

Being a Mum or a Dad

Just what do teenagers think of their Mums and Dads? Try asking them, and they'll probably grunt and disappear upstairs! Colin Piper and Chris Curtis caught a bunch of them on a good day and got them to spill the beans.

On being a Dad

"Dad's great when we get the chance to go out together. He just relaxes and start to chat to me about anything and everything. I love it!" Esther, 15

"When Dad's there he just sits and watches TV and doesn't say anything. We don't talk much, at least not about anything important. He couldn't even name a couple of my friends." David, 13.

Almost every teenager I talked to said they wished they were closer to their fathers. Only a very few said they already were. Of all the things that teenagers talked about when it came to Dads, this was top of the 'wish-list'. And there was only one thing that, in their eyes, was going to achieve that.... time spent together. Forget presents and promises, time is the only currency that really counts. And there were no short cuts either: teenagers saw time spent together as essential if anything else, like trust, respect and openness, was to develop.

"Dad only talks to me when he's telling me off or wants to know something."
Amy, 15

I love you Dad but...

1. You're never there

It's hard for Dads if they're at work all day whilst Mum is at home. Of course, in many families, both parents work. But, whatever the arrangement, the chances are Dad isn't there when their children get home from school. It means there's often little time when both Dad and their children are in the house at the same time. A surprising number of young people I interviewed told me their lives never crossed with their Dads.

"Dad's always busy. Work takes up all of his time. I guess I've got used to it, but I wish it was different."

2. You bring your work home

To be fair, it doesn't seem to be so much the actual work that gets brought home, but the effect of it. Young people talked of their Dad being tired or apathetic and just wanting to collapse in front of the television. They found this infuriating or, as one teenager put it: *"Dad needs a brain and character transplant!"*

Others said their Dads were "often stressed and not very patient." This is frustrating to a young person and can create distance between a child and their Dad. *"He can get*

irritated because he has a lot on his mind. Mum tells me to back off and I've learnt to accept it as part of his job. He finds it hard to switch off."

Another teenager says *"Dad is snappy and unpredictable and therefore I approach Mum. I'm closer to Mum."*

3. You never get involved unless there's an argument and you never admit you're wrong

The result of Dads being busy or too tired means that all too often young people learn to keep their distance, keeping out of the way of fathers who become more and more remote. In some families, the only role left for Dad is as final arbiter in family disputes: something that seems to wind youngsters up a great deal.

"Dad isn't a constant authority figure and only steps in when it's too hot for Mum to handle. I feel he has no right to as he doesn't 'understand.'" Jane, 14.

The more Dads just get left to being the final decision in arguments, the more difficult it is to communicate with their children, especially when it comes to articulating feelings or apologising for mistakes or indeed making any admission of vulnerability.

"I don't understand how Dad works. He just doesn't seem to want to give in. I need to beg to get things. He likes to be in control. He hates it if you contradict him at all. He has to have the final word. It's pride."

"Dad very rarely admits mistakes. He's always right. He very often is and has a lot of foresight. But he doesn't like his authority questioned. He's too egocentric."

4. You haven't noticed I'm growing up

A number of teenagers complained that their 'preoccupied' Dads failed to notice they were growing up. This becomes a point of conflict when Dads fail to trust sufficiently or become over-protective.

"We disagree when dad patronises me and tells me things like how to put a chain on a bike." Stuart, 16

"I have mixed feelings about Dad. I love him for being a tower of strength and not walking out like other dads but he's over-protective."

On being a mum

"Mum is quiet and shy and I love her lots and lots. I'm glad she's proud of me too." Eve.

"When I'm a Mum I will have no favourites, try not to be weepy or argumentative, try to have rational conversation and try not to come in on one side or the other, but leave the children to argue." Charlotte.

"I've got a good Mum. She listens." Darren, 14.

Most young people spoke very affectionately of their Mums. Most felt their Mum's work hard and selflessly for their children. They love unconditionally and often expressively. They could be relied upon to be there, to care and to help. Not many had been able to tell their mums this and some who had tried had found the experience awkward and embarrassing. Generally though, despite all evidence to the contrary, Mums held the primary place in young peoples' hearts. Most young people felt a lot closer to their Mums. Not surprisingly, the time and comfort Mums were able to give was seen as the reason for this.

"I'm closer to Mum than Dad because Mum has brought us up and made an effort to cuddle us." Paul.

"I'm closer to Mum because she offers me comfort. I have fun with Dad." David.

I love you Mum but...

1. You worry and nag too much

Almost all those interviewed talked about nagging when describing their Mums! They recognised it as a sign of love but were still irritated! It was the conflict over little things that caused many of the gripes.

"Mum just won't stop going on about some things. I have to go to my bedroom or I'll just explode...and then she gets even madder that I've walked out." Nikki, 14.

2. You ask too many questions

One other complaint featured highly and that was the problem of persistent questioning. Teenagers didn't know why, but there was nothing more likely to wind them up than 20 questions. They wanted to talk openly with Mum but not to feel like they were getting the third degree!

"I'm sure I'd tell Mum more if she didn't get me mad by asking me questions all the time" Nikki, 14.

3. You don't think of yourself enough

"I worry how hard Mum works. She gets so tired. I worry about Mum more than Dad but then I'm closer to her than dad." Abi.

"Mum is a bit of a martyr. She does everything - but when I offer to help she makes it hard for us to do it." Diane.

Most teenagers says their Mums did most of the housework. The real complaint was that, although Mum always moaned at them for this, she wouldn't actually let them help when it came to the crunch. Instead, Mums took on a 'Feel sorry for me because of the terrible life I have' role. Teenagers weren't impressed. They thought Mum should spend more time on herself, get to relax a bit, and so be easier to live with. Young people would far more rather mum provided good company than gleaming cleanliness!

Teenagers seem to be amazingly open about their parents when anyone other than their parents asks them! But through it all, they felt real love for them and desperately wanted to be proud of them, despite all the hassles. Ah well, who'd be the parent of teenager?!