Supporting your child at school: Tips for Parents and Carers





Adolescence is a time when young people start to explore their place in the world and this gradual change from childhood to adulthood is a difficult one. During childhood, they depended mainly on their parents for economic and emotional support and direction. In adulthood, though, they are expected to achieve independence and make informed choices about school, work, and personal relationships that will affect every aspect of their future.

They must deal with physical changes and increased expectations from family members, teachers, and other adults or professionals in their lives. Adolescents must also deal with sometimes conflicting messages from parents, peers, or the media. They struggle with an increasing need to feel as if they "belong" somewhere.

For some young people, the usual challenges of adolescence can be made more difficult by family situations and/or problems at school. Without support and guidance, these young people may fall victim to behaviours that place them, and others, at risk. The most worrying of these behaviours include dropping out of education, running away from home, joining 'gangs', using alcohol or drugs or becoming involved in other risk-breaking behaviors. Some young people may become depressed, leading to academic problems, social isolation, or even more self-destructive behaviour.

Growing Up Today

Each generation of young people and their families face new and perhaps more challenging, circumstances. Life for many young people today is full of options with regard to careers, beliefs, and lifestyle choices. Today young people need greater self-direction than ever before to successfully move from

adolescence to adulthood. The government has responded to this in schools with an increasing emphasis on the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) and the requirement for schools to develop Personal, Learning and Thinking skills like team work and self-management.

Helping your child make this move to independence requires that you understand healthy adolescent development and how to find the resources that can help you if your child gets off track.

Tips for parenting an adolescent

During adolescence, young people begin to take risks and experiment. They do this because they are moving from a family-centered world to the wider world where they will begin to develop their own identity. They may choose friends their parents do not approve of or try alcohol or other drugs. They may wear clothing that is 'cool' or generational and begin comparing their families' lifestyles with those of other families, or break rules imposed on them by their parents or the larger community.

Young people are basically testing the limits. They are behaving in a way that they believe will allow them to survive without the day-to-day guidance of their parents. They are also trying to gain some authority and power of their own.. It is this 'confrontational' behaviour that often troubles us the most (and will land them in most trouble at school).

While there are no easy answers in parenting, the following strategies may help you support your child during adolescence:

• Educate yourself about adolescent development. Learn about the behaviours to expect, the effects of physical changes, and ways to help your child deal with change. A lot of the behaviour we consider most worrying can be broadly put into two categories:

Acting Out: tantrums, shouting and confrontation ('That's so unfair!)

Acting In: silence, ignoring and becoming withdrawn) ('What's wrong?' 'Nothing!')

Try not to overact to either aspect. Most of all, try and remain consistent. Try and look at how you balance CARE and CONTROL of your child.

- To help with this try and remember your own adolescence: your changing feelings, anger at authority, or hopes and fears. Look at your adolescent's behaviour in the context of those memories to help you keep some perspective. However, be aware that the world you grew up in may have been a very different one to that your child is now experiencing. Try and be aware of current media messages (TV, magazines, the Internet) your child is exposed to. Keep track of their internet usage, their time spent playing computer games or watching television. Monitor their use of chat rooms or social networking sites like MSN: they can often be a breeding ground for unfounded gossip or lead to bullying, causing problems for young people using them regularly
- Think about taking a course on good parenting. Parenting is a learned skill. Training can help even experienced parents by giving them new tools for supporting children.

- Try and *listen* more than talk. Young people have spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence, they want and need the chance to share their feelings and ideas to reflect their changing identity. They need people to acknowledge that they are growing up.
- Teach your adolescent about the joys *and* troubles of life and ways to enjoy the good times and cope with the bad. The myth that life is always easy or fair or that people should always be happy can lead to frustration for young people dealing with the reality in front of them. Try and share your own experiences where appropriate. Model the kind of sharing you would want to receive from them.
- Recognise positive behavior whenever possible; it is far more effective than criticism or punishment for negative behavior. Words that belittle

can hurt your adolescent's self-esteem. However, do not let young people live a life without limits. Try and ensure that actions have consequences at home as well as at school and make your rewards and sanctions (or punishments) as clear and as consistent as possible.

