

# Understanding Your Teenager



Graham Hyman

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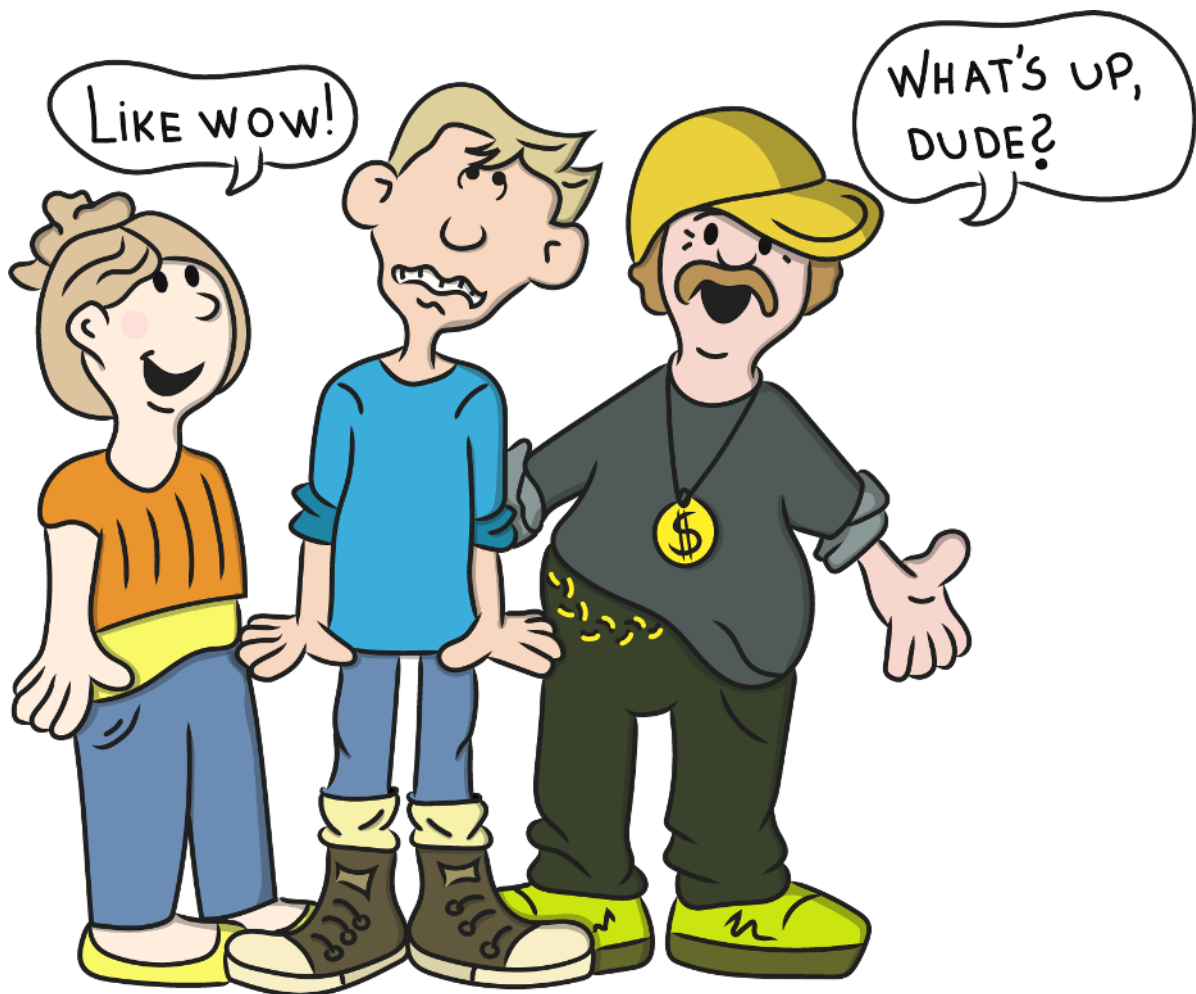
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## Introduction

The more things change ... the more things stay the same!

