

Skills for Good Parenting: High School and Beyond – Focus on the Child

You have to parent the child you have. One of the greatest challenges you face as a parent is to continually fine-tune your parenting approach to reflect the temperament, learning styles, and developmental stage of each individual child. With an adolescent, parenting become much more about helping your teen make good decisions for herself. While teens are displaying a lot of independence, and they be looking more like an adult, their reasoning skills and motivations remain immature. At any given moment, you have to sensitive to who your child is and where they are at that moment. You need to stay centered, remembering your core values and goals, adjusting your approach to accomplish your parenting goal of the moment, while keeping your eye on the long game, which is increasingly about launching your adolescent on a path to successful independence as an adult.

And in addition to parenting the child you have, you need to parent that child in the world in which he sees himself. The contrast between his experiences and yours at his age is probably enormous. You can't be an effective parent if you are parenting your son as if he were living in the world in which you grew up. You can't just re-use the rules that your parents used.

When your child has made a mistake or misbehaved, you still should separate the behavior from the child. The Center for Parenting Education's "Consequences Made Easy" puts it nicely:

Parents use consequences as a result of their children's behaviors. But while concerning yourself with your children's actions, you need to discipline in a way that keeps your child's self-esteem intact. You can do this by not ridiculing or shaming them as you discipline them.

Aside from not tearing them down, you can actually build their self-esteem by holding them accountable and having expectations for their behavior – the message given is: "You are capable of doing better. I expect more of you."

Such expectations tell children that they possess the ability to behave, tolerate disappointment and frustration, delay gratification, grow, and do better – all of which builds their self-esteem.

Let's consider the child you are parenting right now. If your high schooler runs wild with their friends and gets into trouble, even if he knows that he shouldn't have done it, you don't accomplish anything by asking him to explain why he behaved that way. Significant brain development occurs during adolescence. From ages 11 to 25, young people's brains are maturing, especially in the pre-frontal context, which is responsible for managing time, controlling impulses, organizing, prioritizing and making good decision. They are driven to seek new experiences but because they aren't able to control their impulses, they make mistakes and can't explain why.

As a parent, you will spend a great deal of time on instant replay, helping your child to walk through what she did, what happened, and to discuss what she should have done. This

replaying gives her a roadmap for making better choices. In the same way that you spend endless hours helping her learn to walk, now you need to spend time helping her to establish healthy patterns of behavior.

Teens are making decisions for themselves about who to trust, and while they remain attuned to what their peers will think, they are in the process of defining their own values. Respect your teen's opinion. Listen without judgment or downplaying his concerns. Encourage your teen to develop solutions to problems and conflicts and help your teen to make good decisions. Help your teen to plan ahead for difficult or uncomfortable situations. Respect your teen's need for privacy.

Your teen is not always going to make good decisions. Label a specific behavior as problematic, don't label your teen. Use "I" statements when expressing displeasure with their behavior or actions. "I'm upset that you went to that party where there was drinking. I want you to be able to make your own decisions, but you can't break family rules." Remember to tell your high schooler why they should or shouldn't do something, especially if there are consequences outside of the family. This is another example of how you can help your child learn how to make good decisions. The more direct and specific you are, the greater the impact you will have on your child, and the more likely it is that they will remember what you have told them and act appropriately. Showing them external evidence to support your position reinforces your argument.

Trust your instinct if something seems "off" with your child. While teens experience a lot of emotional turmoil, this too can be caused by something deeper. Misbehavior can be a cue that something deeper and more serious is going on. Better to reach out for help to rule out underlying problems.

Keep in mind your teenager's temperament (see resources for information about different temperaments) and their developing maturity. How you talk about an issue or problem with your teenager depends on where they fall on the maturity spectrum in a given moment. If your teen has recently demonstrated the ability to make good decisions, you don't have to be so specific in the guidelines you lay out. In contrast, you would parent a teen who has demonstrated less maturity by continuing to give them more detailed and explicit expectations.

At this stage, your child is defining who they are for themselves. Remember to listen respectfully. At the same time, talk about the dangers of drugs, drinking, smoking and risky sexual activity. Ask your teen what she knows and thinks about these issues. Share your own feelings. Answer questions honestly and directly.

High schooler like to think of themselves as inscrutable. Because of this, it may be easier to talk about emotions expressed in books, movies or tv shows. When you talk about an emotion felt by a fictional character, what your teen may be feeling is a kept a safe distance away. You can also use these conversations to talk about values and beliefs, about which your teen may also be sensitive.

Think too about what example you are setting for your child. We all “lose it” sometimes; when you do, afterwards, acknowledge the inappropriateness of your outburst, and the challenge of keeping strong emotions in check. If the outburst was directed at your child, apologize. If you have been able to walk away from confrontations with your child, telling her “I’m too angry to talk about this right now...” you have provided another teachable moment.

Even though your teen looks beyond the family for role models, you are probably still a very strong influence on her behavior. Be the adult you want your daughter to grow up to be.

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