Navigating Through the Teenage Years: A Primer for Parents

The teen years present a challenge for both young adults and their parents. Teens face a myriad of influences and decisions, along with the ups and downs in mood that come from rapidly changing hormones. Parents find themselves faced with a suddenly different child, who balks at previously accepted rules and sometimes doesn't even seem to like their parents anymore.

How do you get through? Keep a sense of proportion. Be alert for problems but accept that many of the challenges you are both facing are perfectly normal. Try to differentiate important issues from things that really don't matter that much in the grand scheme of things. Recognize that one day you will look back and wonder why issues like hair-cuts and wardrobe could ever have seemed so important!

Tips and Tools You Can Use

Understand that the teen years can be the cause of genuine worries, given that some teens simply can't withstand the peer pressure or handle the stresses. Pay close attention to issues that could be of real importance and ease off on trivial annoyances. Here are some tips to help you get through these years:

Significant challenges for teens can include:

- Peer pressure
- Hormonal changes
- Academic pressure
- Family conflicts
- The struggle for independence

Common concerns for parents include:

- Worries around teens' ability to deal with pressures around alcohol or drugs
- The fear of young people driving while impaired, resulting in tragic accidents
- Issues around attendance and performance of teens at school
- The possibility of severe depression and teenage suicide

Positive Parenting Strategies

- Make quality time for you and your teen, out of the way of the distractions of siblings, chores or work
- Be the grown-up and listen; put aside your own ego and expectations
- Refrain from judging, accusing or applying labels
- Praise efforts, not just accomplishments
- Model your beliefs and values—ensuring your teen observes responsible behaviour teaches more effectively than lecturing or cajoling
- Respect your teen's privacy, but be aware of what's going on (diaries are off limits, but if something your teen is doing worries you, speak up!)
- Allow your teen opportunities to figure out some things for himself or herself
- Set limits, which teach teens the connections between behaviour and consequences
- Take a deep breath and have faith in yourself and your children!

Survival Checklist for Parents

- Be a good role model
- Keep your sense of humour
- Respect your teen's privacy
- Work with your teen to develop and sign contracts for clearer goal expectations
- Reward positive behaviour
- Reward for help with some family tasks
- Set limits without controlling

Positive Coping Techniques

- Peers have a great influence on your teen, so be open to meeting friends and encourage fun, normal, safe activities
- Be available to talk but avoid making judgments
- Let your teen stumble a few times when trying out new wings, but be there when he or she falls
- Teach responsible behaviour to rectify mistakes. Be generous with praise when you approve

When to Seek Help

If your child exhibits any of the signs below, consider seeking professional counselling:

- Prolonged depression
- Continual negative statements
- Excess anger
- Talks about suicide
- Physical or emotional abuse
- A drastic change in personality, appetite or friends
- Loss of interest in school
- Drastic deterioration in attitude
- Quick action should be taken if you fear drug or alcohol abuse or suicide
- If your teen resists help, you may want to set up an appointment with a counselling professional

The teenage years are difficult for many people—but we've all been through them, and know that we learned a lot during our adolescence, and that our children will, too. The teen years don't last forever, so savour the experience of your child reaching toward adulthood, and do all you can to maintain good, open communication with your teenaged son or daughter. Having a genuine desire to connect with your teen is the most meaningful, important step you can take. As best you're able, find points of connection, and build on them.