*"I mean such things as these: — when the young are to be silent before their elders; how they are to show respect to them by standing and making them sit; what honour is due to parents; what garments or shoes are to be worn; the mode of dressing the hair; deportment and manners in general. You would agree with me? — Yes." Socrates quoted in Plato's Republic, Book 4, c 400BC*





So much of what we hear about teenagers is bad news: they are risk takers, moody, rebellious, hormone driven, insolent and messy. If you listen to the messages you quickly get the impression that all teenagers are some kind of sex craved, drug addled, alcoholic maniacs seeking something to destroy. And some of them are, but probably not your kid. The adolescent who is growing in your home will almost certainly at some times skirt

around, and maybe dabble, in those things that terrify parents but at heart he or she is just a normal adolescent kid.

This book is about what goes on in a teen's life and serves as a counterpoint to all of the frightening and negative words that are being written and spoken about today's teenagers. There are dangers for them out there, and kids can be difficult, but most teenagers (most of the time) are great people to be around. They are hopeful, energetic, idealistic and fresh. They are also much easier to guide and develop than many admit. Teenagers can be the best people on earth, if you can get past the weirdness that is part of normal adolescence and not allow the fear of what they might do spoil the joy of who they are now. **Understanding Your Teenager** will help you see what is normal and encourage you in ways to enjoy it.



There has never been a time in my life when I have not worked with teenagers, and I would not have it any other way. They have so much to offer, not just in terms of their future potential, but for the world today. Sadly so much of the press given to them is bad and the anxiety generated by it can create as many problems as the issues themselves. The greatest contribution I can make is to present the other side. Rather than scare parents with dreadful statistics, I aim to give you courage to believe that every effort you make to be positively involved in your kids' lives will make a difference.

The material in this book, and its companion “Living With Your Teenager” is heavily based on the work of Wayne Rice, my friend and mentor, and one of the world's leading authorities on parenting adolescents. Wayne's insights and creativity have inspired and trained me and his generosity and understanding gave birth to the Australian seminars on which this book is based. I remain forever grateful to him. I am also thankful to Dan Pagoda for permission to use his wonderful drawings to add a spark to the pages.

*Graham Hyman, April 2021*



Mark Twain is reported to have said “When a person turns 13 you should put him in a barrel, nail it shut, and feed him through a knot hole. When he turns 17 you should plug up the knot hole”. Many parents would agree!

When a child approaches the end of primary school strange things begin to happen. The four S’s (selfishness, silliness, secrecy and stupidity) begin to dominate a child’s attitude and behaviour. The child’s language skills shrink. Sentences consist of around 5 words, at least one of which is unintelligible. A decade long obsession with the body—functions, parts, and image—begins.

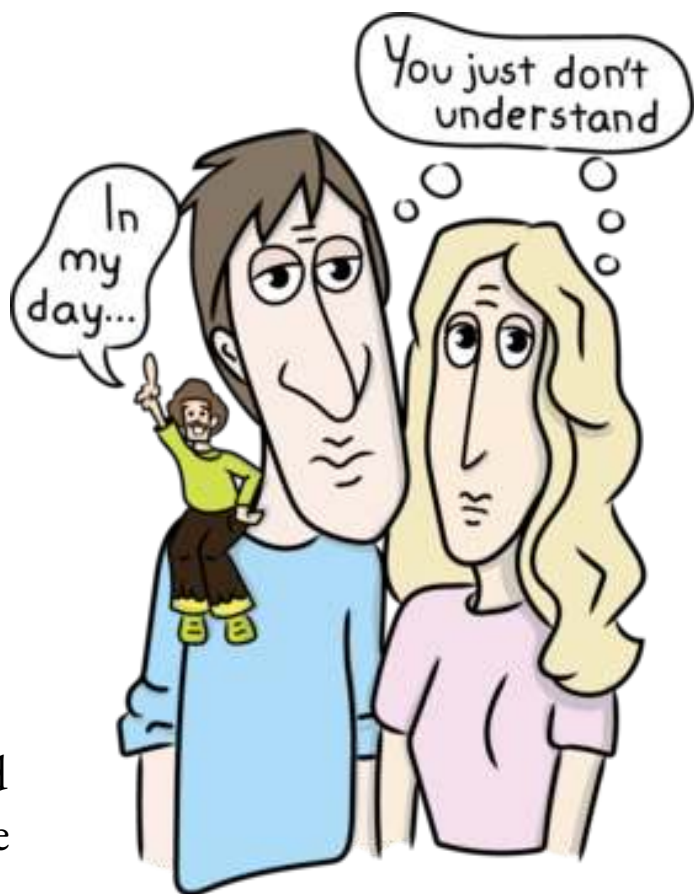
It is certainly a difficult time for parents, but let us never forget that we only experience it as spectators. Our children are the players, they are not just the source but the subject of this confusion and angst.

