

## Getting Teenagers Connected

A major challenge for parents of teenagers is knowing how best to help teenagers become positively involved with groups and individuals in the wider community. It is often difficult to know what teenagers will find interesting and rewarding, and who they will get on with. Every parent has to develop their own approach to encouraging and supporting their teenager as they explore new relationships and activities. However, the formula for success includes encouraging teenagers to be confident, be socially skilled, plan ahead, meet their commitments, keep in touch, and take care of others. This tip sheet provides some ideas on how to help teenagers get connected.

recreational group, prompt them to find out when meetings are scheduled. If the group stops meeting for a while, prompt your teenager to record the name and phone number of at least two people they can contact. Suggest they contact them well before the break is over to avoid missing the re-start. Some teenagers find it difficult to rejoin a group if they are not there at the beginning.

### TAKING CARE OF OTHERS

As parents, we want our teenagers to develop their own views and opinions so they can stand up for themselves and not be pushed around. However, for teenagers to have good friendships and to be liked by their peers it is important they do not take this too far.

Teenagers who are not willing to consider someone else's point of view may find themselves isolated. Good social relationships depend on give and take so that the balance is about even. If one person gets their way too much, then the other person is likely to feel irritated and resentful, and the relationship may suffer. Also, daily life can be unpredictable, which requires your teenager to be able to adapt to changes by being flexible and willing to change. Anyone who keeps rigidly to their plan in the face of changed circumstances will often have a hard time. The human race has been very successful by being adaptable, but some of us are better at this than others, and our teenagers may need help learning to be flexible.

#### ▼ Help your teenager to see things from another person's point of view

Learning to see things from another person's point of view is a skill that children and teenagers take some time to develop. Parents can help by looking for occasions when they could prompt their teenager to imagine what it would be like if they were in another person's shoes. You could use something your teenager sees or hears about in real life, or you could use a character in a TV show or movie.

For example, if a character is portrayed as doing something foolish and your teenager makes a negative comment about them, you might say *What would you be feeling if that was you?* and then *How would you want other people to behave towards you?*

Many teenagers find it difficult to imagine themselves in such a situation. They are often struggling to create a stable and predictable world that they can control, and may say *That would never happen to me!* Point out that sometimes things happen that people have no control over. For example, if you were killed in an accident, or lost your job, the family situation may change very suddenly for the teenager. Your teenager may not want to admit that this might happen, but it may help them to be more sympathetic to the situations that other people find themselves in.

#### ▼ Encourage your teenager to help others

Blaming other people for getting themselves into a difficult situation means you do not have to take any responsibility for helping them. Helping teenagers realise that they may find themselves in a situation where they need help increases the chance that they will be more willing to help others. This is important in helping to create communities where people help each other and foster a helping attitude.

Look for opportunities to help others so that your teenager sees you modelling this behaviour. They are then more likely to copy you and act this way themselves.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

If your teenager struggles to make good connections with people outside family and school, remember that they need to learn how to do this for themselves. Think back to how you worked this out when you were their age. Be as tolerant and accepting as you can when they make choices you do not agree with, and keep the communication channels open.

If you are parenting your teenager with a partner:

- see if you can reach agreement on how much freedom to allow your teenager, and on how to help them learn to avoid or manage risky situations.
- back each other up when you have to negotiate with your teenager about things they want to do — talk about it later in private if you disagree.
- have regular discussions with your partner about setting rules and limits that your teenager is expected to follow and keep to.

If you are parenting without a partner it may be helpful to talk to other parents to see what kinds of freedom and opportunities they are giving their teenagers.

If the strategies in this tip sheet do not seem to be effective for you, there are other tip sheets that address more specific issues (e.g. friends and peer relationships, fads and fashions, sex and dating). There are also additional strategies, such as using behavioural contracts, that might be helpful. You may find it useful to discuss these with an accredited Teen Triple P provider either individually or in a group of other parents of teenagers.

### TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

Help your teenager to get connected by encouraging them to:

- be confident
- be socially skilled
- plan ahead
- meet commitments
- keep in touch
- take care of others.

