may take a while to develop rapport, and a while longer for teens to be ready to make changes. Parents should ask counselors to keep them informed on what to expect and to discuss progress as it is made. Counselors also can help parents understand what to look for in terms of changes, and approximately when these changes might occur. If your child is prescribed medication by a physician, be informed about the side

effects and understand that medications may take several weeks to work.

- **Evaluate your counselor** as you would any other professional you work with: You should feel good about the person, but you should also get results.
- **Monitor progress.** When you are unhappy with progress, talk it over with the counselor. Sometimes parents are impatient and expect quick results. Counselors should explain their timetable and perhaps point out progress that may not be so obvious. If progress is not being made, parents should ask how the counseling approach might be modified. If the modified approach doesn't work, parents should consider getting a second opinion or transferring to another professional.
- **Be your child's advocate.** Whether you have private health coverage or you rely on public programs for health care, find out what treatment services are covered and for how long. Let your health care professional, insurance



company, social worker, case manager, and anyone else involved in your child's treatment, know what you think your child and family need. Make sure you are involved in decisions about your child's treatment.

CONCLUSION

Parents matter when it comes to helping their children successfully navigate the teenage years to ensure a safe and healthy passage from childhood into adulthood. Being knowledgeable and keeping communication open, recognizing warning signs of problems and seeking help when you think it's needed are important contributions that can support your teens development.



Above all, never give up on your teen.



Never relinquish your love and your hope.



Keep the conversations going—
Raising children is a lifetime of learning.