Adolescence will affect all kids differently, but it will affect all kids. Some will breeze through unchanged and unscarred while others will seem to encounter a new crisis every day.

When you add life in a high pressured society that promises so much excitement at the same time it warns of so much danger it is unsurprising that our current teenagers seem to be more extreme than those of previous generations.

## 1. Teens are growing up in a different world.

Every time there is a negative incident involving teenagers someone will make a statement to the effect that kids are so much worse today. At family gatherings grandparents take delight in pointing out how much better today's kids have it, and how little they appreciate it. The problems of the youth world are attributed to their lack of respect, the loss of societal values and the removal of a parent's right to use corporal punishment.



Interestingly, these have been household conversations in every corner of the globe for as long as we know. Each generation has been troubled by its children and grandchildren, and equally has been quick to idealise its own youth. It takes only a brief study of the process of adolescence to see how natural and likely this process is.

As we shall see explore later, adolescence is a time of discovery, experimentation and independence. If childhood is when people learn how to live; adolescence is when people learn how to live on their own. Consequently adolescence is the time when children move outside their inherited parameters in order to find their own place. It is this progression from the world created by their parents into a world they create for themselves that is fundamental to the conflict and frustration that comes in homes where adolescents lurk.

In these things today's kids are no different to any who have ever lived, but there are elements of modern society that do make it harder for this generation of young people to navigate this new territory. All societies have changed over time, but in the past that change was so slow it could only be seen retrospectively. All people alive at the same time had basically the same view of how life ought to be lived: values for the present, implications of the past, possibilities for the future. While each living generation may have had a slightly different interpretation of these core issues, the issues were held in common.



The bushfire of change in Australian life that began in the 60's was fuelled by the incredible leaps in technology that made the unbelievable possible. It was fanned by the media that made the unimaginable attractive, funded by the wealth that put nearly all things in reach, and accelerated by the internet that transported every exciting thing in the world into every home, in full colour with sound!

To add to the impact of this change, for the first time in history, many of the mores of our society have been largely undermined by the science which once supported and some times demanded them.

In a little over six decades we have reached a point where the current spread of views about societal values is the equivalent of one that in the past would have covered ten or twenty generations. Is it any wonder then that today's parents (and grandparents) find their teenagers a puzzle, and the feeling is reciprocated?

Not all of the changes are negative, many are excellent and celebrated by all, but some make the progress through adolescence more difficult for today's children than any others. The first step in understanding teenagers is to identify these hurdles, prepare for them and develop strategies give kids strength to jump them.

Over the generations societies learned that adolescence is most successfully negotiated when it is underpinned by secure, external support structures. Today for many of our kids those support structures have either become weak or non-existent.



What distractions do your kids have in their lives that did not exist, or were not freely available when you were their age?

What fears are common in today's teens that were not even known by you?

What pressures do your kids face that make their teen lives harder than yours was?

Think about your teen years, what generational differences with your parents created conflict?

How did your parents deal with the generational differences well? How did your parents deal with generational differences poorly?

As a teen, how did you deal with them well? How did you deal with them poorly?

And the big one – **what can you learn from that to create the best positive outcomes for what is going on in your home now?**

Choose one or two of your previous responses and decide on 2 small changes in your attitude and actions towards your kids for each of them.