- Teach your adolescent that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand, and give your child increasing responsibility for their own personal wellbeing. Give them opportunities to help and to become involved in both family decision-making discussions and those that affect them personally. In doing so, seek your child's input and try to help him or her to understand the process that <u>you</u> use to make those decisions. Look for situations that can allow your child to test decision-making skills with your support (a kind of 'It's ok, I'll catch you if you fall' approach) It is sometimes difficult for parents to give up control out of concern for their child's safety. Remember, though, that adolescents' skills in coping with increasing responsibility will only improve with a parents' willingness to support them as they make choices and face new challenges.
- Offer your child chances to become involved in extra-curricular or community-based activities. All young people are searching to find their place in the world. Involving adolescents in developing solutions to community problems (or simply be exposed to some of the problems other people face every day) can shift their focus from themselves, give them some perspective and help them to develop skills and feel involved.
- Spend quality *and* quantity time with your adolescent. Adolescence is a time when young people naturally begin to pull away from the family and spend more time at school or with friends. Try and eat at least THREE TIMES together during the week. Your involvement will both show your support and help you stay informed about your child's life.
- Encourage other caring adults, including friends and relatives, to spend time with your adolescent. Aunts and uncles or adult neighbors can sometimes offer your child further support, guidance, and attention.
- Accept that you have feelings too. You may feel frustrated, angry, discouraged, or sad during difficult times, especially those related to a lack of progress at school. Being a good parent doesn't mean being perfect. Model the ability to apologize when you feel that you let your emotions get the best of you. Lead by example.
- Remember that most young people have problems at some time. Parents sometimes needlessly feel embarrassed when their child is having trouble. Do not assume that your child's behavior always reflects on the quality of your parenting.

- Do not always push for drastic or dramatic solutions. Sometimes young people just need time and support to work through their problems.
- Try and make sure that your child arrives at school ready to learn. Sleeping patterns, for example, are already disrupted in adolescence, try and ensure that your child has a regular routine even in the later teenage years. Watch what they are eating. Hendon is committed to educating children as to how they can stay healthy and safe. If you have concerns over your child's diet or their intake of fizzy drinks make the school aware we may be able to help monitor and support the messages your child is receiving at home.

When an adolescent Needs Help



All young people need daily support and guidance. But some young people whose adolescence is marked by more serious struggles may require help from outside the family. Many people believe that family matters should be kept private. Seeking help, however, simply means that you are drawing on every community resource that you can to help support your child.

It is never too late to reach out for help. But early intervention is really important in reducing the damage that problems might cause Watch for these signs that your child might need help in dealing with the difficulties of adolescence:

- Large amounts of time spent alone, and isolation from family and friends
- Sudden changes in school performance
- Drastic mood swings or changes in behaviour
- Changes in your child's friendship group or sudden separation from longtime friends
- Lack of interest in hobbies or social and leisure activities
- Loss of appetite OR comfort/overeating

Keep in mind that these signs do not always mean that your adolescent is in trouble. Some changes in friendships, for example, are normal as young people mature and find new interests.

Also, all young people are different. A more introverted young person, for example, may enjoy spending time alone reading. Parents usually know best how their children are doing on the basis of experience, but this doesn't mean that others can't sometimes provide useful insights (in a 'you can't see the wood for trees sometimes' kind of way). Unfortunately, during adolescence, young people often stop sharing as much information with their parents as they did at younger ages.



The first step for parents in dealing with concerns about their adolescents, therefore, is to get them talking. Simply talking with adolescents, without focusing on immediate problems i.e. issues they are not yet comfortable with or that might stop them talking, gives young people the chance to share their struggles or give reassurance that they are comfortable and doing well. Try and show that you really value their opinions and that what they say really matters to you ('You're right. I hadn't thought about it that way before'). Let them provide you with a guide to their world wherever possible.

If problems appear to persist and your child seems reluctant or unable to discuss them with you, try talking with him or her in a non-confrontational manner about the changes that you notice. Be specific rather than general and focus on the problem as you see it – not the child as a whole. However, be prepared for a defensive reaction, and listen and ask questions. Be willing to help your adolescent talk through problems, rather than immediately giving solutions or making demands on them.



If your efforts to talk with your child do not appear to be working at all, you might get an outside perspective from a close and trusted friend or relative. You also can seek support, guidance and direction on dealing with your teen through:

• SCHOOL Hendon offers a wide range of pastoral support services for students struggling with their social or emotional development. Contact your child's Head of Year with any significant concerns over their progress - you may be able help the school in identifying issues before they develop and helping to target early intervention. Alternately, we

may already be noticing things at school that you are not able to observe (through time spent with friends etc) in your child's behaviour at home.

• LOCAL COMMUNITY AGENCIES. Barnet offers a range of services to families through a range of agencies. The most helpful resource is a new directory called 'DIRECT ME'. Copies are available in local libraries and it is also available online at www.barnet.gov.uk/directme.