

## What parents must change and common mistakes parenting teenagers



### Adolescence changes the parenting task

Many parents continue using strategies that worked in childhood: direct commands, close monitoring, immediate correction, and adult-led solutions. These may become less effective in adolescence because the teenager's developmental task is different. Teens are building autonomy, identity, social competence, moral reasoning, and future-oriented decision-making.

This does not mean parents should step back completely. Research on adolescent development distinguishes between appropriate behavioral control and psychological control. Behavioral control includes knowing where your teen is, setting curfews, monitoring school obligations, and maintaining safety rules. Psychological control is different: it attempts to control the teen's inner world through guilt induction, shame, conditional affection, or intrusive manipulation. The first can be protective; the second is associated with poorer adjustment.

What parents must change is the balance. A teenager still needs warmth and consistent boundaries, but the method should become more collaborative. Instead of, "Because I said so," a parent might say, "Your safety is my responsibility, and your need for independence matters too. Let's agree on a plan that covers

both."

### **Mistake 1: confusing independence with disrespect**

Teenagers often question rules, argue about fairness, and test limits. This can feel like defiance, but it is also part of cognitive and social development.

Abstract thinking expands during adolescence, and teens become more sensitive to hypocrisy, inconsistency, and perceived disrespect.

A common mistake is interpreting every disagreement as a challenge to parental authority. When parents respond as if they must "win," the conversation can become a power struggle. The teen may then focus more on defending dignity than on solving the problem.

A better approach is to separate tone from content. A parent can say, "I want to hear your argument, but I cannot stay in a conversation where we insult each other. Take five minutes, then come back and tell me what feels unfair." This preserves authority while modeling emotional regulation in parent conversations.

### **Mistake 2: using psychological control instead of guidance**

Psychological control can be subtle because it may come from fear and love. Examples include, "After everything I've done for you, how could you do this?" or "If you loved this family, you wouldn't act this way." Other forms include withdrawing affection, humiliating a teen, invading privacy without a safety reason, or making a teen responsible for the parent's emotional stability.

These methods may produce short-term compliance, but they can undermine trust, emotional security, and self-regulation. Adolescents generally do better when parents support autonomy while maintaining clear expectations. Autonomy support does not mean approving every choice; it means acknowledging the teen's perspective, explaining reasons for rules, and allowing appropriate participation in decisions.

Practical replacements include:

Use values-based explanations: "Driving tired is dangerous, so the car rule is non-negotiable."

Offer bounded choices: "You can do homework before dinner or after dinner, but it needs to be done before gaming."

Criticize the behavior, not the person: "The lie damaged trust," rather than "You are a liar."

Repair after conflict: "I was too harsh earlier. The rule still matters, but I want to discuss it calmly."

### **Mistake 3: having rules without relationship**

Limits work best in the context of connection. A teenager who feels chronically criticized may stop sharing information, which makes behavioral monitoring harder. Parents sometimes increase surveillance when a teen becomes secretive, but if the underlying relationship is tense, surveillance alone may worsen the secrecy.

Connection does not require dramatic conversations. Many teenagers open up during low-pressure moments: in the car, while cooking, walking, or doing an activity side by side. Parents can use open-ended questions for difficult conversations, such as, "What would make school feel more manageable this week?" or "What do you wish adults understood about your friend group?"

It also helps to maintain positive attention that is not tied to performance. Ask about music, games, friendships, humor, or plans without turning every exchange into a lesson. When the relationship contains enough warmth, correction is easier for a teen to tolerate.

### **Mistake 4: escalating arguments instead of de-escalating**

The NHS advises parents coping with rebellious teenagers to stay calm, avoid retaliatory shouting, and set clear boundaries. This is difficult in real life. Parents may be sleep-deprived, frightened, embarrassed, or triggered by a teen's tone. Still, escalation rarely improves judgment in either person. Heightened physiological arousal can impair problem-solving, increase impulsive speech, and prolong conflict.

De-escalation does not mean giving in. It means delaying the problem-solving until both nervous systems are more regulated. A useful script is: "We are both too angry to solve this well. I am pausing the discussion. The issue is not

forgotten; we will return to it at 7 p.m."

Parents should also avoid long lectures during a teen's emotional peak. The adolescent brain is less receptive to complex reasoning when flooded with anger, panic, or shame. Short, calm statements are more effective: name the limit, name the next step, and stop arguing.

### **Mistake 5: being either too permissive or too rigid**

Some parents respond to adolescence by removing too many limits because they fear conflict. Others become rigid because they fear losing control. Both extremes can create problems. Permissiveness may leave teens without enough structure for sleep, schoolwork, digital behavior, substance exposure, or safety. Excessive rigidity may block skill-building and encourage secrecy.

The middle path is authoritative parenting: high warmth and high expectations. This includes predictable rules, consistent consequences, and age-appropriate negotiation. A 13-year-old may need more direct supervision than a 17-year-old. A teen who has shown responsible behavior may earn wider boundaries. A teen who has repeatedly broken safety rules may need temporary restriction plus a clear path to regain trust.

Consequences should be related, respectful, and realistic. If a teen misses curfew, the next step might be an earlier curfew for a defined period, a transportation plan, and check-ins. Consequences that are extreme, indefinite, or humiliating often produce resentment rather than learning.

### **Mistake 6: ignoring sleep, stress, and mental health context**

Teen behavior is not only a moral issue; it can be affected by sleep debt, anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma exposure, neurodevelopmental differences, substance use, academic overload, bullying, family conflict, or medical conditions. Parents should avoid diagnosing their teenager based on internet information, but they should take patterns seriously.

Warning signs include persistent withdrawal, marked functional decline, school refusal, self-harm talk or behavior, intoxication, sudden aggression, drastic appetite or sleep changes, or expressions of hopelessness. These situations

warrant support from a pediatrician, family doctor, mental health clinician, school counselor, or emergency services depending on urgency.

Parents can say, "I'm not here to label you. I'm concerned because you seem to be suffering, and we do not have to handle it alone." This reduces shame and frames professional help as support, not punishment.

### **What parents can change starting today**

Change does not require becoming a perfect parent. It requires repeated repair and a more developmentally realistic approach. Teens notice when adults take responsibility for their part of the cycle.

Shift from commander to coach. Ask how your teen plans to solve a problem before giving advice.

Keep non-negotiables clear. Safety, violence, substance exposure, school attendance, and basic respect need firm boundaries.

Negotiate what can be negotiated. Clothing, hobbies, room organization, and some schedule choices may allow healthy autonomy.

Use fewer words during conflict. State the limit, pause, and return later for collaborative problem-solving.

Repair quickly. Apologizing for yelling does not remove the rule; it models accountability.

Coordinate between caregivers. Inconsistent rules or high-conflict co-parenting can intensify teen distress and manipulation of gaps.

The central message is simple but demanding: stay connected while letting your teenager become separate. Your authority becomes more effective when it is paired with respect, warmth, and a credible reason for limits.