## **1. The extended family has gone out of business**

“It takes a village to raise a child” (African proverb)

The proverb states what we all instinctively feel: progress from birth to adult is best made when it is helped and guided by a wide range of positive inputs. Especially during adolescence (when parents often seem impossible and unrealistic) children need the nurturing and influence of other adults. These people offer much more than an extension of parental policing or implicit advice. Sometimes all they give a child is a sense of acceptance and security. The village offers certainty, and sometimes sanctuary, when the world is frightening and confusing. When an adolescent is at odds with its parents the village has the capacity to reinforce the parents’ values without the parents’ implied criticism or judgement.

Unfortunately, far too few of our children live in anything like villages. Australian society has become so insular and fractured that the vast majority have little contact with adults in the community and even less with their extended family. For many teenagers the closest thing to a village they experience is their school: here they hopefully encounter adults who are not their parents but who extend persistent encouragement and acceptance. Who give the impression that no matter what, they will be available and accepting.

Since the early 60's Australia has become an increasingly insular society. As Margaret Mead said "we are expecting something less than the nuclear family to do more than we expected the extended family to do". Kids are detached from the support, acceptance and guidance that comes from the extended family, and community, by our changed social patterns, changed family structures and domestic mobility.



Who are the best supportive adults (for your kids and you) in your circle?

Whose kids in your circle could you be the best supportive adult for?

Make a list of ways you can encourage and enable your kids spending enough time with those supportive adults that will build a sense of belonging and being cared for. In other words, how can you build the village?



## **2. This is the first generation of teenagers to be unnecessary.**

Up until just two generations ago teenagers were necessary to expand the family's influence, to increase the family's financial security and to defend and nurse the nation. They were priorities. Today they have become liabilities. We don't have enough work opportunities to give them jobs. We don't have enough money to fund their tertiary education. The media constantly portrays them as being a problem almost too large to solve.

Add this to the high pressure of expectations in terms of school leaving results, the demands of modern education and the impact of family fracture and you have kids who can easily believe they don't matter. It is this lack of a sense priority that contributes to very much (though not all) of extreme adolescent risk taking and quite possibly to the growth in negative mental health outcomes in today's teens.



Education, easy access to support agencies and harm minimisation strategies are all important in supporting our children through these crises. There is, though, a far more fundamental issue that promotes resilience and wise decision making in teenagers: the creation of a home environment that constantly reaffirms the child in his or her importance and value. Put simply, “Do all you in your power to let your child know that that your child matters, because then that child will believe that it matters what it does”



Put yourself in your child's shoes and think about your daily routines, how often do her/his needs take a back seat to the other demands on your life?

Over the last week how many of the conversations with your child were encouraging, affirming and/or supportive against how many were negative, critical and/or corrective?

Decide on a time each day where you will stop for 30 seconds and think of one great thing about your kid saw that day, and then make sure you tell him or her. A great time for this is just before you go to sleep, far better to drift off thinking about positive things than worrying about all the negative ones.



Decide to choose to prioritise your child in some small but obvious way every day. It may be turning off your phone for the first hour you're home from work. It may be turning up to your kid's event during the day - and watching the kid in the event not networking with the other parents there. It may be saying a warm, caring, goodnight every time, even when it's the last thing you feel like doing because the teen has done everything to push you away.

### 3. Our kids are overwhelmed by choices

*"We have moved from an either or society to a multiple choice society"*

*John Naisbett, Megatrends.*

Life is very much more complicated for today's adolescents because there is so much more of life to be experienced. From course electives to entertainment options to take away food to value systems, our kids are forced to make choices almost every minute of their lives.

Many of these choices, though minor, make a powerful impact simply by the weight of numbers. Others are major and potentially life changing. Combined, they easily create a sense of confusion and anxiety in teenagers.

Many of our kids today are making decisions at 13 over issues about which their parents have little knowledge until they were in their late teens. They are also making these choices at a developmental stage that sees them evaluate everything with a sense of immediacy. The 'now' is critical to teenagers because a thing either has to impact 'now' to be worthwhile or, on the other hand, there is real fear that if it doesn't happen 'now' it will not happen at all. Consequently, choices about small things take on enormous significance and the frequency of choices leads to frustration, and even sometimes a sense of loss.



