

10 Things to Help your Teen's Self Esteem

1. That's the rule, now stick to it

(Set them limits)

“My parents let me do anything. I can come in whenever I like. But I only like it sometimes. I know if they really cared about me they wouldn't do that, they'd stop me.”

In the 1960's Stanley Coopersmith, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, set out to discover what differences there were in parenting between children with poor self-esteem and those with high self-esteem. Time and time again he found that those parents who set rules that were clear and consistently enforced were the ones whose children had high self-esteem.

Believe it or not, teenagers seem to have more respect for parents when they limit their freedom because it shows that they care about what happens to them. They respect parents even more if they stick to the rules which have been set because it helps them know where they stand.

2. Thank you for that *and* we'll talk about it later

(Compliment in public, discipline in private)

“If Dad tries to have a go at me in front of anyone, I just go quiet. I won't even look at him or acknowledge he's talking to me. It makes him even madder, but I don't care.”

Of all the things that seem to hurt teenagers, being humiliated in public is pretty near the top of the list. Teenagers are far more self-conscious about those around them than younger children, and are therefore much more easily hurt by Mum or Dad having a go at them in public

However, complimenting your teenager in public can make them feel genuinely proud and valued. And that can be a far more effective motivator to good behaviour than an argument or screaming match.

Talking with teenagers, it's astonishing how they can recall, with incredible clarity, whenever their parents have done just that. It just goes to show what a difference it makes when a parent compliments in public but disciplines in private.

3. Why don't we do it together

(Spend quality time with them)

“When I was a teenager I never used to let on how much I loved spending time with my Mum & Dad”.

Giving your teenager time is about the most valuable thing you can do for them. Teenagers talk about knowing that their parents love them, not because they've bought them the latest clothes or a TV for their bedroom, but simply because they found the time to do something with them.

Youngsters from broken homes speak scathingly of Dad's who appear every few months and take them shopping to shower them with gifts, before disappearing again. Their view is straightforward: Dad doesn't really care. Presents are a poor substitute for time.

What may surprise parents more is that it often doesn't matter to teenagers what they spent the time together doing; it could be anything from shopping to cleaning the car. And perhaps parents should also note this: few, if any, teenagers actually tell them they like spending time with them, they may even just complain a little when they are asked. But, deep down, they feel valued and important.

4. It's OK to make mistakes

(Teach them how to cope with failure)

"I'll never forget when my parents came to watch me play football once. We lost and I let in two goals, but at the end they still said I did ok".

Teenagers need to hear that failing or making mistakes is a normal part of life. It's OK to be upset and feel sad about failing, but it doesn't mean that they'll never be good at anything. Gentle encouragement can help a teenager gain the confidence to either have another go at something or move on to another challenge.

How a teenager copes with failure is one of the keys to a healthy self-esteem. And how a parent handles a teenager's failure may, in turn, be the key to how the teenager copes.

5. I can do it later, let's talk about this now

(Make yourself available)

"I've found I can't choose when my kids want to talk. In fact, it'll almost always be when I least expect it, like in the car or going shopping. But when they do seem to want to chat, I know I have to stop everything to listen, no matter how hard it might seem. I want them to know they matter."

Teenagers are notorious for not wanting to talk when they're questioned by their parents. Quiz them about their friends or what happened at the party and they'll often clam up. But there are times when they do want to talk. And even though those times may be when parents are busy doing something else, it makes all the difference if a parent is prepared to drop everything to talk.

"Be glad whenever your kids want to talk. Drop everything for it" says one parent, "after all, there'll come a day when they've moved out and away when you'll long for them to come and visit and chat. Make the most of it now."

Parents give value to their teenager by listening to what they say, and, sometimes, what they do not say. Teenagers will sometimes talk round issues rather than acknowledge them up front. This is particularly true when it comes to embarrassing subjects like puberty.

6. I know that everyone else does that

(Recognise peer pressure)

“I remember when I came home from school after everyone had had a go at me for not wearing the right clothes. Mum and Dad were great because they listened to what I had to say, rather than just telling me to ignore them”.

Peer pressure, (the influence of your teenager’s friends), affect their choice of clothes, music, beliefs and much, much more. The temptation to try and be part of the ‘in-crowd’ can leave a teenager open to trying drugs, smoking, even underage sex.

As a parent, there may be little you can do to change this. It is, after all, something that everyone faces to some degree whatever their age. But parents can recognise and acknowledge to their teenager that the pressure is there. That alone will help because it will reassure a child that their parent understands them. They’ll be more likely to talk about peer pressure to a parent who understands rather than to one who simply brushes it off by saying ‘Just ignore what others say’.

7. This is your job now

(Teach them responsibility)

“When Mum and Dad left me in the house while they went away for the weekend, I felt like they really trusted me. I cleaned the whole place from top to bottom and made sure everything was just right. Before that weekend, I’d never helped with the cleaning in my life.”

Responsibility breeds maturity. By entrusting your teenager with a job, task or role that is significant, a parent is showing that they believe they can achieve things.

“Parent’s often want to step in and stop their child making a mistake if they’re having a go at something. Don’t. Tell them what to do, correct them if they get it wrong, but let them keep control. The trust and esteem you build is well worth the risk.”

8. That was really good when you helped me then

(Be specific in praise)

Tracey was glowing about her Mum: “She was always positive and always believed in us. And when we did something, like getting merits at school, she was always doing something silly like baking special cakes for tea to celebrate. We told her she was daft, but we still loved it.”

When a parent is specific in their praise, it helps a teenager believe that the praise is genuine. So, instead of 'You're bright', a parent could try 'You're really good at Science, which you showed when you worked so hard at your homework last week.'

9. Go on, have a try then

(Encourage them to try new things)

"Dad seems to reckon I'll be good at anything I try. He's always telling me to have a go at something, like if we pass a sign for judo classes or something in the car. Even if I don't end up doing it, I still feel like I could if I wanted to."

Giving your children the confidence to try new things is one of the best things a parent can do. It builds a teenager's self-esteem more than parents realise. And knowing that a parent is proud of them is a great incentive to try other new things. Of course, letting them know that you are there for them whatever the outcome is vital for their confidence. It's about pushing them out of their comfort zone whilst operating within a safe boundary.

10. I'll be there to see you practice this afternoon

"I know Mum loves me because she always asks me how my day has been at school. I always grunt in reply, but I like her doing it."

"Dad watches all my football matches, even though I know he's not that into football."

Tell a teenager you love them and they'll probably laugh, look at you as though you've gone mad or storm out the room. Handling direct emotions like that is something that teenagers can find hard to handle. But they do still need to know that a parent loves them.