### WHAT IS GETTING CONNECTED?

As our children grow older they spend more time away from home and get involved in activities that may be different from those enjoyed by their parents. This can be a great challenge for parents, particularly if they do not approve of the people or the activities their teenagers spend time with.

Teenagers today have more social and recreational opportunities than many of us ever had at the same age. Changes in technology have made it far easier for teenagers to contact each other using e-mail, chat rooms, mobile phones and text messages. Some parents are unsure about how to cope with these changes.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR PARENTS TO BE INVOLVED IN TEENAGERS' ACTIVITIES?

During the early teenage years parents can still influence what their teenagers do and who they spend time with. Showing an interest in what teenagers are doing, who they are with, and where they are helps strengthen family relationships as long as it is done appropriately.

A challenge for many parents is getting the balance right. Restricting teenagers too much by not allowing them to decide for themselves what they will do and who they will do it with can lead to resentment and serious conflict. However, trusting the teenager's judgment completely can result in their getting into situations that they are not experienced enough to handle. They may then end up in serious difficulties. Simply wishing and hoping that children will make appropriate friends and avoid temptation will not make it happen, particularly as peer pressure and puberty have an increasing impact during the teenage years.

### THE FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

The six key ingredients for teenagers becoming successfully connected in the wider community are:

- being confident
- being socially skilled
- planning ahead
- meeting commitments
- keeping in touch
- taking care of others.

### BEING CONFIDENT

#### ▼ Why is being confident important?

Being confident promotes self-esteem and makes your teenager feel good about themselves and their abilities. This makes it easier for them to make friends and try new challenges. It also helps a teenager to develop a clear sense of who they are, and what they will and will not do. This helps to protect against being pressured by peers to participate in risky, illegal,

or other inappropriate behaviour. It also promotes a positive approach to life that protects against depression and hopelessness.

#### ▼ How to help your teenager become more confident

- Create a secure and predictable home environment so your teenager is not constantly unsure or anxious about what will happen next, or how you will react to their behaviour.
- A healthy and varied diet and an active lifestyle ensure that your teenager is healthy and fit and feels good about themselves.
- Encourage laughter and fun and provide your teenager with lots of appropriate affection. Some parents think that older children do not want or need their parents' affection. This is rarely true but it can happen if parents embarrass their teenager in front of other people, particularly their peers. Look for ways to show affection that are appropriate to your teenager's age and preferences.
- Acknowledge your teenager's efforts and accomplishments. Do not wait until they have finished something or until what they have done is perfect before commenting. There are lots of areas of your teenager's life where this could be done — their dress or hair, their room, their involvement at school, or their behaviour with a sibling. Keep it brief but do it as often as you can.
- Encourage your teenager to express their own views and opinions on everyday issues, and encourage them to make their own decisions wherever possible.
- Encourage your teenager to set goals for themselves that extend their abilities a little. At the same time



FOR FURTHER HELP If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your teenager's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet, or contact:

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ensure they are not too self-critical or dismissive of their efforts as they work towards their goals.

### BEING SOCIALLY SKILLED

Social skills that teenagers need to help them get involved with people and activities include being able to:

- join a group of people, for example, at a party or a social event
- introduce themselves to someone
- talk about interesting and topical things, including personal interests and activities
- show interest in other people and their interests and activities
- take turns in conversations
- tell jokes and make people laugh
- give and receive compliments appropriately.

#### ▼ Why social skills are important

Good social skills help teenagers to make and keep friends, and to interact well with others in more formal situations, such as when making a speech or during a job interview. Having good social skills allows your teenager to feel relaxed and confident in social situations, especially with members of the opposite sex.

#### ▼ How to help your teenager become socially skilled

Teenagers often need help to become socially skilled as they may find it difficult to know what to say in new situations. This can be a particular problem when they are away from the more predictable and familiar settings of home and school.