Choices are easiest to make when you are prepared for them, that's where parents come in – anticipate and prepare. What new choices will your teen need to make in the next six months and what do you need to do in the meantime to build readiness?

Get in the habit of discussing choices, including offering alternatives, and avoid making arbitrary decisions on your child's behalf whenever possible.

Allow your child to make some (safe) choices that may not turn out well, much can be learned from bad choices.



With the big choices (school subjects, morality, big spending decisions, etc.) make sure you are equipped to make an intelligent contribution by doing your research. Your desire to help will benefit greatly if it comes from contemporary knowledge rather than opinion.

## **How should you respond?**

### **1) As scary as all this is, RELAX.**

Too often in life we allow the stress that comes from worrying about what might happen to undermine the good things happening in the present. Added to that, a parenting style that is constantly second guessing itself, frequently changing its approach and focusing on the possible negatives can actually undermine a teen's progress. Decide on the parenting style you will follow and stick to it, believe in yourself and trust that the time, love, acceptance and guidance you freely give your kids will ultimately take root and flower, even if your child seems like an ugly weed right now!

### **2) Avoid idealising the past.**

Our memories can be very convenient and it is easy to look back at our adolescence with rose coloured glasses. If parents' expectations for their teens are based on what they remember of life when they were teens the bar can easily be set unfairly high. Besides, the present is where our kids live they have to grow into mature adults in the context of their world. We cannot take them back to yesterday, even if we wanted to.

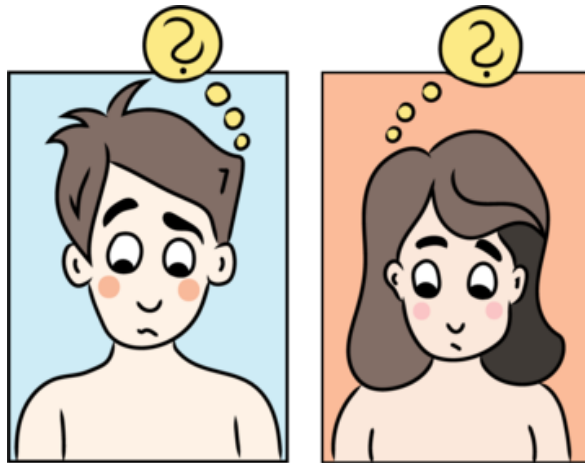
### 3) Respond appropriately.

As a result of reading this book you may discover things that that you need to do, that your grandparents and parents didn't, don't be afraid to give them a go.

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## 2. Teens are in transition.

### 1. The most significant period of change





Only menopause and toddler-hood compare to adolescence for the amount of change that goes on. While neither is as severe, both get more attention. There are books, magazines, courses and clinics to help people through these life changes with the minimum of negative impact. Adolescence, the greatest time of change in life, is experienced at a time when (unlike the toddler) the subject knows what is going on and (unlike the menopausal woman) does not have the weight of life experience to provide coping skills. The impact of these changes lead to great deal of frustration, for both adolescents and the people around them.

It is also more difficult for our kids because there are few rewards to make the frustration worthwhile. Where it was once normal for the functions, size and confidence that arrived with adolescence to be exercised in adult ways, today's teens are expected to deal with these new grown up abilities in a children's playground.

Other cultures had (and have) 'Rites of Passage' ceremonies and events that declared to the child and the community that the teen qualified to accept adult responsibilities and undertake adult activities. This introduced a status that allowed them to see the physical and emotional changes as tools of adulthood. Without this, the best for our kids is to see them as tools of experimentation and rebellion. In summary, other societies make their adolescents apprentice adults, we keep ours as delayed children.

## Think about it



What changes are you making at home to make your child progressively feel more adult?

What bigger changes will you need to make when your child is in that body and mind that is bursting to be an adult (16+) but is still stuck in child's life at school?

