

THE REAL PICTURE – PARENTS & PRE-TEENS

**One moment
he hurtles over
to hug me
at the school gate,
the next
he insists on
walking home
alone**

The period between being a child and being a teenager can be confusing. It's a transition that poses its own challenges for everyone in the family.



Teenagers are getting younger

Parents say that the teenage years can start long before children actually hit 13. When your child reaches around 10, they may seem to suddenly grow up very fast. They may begin to shut you out and start relying on their mates and the media as role models. It's as if the rules keep on changing and you're running to keep up.

Whatever they say or however they look or act, your children are still very young. They can be frightened by the pace of change and unsure how best to tackle a whole load of challenges. Becoming a teenager can be quite scary, as well as exciting.

They need your love and support as they work out how to fit in or how to cope with the changes along the way. As they change, so does your role. You are moving away from looking after them physically and protecting them emotionally, becoming more of a helper and guide. What you do and say now will make a great difference to how they feel about themselves as they are growing up. Your support will build their self-confidence in valuing who they are and what they do.

Talking with parents helps young people to:

- Be safer
- Feel less anxious
- Make up their own mind
- Be confident in their relationships both now and in the future

"I had it all planned – all the sentences ready about the importance of love and respect but I never said it. Then they grew up. I missed my chance and I regret that – I'm their dad. By talking I would have shown I was there for them."

PUBERTY

Puberty marks the move from being a child to being an adult. It's a time when the body changes as it becomes sexually mature. It can be frightening and exciting for both girls and boys, and it is important that they face these changes with confidence.

Just understanding what will happen, and why, helps. Puberty happens at different rates for different people. You will probably need to reassure your children that they aren't abnormal just because others seem to be maturing before them.

Parents have a variety of ways of telling their children about puberty. You can find out more through leaflets and websites, or by talking to the school or other parents about their approach. Starting the conversation, and then giving them material to study in private and offering to talk about any problems they might have afterwards, is a useful tactic.

Puberty can be a time of upheaval for both parent and child. Mood swings can cause a lot of conflict; boredom and apathy can dominate, and an obsession with physical looks might seem completely out of proportion. Parents can help themselves, and their children, by being prepared for this and by talking to other parents and friends about their experiences.



The leaflets, 4 boys and 4 girls are excellent to hand over to your children at this age. You can order these by calling the fpa helpline on 0845 310 1334 or visiting www.fpa.org.uk

Other useful sites include:

- www.youthinformation.com
- www.likeitis.org.uk
- www.factsoflife.org.uk
- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.childline.org.uk
- www.brook.org.uk

"I want to protect my child all the time. I want them to be completely safe. But it's no good sort of locking them in at this age."

SELF-CONFIDENCE, ROLE MODELS AND GROWING UP

“You’re in a no win situation – I say you look beautiful and she says, ‘what do you know?’ Then if I say nothing she accuses me of thinking she is ugly.”

Parents are often worried about the pace of change and how their young children seem to be desperate to grow up before their time. Girls might start wearing grown-up clothes, experiment with make-up and seem to be obsessed about celebrity role models. But they might be nervous and frightened of their grown-up image. It can seem as if they are acting at being grown-up without knowing what they are doing and this can be very worrying for parents.

Demanding to spend more and more time with their mates is very common. Boys too become heavily influenced by role models and begin to spend less and less time with their parents. Making friends, losing them, being one of the gang or just an outsider can be all important to both girls and boys. Telling them that you are there to talk about what is happening with their friends can make a real difference, especially if your child is in despair about a friendship break-up.

Parents, who have gone through this stage with their children, say how important it is to keep things in perspective. These tips and strategies are based on their advice.

Parentline Plus tips

- It is easier to keep a sense of perspective if you understand, even if you hate the way they look, that it is all about testing their identity. But if clothes seem highly provocative, it’s important to talk about the risks they might face, looking so much older than they actually are. Try to do this at times when you are relaxed and chatting easily.
- Don’t tease them or make fun of their friends. The barriers will go up at once. Try to keep praising them. Concentrate on things like doing well at school, introducing them to a new kind of music or dance, coming to do the weekly shop with you.
- If your child is unusually quiet or seems depressed, there may be friendship problems. They may have problems at school because of friends and there may be bullying involved. Ask if there is anything you can do to help and let them know you are always there to talk to.

- Pre-teens may start having unusual eating habits. Issues around food and eating can be a sign of a growing lack of confidence. Don't bully or bribe if you are worried about how little your pre-teen is eating. Try to have a gentle heart-to-heart to find out what is worrying them. If you feel that they may be developing an eating disorder, seek professional help quickly. The earlier these conditions are treated, the greater chance of stopping them.
- Respect their privacy and they will respect and listen to you more. Little things make a difference – make sure you don't walk in when they are in the bath or changing; offer to put a lock on the bathroom door if you haven't got one.
- Make sure that when you put your foot down it is about the important things – like keeping safe. Tidy rooms are not top of the list!
- Remember what you were like at their age – make them laugh about such things as what you tried to look like and what music you loved.