- Watch TV news and current affairs programs together or show them items of interest in the local paper and ask them to tell you about things that interest or puzzle them. Give some views of your own and encourage them to ask you more about these so as to introduce them to taking turns.
- Take your teenager to social situations and rehearse with them what to say. For example, get them to order food at a café, ask for information about an item in a shop, or phone and ask for information about bus or train times. The more opportunities they have to talk to people they do not know, the more confident and skilled they will become.

- Talk with your teenager as if you were someone they had not met before. Ask them questions about themselves to give them the chance to practise answering them. Then get them to ask you questions about yourself. This can be fun and can lead to a closer relationship between you and your teenager. You may find out things about each other that you did not know before.
- After they have been in a new social situation, ask your teenager how they thought they went and praise their efforts. Focus on the positives, and only look for one or two things they might improve on next time.

### PLANNING AHEAD

Teenagers often want to go to events and activities that parents are concerned may be risky, such as parties, music festivals, and late night movies. Teenagers are often inexperienced in what can go wrong on such occasions. They may believe that nothing unexpected or problematic will occur.

However, parents can usually think of many things that might go wrong. This can range from the teenager losing their money, to being abducted or assaulted.

Continually attempting to restrict teenagers' opportunities to attend such events because of these fears can limit their opportunities to take part in important social and recreational events. It can also foster resentment and deception and does not help teenagers learn to manage unexpected situations. Finally, such restrictions may be difficult to enforce, so the teenager learns that the parent does not carry through.

#### ▼ How planning ahead can offer a solution

Planning ahead can prepare teenagers for the unexpected and can increase the confidence of both parent and teenager that the activity can occur with less risk. It involves discussing with your teenager what they will do to avoid or prevent your concerns from happening. Require that your teenager plans ahead with you for a particular event, and decide what they would do in the event of things going wrong.

Be honest with your teenager about your real concerns. Losing their money or missing the last bus home is not the real

issue — it is what might happen to them if they accept a lift from someone who is drunk or who assaults them.

It is reasonable for you to expect them to know what to do in the event of a likely problem, although they will probably accuse you of fussing and insist it will not happen to them. Persist in requiring your teenager to come up with a plan 'just in case'. If nothing goes wrong, so much the better. But if something does, they will be better prepared to deal with it — and you will feel more comfortable about letting them go.

#### ▼ How to help your teenager plan ahead

You may find it helpful to gather some information before you talk to your teenager, or you may ask them to do this. For example, knowing the start and finish times and the exact location of an event may make it easier to work out how they will get there and home again safely.

Pose several *What if...?* questions about the more likely things that could go wrong. For example, *What if you lose your money? What if your mobile phone battery is flat, or the signal is too weak to call? What if your friends decide to do something completely different, or you lose contact with them?*

Help them to problem solve and suggest possible solutions until you agree on what they will do in each situation. You may need to practise with them if the solution includes saying something to someone to avoid a problem developing. For example, so that they can sound confident and determined, a teenager may need to practise saying *I don't want another drink because I need to get up early to go fishing.*

#### ▼ How to help your teenager keep to the plan

After you and your teenager have agreed upon what they will do for the 'what if' situations, get them to make a commitment to follow the plan. You may need to include an agreed upon contact method and time for them to check in so you can discuss how they are doing. This can help you find out whether anything has happened that means the plan has to be changed. For example, the party they have gone to may have turned out to be too boring, or it may have been invaded by hundreds of gate crashers. You may

need to negotiate a new plan over the phone, or make different transport arrangements.

#### ▼ After the event

Make a time to sit down with your teenager and review how well the plan worked. If the event did not go as well as you had hoped, or something happened that had not been planned for, discuss how to improve the plan next time.

Praise your teenager for any problem solving they did at the time that improved the plan. For example, something may have happened that had not been planned for, but they managed it well. This is what we really want to encourage, so that our teenagers become skilled both at planning ahead and problem solving in new situations.