Develop a plan, with your teen, for your teen's emerging adulthood. Agree on what adult privileges and opportunities should arrive, together with when and on what conditions.



## 2. Physical Changes

Western children are entering adolescence much earlier (between 8 and 12 for girls and between 11 and 14 for boys). There is much speculation about the causal factors in this (better nutrition, increased body weight, brain responses to the prolonged exposure to graphic sexual imagery). Regardless of the cause, the reality is that our children are entering puberty well before many of them have the maturity to properly cope with it.

Plus, in this internet age where every real and imagined experience is piped in living colour into every screen, kids are much more aware of body change and hence fascinated, concerned, and competitive about it.

While every child changes differently there is one absolute certainty: every child will go through significant periods when it believes that it is the only one who looks this way, that it is the freak.

### **3. Intellectual Changes**

An equally powerful set of changes that is much less recognised or expected is in the way kids think. Children process information by learning and repeating. They see adults in their lives as sources of wisdom through whom they can learn.

On the other hand, Adolescents take what they learn, compare it to what they observe and make their own conclusions. They perceive adults to be proponents of information that may or may not be true, but regardless is open to challenge. Where a child's question might be "Why?" an adolescent's is far more likely to be "Why not?"

Consequently parents who are dictatorial or adversarial will often see a rapidly diminishing influence on their children during adolescence. Teens need the space to disagree with their parents and the time to test their new ideas. Where they are given latitude to do this unnecessary conflict is avoided and they progress to mature thinking more rapidly.

### **4. The imaginary audience**

The consequence of all this change is that kids are often chronically impacted by what the psychologist David Elkind called the Imaginary Audience. This is where you believe that people around you are thinking what you think they are thinking about you. Much of the adolescent behaviour, especially stubbornness and silliness, that so frustrates parents stems from the fact that the teen is playing up to this perceived set of spectators or doing everything possible to avoid being embarrassed in front of them.

With all these changes and chronic self awareness, teens are highly susceptible to embarrassment, which can't be totally avoided, but it is easy for parents to damage their relationship with their kids by treating the changes too lightly, or worse, making fun of them.



Jokes, nicknames and sharing personal stories with others can be acutely embarrassing for teens, are there any of these that you need to stop using or change?

As uncomfortable as it might be, make sure that the “parent talk” informs your teen about adolescent changes, including sex, well before they receive that information in the classroom or playground.



Decide that you do not need to be right about everything, and narrow down the number of things about which you must be adamant.

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### **3. Teens are seeking autonomy.**

#### **Areas of conflict:**



Adolescence is the time in life when you find your own self – different to your parents and independent of them. This leads to conflict! The beginnings of this are usually seen around 6 – 12 months after the first signs of physical change.

#### **1. Power & authority**

#### **2. Behaviour**



The value that increases most during adolescence is *to make my own decisions*. A critical process in parenting a child through adolescence is to give the child opportunities to take control, to direct its own life. It is equally important to make this a staged process because the child needs to test the waters of personal responsibility confident in the security and guidance provided by its parents.

### **a. Argument**

Adults disagree with each other differently to the way they disagree with their children. When a child believes it is an adult it will argue like an adult; which essentially means it will reach a point where it will not back down.

Unfortunately this often means that an arguing teen will often mimic, and even exaggerate, the worst elements of adult argument. They quickly become belligerent, emotional, uncooperative and rude. Parents do well to try and deflect this by sticking solely to the argument and not becoming diverted into attempting to change the behaviour

### **b. Decoration**

The number one source of conflict in homes where adolescents live is decoration: hair, clothes, bedroom interior decoration, jewellery, body art; the list goes on. Most teen fashion is a harmless fad but many homes experience hours of conflict and pain because parents refuse to make concessions. While parents should not give in on everything, it is important to allow kids to find safe ways to express their emerging adulthood.



Adolescence is when children practice becoming independent adults and, as in any area of life, when you practice you make mistakes and sometimes fail. The only time this becomes a problem is when the supervisors, in this case parents, have inappropriate expectations. Set the bar too high and you create an environment with almost daily conflict. Set it too low and your child will be slower to learn the attitudes and behaviours that lead to a confident, mature adulthood.