TESTING TIMES – SETTING LIMITS

This might be the first time that your child challenges you about what they can and cannot do. They are testing how far they can go and how much you will take. If you talk with them rather than at them about setting limits, your relationship will be more open, adaptable and trusting. Things will then be much easier when they become teenagers.

Parentline Plus tips

- Setting the bottom line gives a clear message on what you value and helps to keep your child safe and secure.
- Tell your children clearly what you want and why, and listen to their point of view. Boundaries work far better if they are made and agreed by everyone.
- Remember that if you are getting on badly and feel their behaviour is wrong, it is the behaviour not the person that you dislike. They're probably just doing what is normal for their age and development.
- Make a compromise. It doesn't mean you're giving in, but shows that you value their opinions and are letting your children take more responsibility for themselves.
- Trust them. Children are far more likely to cooperate if they feel trusted and part of a team.
- Start to give them some responsibility for their own safety at this age. Children do need to be kept safe so give them ideas of how they can do so.

TIME TO TALK ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

“Talk to your children about sex – and everything else! It’s better that they learn about it from you than in the playground at school.”

Talking about relationships, sex and responsibilities gives your child the knowledge and confidence to face important choices in the future. But there is no right time to start talking about relationships and sex because every child is different. You will know when it is the right time for your child.

Remember that they are already learning by your example. If they see that you are considerate, thoughtful and responsible in your ways with other people, they will learn the value of behaving that way too.

Friendships count here. Having a close friend or a group of friends can build up your child’s confidence but at the same time, falling out with the gang or a best friend can escalate into a real crisis. When your child becomes a teenager they may feel pressured into early sex by their friends, if they are boys, and by their boyfriends, if they are girls. They all need to be encouraged to delay until they feel it is absolutely right for them. They need support in learning how to resist pressure, and this can be best developed by talking with their parents and to keep on talking.

It’s not just about talking about sex. Young people say they want to talk about relationships, responsibilities and values. Not just about biology. It’s good to know that young people themselves are saying they want their parents to be the ones they talk to about these issues. And research shows that when a teenager feels confident and knowledgeable through talking with their parents, they are more likely to delay the age of first sex.

“I got a book out of the library and said, ‘Look son, you don’t want me to tell you how it’s all done, but there’s a book. If you have a question then come and ask me or dad’.”

Parentline Plus tips

You might find that your kids don't want to admit what they know or don't know. Here are some tips and strategies to help you get the messages through:

- Use TV or magazine stories to start the conversation. Talking about someone's relationships in a soap storyline or in real life works well.
- Listen to what they are saying without judging them. Show respect to them by treating them as an equal.
- Keep it light – a sense of humour can be a real icebreaker. Don't bombard them with facts or questions as you could risk putting them off from talking about sex and relationships at all.
- Try to remember what you felt like at puberty – telling them about your experiences is another way of getting the conversation going.
- Find out what the school is doing – particularly if your child is in Years 6 or 7, because many primary schools offer early sex and relationships' education, often developed in partnership with parents. The school could help with materials both for you and your kids.
- If they don't want to talk, you could hand over some leaflets or leave them lying around for them to pick up.
- If leaflets don't work they might prefer to talk to another member of the family or a family friend. Older siblings are often good for this because kids of this age listen and learn from older children and young adults.



Can't find the right words? If you're not sure about what to say or the words to use visit www.fpa.org.uk and our website – www.parentlineplus.org.uk

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

All these many changes can affect the whole family. Doing the best you can is sometimes hard work and you may need someone to help you through. Try to find people who you trust to talk to. Ask for support from organisations such as Parentline Plus or a local parenting course at the school (if there is one available). Don't wait until you are desperate. Every parent needs help at times and asking for it is a sign of strength, not weakness.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

This booklet is only a guide. If you need someone to talk to, call the Parentline Plus free, confidential helpline service on **0808 800 2222**. Or if you have a hearing or speech impairment, our free textphone is **0800 783 6783**. You can also contact us by email:

parentsupport@parentlineplus.org.uk

Parentline Plus produces information and materials on a range of parenting issues. Visit our website for more information on parenting: **www.parentlineplus.org.uk**

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND HELP

Included below are some websites for young people. These contain lots of useful information and advice but as they are mainly aimed at teenagers, we suggest you let your children know about the websites when you feel the time is right for them.

fpa

Information and advice on all aspects of sexual health.

Helpline: 0845 310 1334
www.fpa.org.uk

Young Minds

Information and advice for any adult concerned about the mental health and emotional well-being of their child.

Helpline: 0800 018 2138
www.youngminds.org.uk

RU Thinking

For 13-18 year olds: Information, advice and guidance on relationships, sex and contraception.

Helpline: 0800 28 29 30
www.ruthinking.co.uk

ChildLine

Service for children and young people to talk to someone about any problem.

Helpline: 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

Brook

Information and advice for young people under 25 on all aspects of sexual health.

Helpline: 0800 0185 023
www.brook.org.uk

Can't get onto the Internet at home?

Visit your local library which will have computers and Internet access.