If it went badly wrong and they did not keep to the agreement, next time you may need to decide on an incentive to help them keep to the plan, or a privilege they will lose if they fail to follow it. Or you may just decide that your teenager is not ready for this amount of freedom, and not allow them to go again until they can demonstrate they can manage something less risky. Look for such an event that is coming up so that your teenager can have another chance to plan how to behave responsibly with a lower level of risk.

### MEETING COMMITMENTS

Success in life depends a lot on doing things when we say we will. This might be meeting a friend, bringing promised items to a party, or phoning a group of people to organise a meeting. If we forget or leave it too late, our relationships will suffer.

Meeting commitments helps teenagers develop responsibility and is a skill that is highly valued by other people. It will also help teenagers make and keep friends.

Finally, teenagers who volunteer to take on extra responsibilities, and do them well, are often given opportunities to do new things. These can be enjoyable and character building, and often open doors to even more opportunities.

#### ▼ How to encourage your teenager to make and keep their commitments

Children learn many things from their parents, and keeping commitments is one of these. Make sure your teenager knows

when you are demonstrating this by talking to them. For example, *I told Mary I'd be there at 6.00 so I need to go now or she'll have to wait for me.*

Talk to your teenager about their arrangements to meet others and whether they have to take anything or do anything before an event or activity. Make this a part of your general conversation. This way you will also get to know more about who your teenager is spending time with, what they are doing, and how well things are going.

We want teenagers to become more independent and to learn to accept the consequences of their actions. We also want them to learn to think ahead about how their actions may affect a friendship or being part of a group. In this way they can learn to avoid outcomes that may be disappointing to them or that limit their opportunities. Tell your teenager you are impressed when you see them meeting their commitments.

If your teenager has difficulty thinking ahead, prompt them gently. We want them to learn to do this for themselves and not just rely on us to do it for them. For example, you might ask *What do you think might happen if you don't turn up with your proper sports gear?* The teenager might answer *I might not be allowed to play*, or they might say *The coach doesn't care — nobody wears their proper uniform*. You may decide to let your teenager find out for themselves whether their prediction is correct.

Review it later to find out what the actual consequences were. If your teenager was wrong, resist the temptation to say *I told you!* Just talk with them about what they will do next time.

#### ▼ What to do if your teenager does not want to keep their commitment

If your teenager insists on doing it their way but their way is something that you are not willing to accept, make your own standards clear to your teenager.

For example, imagine you ask your teenager *What do you think will happen if you don't turn up for the final practice session?* and they reply *It doesn't matter — they can't find anyone else to take my place*. If you are unhappy about this attitude, you might say *Well I am not happy with that. I don't think letting*

*people down is OK*. Explain why you believe that and ask the teenager to put themselves in the other people's position.

If your teenager does not change their intention, try to negotiate a compromise that is acceptable to you both. This requires you both to problem solve. If your teenager has trouble coming up with a compromise, prompt them by offering a suggestion. In this situation, a compromise might be (a) your teenager phoning to let the person in charge know they are not going to attend, (b) your teenager going for part of the time, or (c) you offering some enjoyable activity immediately before or after the event.

### KEEPING IN TOUCH

Keeping in touch helps to maintain personal relationships and promote supportive friendships. It is all too easy to lose contact with people or drift away from involvement in social or recreational groups that provide support and enjoyment. Humans are very social beings and we all need other people to a greater or a lesser degree. Being isolated is often associated with depression and anxiety, whereas an active social life protects against these conditions.

#### ▼ Encourage your teenager to keep in touch with friends

Birthdays and other anniversaries are good times to keep in touch with people. Encourage your teenager to make a note on the calendar or to keep a diary of important dates and to check them regularly to see if any are coming up. You may need to prompt your teenager to find out these dates.

Then ask them how they plan to let the other person know they have remembered them. Discuss different options and help them select one that is appropriate. A card, e-mail, or text message can be a very simple and effective way of getting your teenager to keep in touch with friends, especially ones they may not see very often.

#### ▼ Encourage your teenager to keep in touch with clubs and groups

Keeping in touch with social and recreational groups can also be difficult, especially after a long break or holiday. If your teenager is a member of a club or