Make a timeline of the degrees of freedom you allow your child to choose independent behaviours, decisions and attitudes.



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## 4. Teens are expanding their relationships.



Friends are the centre of the universe for many teenagers. The most important question from a teen to its peers is 'Do you like me?' They are validated by the acceptance of their peers, unlike small children who are often happy to have a playmate.

There are teenagers who seem to not need friends, who are happy in their own company. They are content to interact with family and teen acquaintances. This is perfectly normal and people like this will often go through their lives with very small, but very close circles of friends. The only time this is an issue is when the teen himself or herself is troubled by it.

## 1. Don't fear your teenager's friends

As frightening as they might be, a teen's friends are a critical part of that child's social development and self confidence. Adolescent friendship clusters are where rough edges get smoothed and communication techniques are trialled. They are the places where kids finally learn that every failure is not a catastrophe and every success is not a pathway to glory. They learn to be courageous and compassionate, and above all the benefit of valuing others. Interestingly, many kids learn as much from bad friendships choices as good ones.

*“There are times when it is a necessary part of growing up to live through a particular relationship. Much growth and learning about oneself can take place, even in some of the most ill-advised friendships. The only real protection against poor friendship choices is whatever help we can give our children in respecting themselves so much that they are unlikely to choose relationships that will hurt or demean them, and that we help them to understand enough about human motivation and behaviour to judge others with insight.” Eda Le Shan, 1969*

## 2. Teenagers need adult friends

Peer group pressure terrifies many parents, because teens in groups can get into so much danger. In the short term the peer group is often the major influence, but in reality it only influences fashion. For most people the long term influences come from the adults in their lives when they were teens. These people influence character.

In addition to this, it is the respect they hold for the adults in their lives that is the most powerful force to protect your kids when they do feel pressured by their peer group to do physically or morally dangerous things. Kids ultimately moderate their behaviour not because they like what their parents say, but because they like their parents.

All research shows the same results. Whenever adults are heavily involved in their teens' lives the teens ultimately absorb the influence of those adults. Family gatherings and meal times, holidays together, adult involvement as spectators at teen events, even watching television together, all work over time to build a platform of beliefs and values in the teen that will in due course serve as the basis for that child's approach to life.

Whether a teen is a gregarious social animal or more reserved and content with just a few friends, the peer group is enormously important to kids. Consequently, teens will increasingly withdraw from their parents' company and place themselves instead in the company of their friends.

The important thing is to ensure that while key adults cannot always be in the physical company of their children they are positively in the child's mind.





Think about what you are doing when your teens are at home with you. Decide to prioritise spending time with them over activities that remote your availability to them.

As trite as it might seem, have family meals together, with no devices, as often as possible. The younger your kids are when you start this as an absolute rule the easier it will be to ensure it happens through their teen years.



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## 5. Teenagers are equipping themselves for adulthood.

### 1. Responsibility

To learn responsibility a child must be given the opportunity to be responsible, and this is usually best done by the jobs a child has to do. Regardless of the type of job there are three things about it that will ensure it teaches responsibility:



In this ‘cotton wool’ society kids are insulated from every potential harm. Added to that because of our performance orientation they are overloaded with activities that relate to their schooling, arts and sport. Consequently most kids’ lives are overwhelmingly busy. So busy, in fact, they often miss the opportunity to learn critical life skills by ‘carrying part of the load’.

*1) Affirm your child in the doing of the job (rather than only noticing when the job is left undone or done improperly).*

*2) Never give a job to a teenager that you are not prepared to leave undone if the teen doesn’t do it. (If the parent rescues what does that really teach?)*

*3) Don’t be a ‘fixer-upper’, be prepared to accept the teen’s standards unless you have a logical reason for the standards to be different, in which case share that reason with the teen. Keep in mind that teenagers are pragmatists: if they can’t see a practical reason for a job to be done a certain way they will not do it that way.*

## 2. Effective Communication Skills

Home is the place children learn how to communicate. School refines it and society moderates it but what is experienced in the home sets the trend for life. Kids learn to communicate with others the way their parents communicate with, and around, them. If you want to know what sort of job you are doing, just listen to your kids fighting with each other—you'll hear yourself!

