

Perhaps the only thing more difficult than going through adolescence is being the parent of an adolescent.

You want your child to grow into a strong, caring, happy, healthy and productive person, but you might find it a challenge to continue to set limits without squelching the spirit and independence of the emerging adult.

New Canaan Matters spoke with experts who work with parents and teens in our area. Here are their observations and tips.

Culture Challenges

“Teens are struggling with difficult decisions every day of their lives and, in many cases, parents refuse to acknowledge that their kids are making choices about issues such as using alcohol and drugs, becoming sexually active and cheating in school,” says Rose Marie Turner, L.C.S.W., program director of Family Centers in New Canaan, Darien, Stamford and Greenwich.

“Parents need to recognize that these challenges are a very real part of the culture and they must help their children develop the skills necessary to confront these issues and make the right choices. The sooner parents admit that drugs and alcohol are readily available and in their children’s lives, the better they can help kids deal with how to face these issues,” says Turner. “Parents can start by asking, ‘How hard is it for you not to do it?’” she says. “Most of the time, kids will make the right choices.”

“Alcohol is a major factor in the socialization process here, and not everyone participates,” says Christopher Lynch, New Canaan’s chief of police. “Parents are certainly the most important players in their children’s lives, and they do need to do the basics: Know what their children’s plans are, have them call if there is a change of plans and be up when their kids come home,” he says. “Parents should also give kids an avenue so that if they’re in a situation they can’t handle they can get in touch with their parents without reprisal,” he says.

Isolation and Disconnection

“It’s more difficult for parents today because the traditional support systems of the past no longer exist. We tend to live away from extended family and, when families are isolated, kids can actually wear parents down with their demands. Some parents may tend to compromise their own values and look the other way because they don’t want their kids to be angry at them. Parents in the community need to pull together and get support from one another. They should meet with other parents who have kids the same age regularly and agree on some guidelines for their children.”

“Sometimes parents try to fix what’s happening in a closed environment,” says Eileen Tenaglia, MSW, director of Youth Services at the Department of Human Services.

“The most important thing is that families don’t feel alone in dealing with an issue. Parents are not expected to have all the answers. There are workshops in the community and families should be engaged in the community,” she says.

“Some parents are bewildered that their kids are so distant,” says Suzanne Harris, MBA, a certified personal and professional development coach in Norwalk. “Yet they don’t really know their kids. They haven’t taken as much time to understand their child as they would someone from their work life or someone else from outside their home,” she says. “They’re ‘working their kids in’ between their social obligations and their kids’ activities schedule,” she says.

Monitoring, Communicating and Connecting

Adolescence is a time when your child might need more of your energy and attention than ever before. Here are ten suggestions for guiding your child toward adulthood while continuing to foster your relationship.

1. Have confidence in your parenting skills.

“Know who you are, what your values are and stick to them,” says Harris. Be a strong role model for your children by living up to your values. Parents lose credibility when they lack confidence and don’t set a good example for their children, and kids feel equal and entitled, which makes it easier for them to ignore their parents’ wishes and guidelines.

2. Get to know your child.

See him for the person he is, not just as your extension, says Harris. Go into his world and learn about his likes and dislikes, favorite movies, music and books, which environments he thrives in, what his work/study style is. Learn what kind of person he is.

3. Remember that you’re a parent, not a pal.

Engaging in fun activities with your child doesn’t preclude having expectations, setting the limits and enforcing the rules. Your child needs your supervision and guidance. You must set nonnegotiable rules, such as a curfew and a don’t-drink-and-drive edict, and there must be consequences if the rules are violated. “If there are no consequences for bad actions, parents are just digging a hole for themselves,” says Lynch. Don’t try to be cool or worry that your child will be angry at you. Your job is to keep your child safe and healthy.

4. Be there.

Your children need to know that you’re accessible, even though you’re not together 24/7. Keep in touch: Set up regular daily phone times, use the instant messaging option on your e-mail, be there when your child comes home.

5. Establish good communication, and always strive to keep the talk going.

Discussion helps you stay involved in your child’s life. Talk about everything, but

sometimes it's a good idea to stick to neutral topics as well: What did you like about that movie? Did you like the book? If the only conversation between parent and child involves a parent barking orders to do or avoid doing something, a child is less likely to feel connected enough to open up to a parent. Learn to listen more and talk less.

6. Parent as a team.

Discuss issues such as dress and curfew with your spouse and agree on a stand before approaching your child so that you can present a united front. If you're divorced, do the same with your ex-spouse. That way, your child will not receive mixed messages and won't be able to play the soft, kind parent against the hard, mean parent.

7. Network with other parents.

Kids are the masters of networking; parents must do the same, advises Turner. Get together with other parents and agree on a curfew. It's easier to parent with other parents. It's also easier for kids to follow rules if everyone has the same set of rules. If you have a concern about your child, ask other parents to keep an eye on the situation. They'll be happy to because they know you'd do the same for them.

8. Create an environment of mutual respect.

Respect your child's individuality and privacy. Use positive reinforcement for good behavior, and avoid belittling your child's efforts. Be sensitive, understanding and encouraging. At the same time, don't be afraid to put your child in her place when necessary. If she is being insensitive to you or invasive of your privacy, don't hesitate to let her know it.

9. Take care of yourselves as well as your family.

Children do best when their parents are happy, loving and ok. If you're distracted and unfulfilled, your kids will know it.

10. Know when to seek help.

You should be alert to sudden changes in your child's behavior that could indicate a potential problem, such as withdrawal from family and friends; drastic mood shifts; a drop in school grades; extreme dieting, weight loss or exercising; or the lack of interest in activities that were once favorites.

With hands-on, vigilant parenting, you guide your adolescent toward becoming a responsible adult, and the rewards are great for all.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

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