Of all the areas of communication the most significant is the difference between gentleness and aggression. Our hurried society means that communication in many families is dominated by the aggressive form. Not violence or nastiness; simply short, sharp, quick. Parents speak to their children in 3 word sentences: "Do your home work", "Have a shower", "Make your bed", "Go to bed". Around their children they speak to each other in 5 word sentences: "Did you phone the bank?", "Is the rubbish out?", "When will you phone your mother?" "I've had the lousiest day!"

We should instead practise gentleness. This is not always easy but is always important. The art of gentleness is to speak slowly and quietly. This means to source words from down in the diaphragm where they sound calm, not up in the throat where they sound shrill. To respond rather than react to a situation. When faced with a situation that makes all the little hairs on your neck stand on end, to step back and take, quite literally, 3 deep breaths.

The time taken will help you think more carefully. The oxygen you intake will help you think more clearly. And the very process of deep breathing will relax your muscles and make you sound calm.

Where children grow up around much more gentleness than aggression they learn skills that will lead to successful and positive communication for the rest of their lives.



What kind of communication are you modelling to your child?

We should instead practise gentleness. This is not always easy but is always important. The art of gentleness is to speak slowly and quietly.

Make a plan for increased responsibility, beginning with what changes you need to make immediately (if any) and then deciding at what age varying types of responsibility should be handed over to your child.

A great way to do this is to discuss it with your teen, especially if through the discussions compromises are made by both the teen and the parent/s.



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## 6. Teenagers are developing personal values and beliefs.

### 1. The philosopher in your child is active from 15 – 25.

Very few people live the whole of their lives believing what they did at 15. Even fewer change their philosophical views after about 25, but that period in between is where all of the big decisions are made.



### 2. Your kids will probably end up like you – if they like you.

Most people end up with a belief system that is remarkably like their parents. As the grandmother's wisdom says "Don't be discouraged if your children reject your advice. Years later they will offer it to their own children". Interestingly, kids are usually more convinced of the worth of a parent's ideas by the value they place on the relationship with the parent than by the power of a parent's argument.

### 3. This development is transitional too!

The child who speaks like an angel in the morning can easily act like a devil in the afternoon. The teen who cries in the morning about the injustice of poverty in the third world can, without any sense of inconsistency, be in tears in the afternoon because her mother will not buy her \$200 shoes. They are not hypocrites; they are just working from different parts of their brains. By their mid twenties they will have worked it out.



What beliefs of your parents did you reject as a teen but have come closer to adopting as you have gotten older?  
What made you change?

Become informed about the issues that concern you, make sure you are ready to converse from a basis in knowledge, not conjecture.



Which of your teen's current moral, political and religious views currently trouble you?

Do any of them pose any real risk to your child's development?

Reconsider your own views on some of these issues, the young are not always wrong.

Be prepared to agree to disagree, without emotion, on issues that you feel are non-negotiable. They are never worth breaking your relationship for and the more calm you are in your confidence the more likely it is that your teen will ultimately move towards your view.

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# About Graham Hyman

Graham Hyman has worked with teenagers full time since he was a teenager!

Since 1994 he has been one of Australia's foremost school speakers; addressing staff, students and parents in schools of all systems in every state of Australia. Over that time he has worked in over one quarter of Australian secondary schools, addressing around 40,000 students, 15,000 parents and 2,000 teachers annually.

The corporate world is also beginning to take advantage of Graham's insights into family and relationships and his powerful and entertaining presentation style. He is a regular conference speaker for companies and associations in every industry. After graduating high school in 1972 Graham studied ministry and counselling at the Churches of Christ Theological College and UQ for 4 years. He was the senior minister of Burleigh Heads Church of Christ (77-84) and the Churches of Christ National Youth Director (84-89). Since 1989 he, with his wife Jadie, have run Youth Specialties Australia; an independent training organisation.

