

# Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: The Teenage Years

Have you noticed that being a grandparent changes when children become teens? Adolescence is a time of rapid growth in how teens look, act, think, and feel. With this growth, teenagers begin to need different things out of life. You may need to change your grandparenting style in order to meet the new needs of your teenagers. You might feel like you don't know them anymore, but don't be alarmed-the changes are normal.

## *Is There a Generation Gap?*

You may have heard the phrase "generation gap" to describe the differences in thinking between grandparents and teenagers. Every generation creates its own styles of music, clothing, and slang-so your teens' language, music, and interests may not make much sense to you.

But keep in mind that the family still has an enormous influence on children during the adolescent years. In fact, most teenagers agree with their parents on topics such as what do with your life, the value of education, and religion. Your teenager will carry many of your family values and beliefs through adolescence and into adulthood.

## *Adapting Your Parenting Style*

Don't worry. You don't have to completely change your parenting style when your grandchildren reach their teens. A style that is warm yet firm works just as well with teens as with younger children. But remember that you'll need to adapt your style to the ages of your grandchildren. Expand limits as your grandchildren get older, and give more choices within those limits. Be "askable". Let your grandchildren know, by what you say and do, that you are there to listen and answer their questions. Be open-minded, and really listen when they talk. And it's important to take time to discuss difficult topics with your teenagers, including puberty, body changes, sex, and drugs and alcohol.

- ❖ ***Going Through Puberty.*** It may look like your grandchild has changed into a young man or young woman overnight! The physical changes of puberty may begin as early as age 9 or 10 in some children, and continue through most of the teen years. Both girls and boys go through a growth spurt as they enter puberty. Girls' hips get wider and breasts begin developing, and their menstrual periods begin. Boys' shoulders widen and voices deepen. Both boys and girls begin growing pubic hair.

Even if you feel uncomfortable, discuss the changes their bodies will go through even before they happen. Puberty is a confusing time for many young teens, but knowing what to expect makes the physical changes easier to handle. For girls, puberty is occurring earlier than ever before, so the discussion needs to start earlier. In some girls, puberty starts as early as age 8 or 9. Don't wait for

your grandchildren to ask you; they may not feel comfortable if you haven't talked about these issues before.

If you're not comfortable explaining puberty yourself, there are good books for children that give the basic information. Talk to the children's librarian or children's section manager at a local bookstore for recommendations on books about puberty. Your attitude will make a big difference in how they feel about the changes they are going through. If you're positive and supportive, your grandchildren will be more likely to see puberty as a positive experience.

- ❖ **Sex.** Adolescents want to be able to talk with trusted adults about sex, but they often feel uncomfortable. And the idea that your grandchildren are curious about sex may make you uncomfortable. But remember that you are their best source of information about sex. When young people don't feel comfortable talking to adults about sex, they usually turn to peers, who may give them inaccurate information. When you discuss sex with your teenaged grandchildren, you can provide them with accurate information. At a minimum, teens need accurate rate information about sexual intercourse, how pregnancy happens, and sexually transmitted diseases.

You can also use discussions about sex as a chance to share your own values and beliefs. Most teens still pay attention to adults' values when they are making tough decisions. But be careful to keep discussions of sex from turning into arguments. Adults sometimes lose the chance to help children make decisions about sex because they begin to nag, preach, or moralize. It is important to be "askable". Let teens know that they can ask you questions any time, and help them develop the skills and judgment to make good decisions about their sexuality.

- ❖ **Drugs and Alcohol.** Adults have a strong influence on the drinking and drug habits of teens. Parents (and grandparents) who drink excessively are more likely to have children with alcohol or drug problems. As you consider what you want your teens to learn about drug and alcohol use, think about your own drinking and drug habits. What messages are they learning by watching you? What messages do you want to pass on to them?

As with sex, it's important to discuss drug and alcohol use before your grandchildren need to make decisions about them. Make sure they have accurate information about the laws against underage drinking and illegal drugs. Explain the risks of drunk driving. And be sure to share your values. Let them know how you feel about drugs and alcohol, even if they don't agree. Talking to your grandchild is one of the most important ways to influence their drinking and drug use.

Keep in mind that it's never too early to start talking about these "tough" topics. Begin sharing your values about sex, drinking, and drug use when children are young. Let your grandchildren know your beliefs and values, and explain the reasons behind your views. If you have teenagers in your home and haven't already discussed these topics, it's never too late to start. If you don't talk to your grandchildren, they will learn from someone else - movies, television, their friends - and you may not approve of what they hear.

### ***Thinking More Like an Adult***

Teenagers start to be able to think more like adults, although they don't always use these new, more mature thinking skills! Unlike younger children, teens can think beyond the concrete of this world to more abstract ideas. They can imagine what a perfect world would be like, for example, and compare their lives with this imagined perfect world.

So why do teens tend to take risks? Believe it or not, the parts of their brains that handle reasoning and decision-making still aren't completely developed. Even though they can think more like an adult, they still have some misconceptions that can lead to poor choices. Many teens don't understand that they are vulnerable to risks. They might take dangerous risks, such as driving too fast or not wearing seat belts, because they think that nothing bad will happen to them. Even if they know others have been hurt in car wrecks, they don't always recognize that it could happen to them, too.

You can handle teen risk-taking by helping your teen evaluate risks. Help your teen find safer outlets for risk-taking urges. Riding roller coasters, for example, is a safer risk than driving too fast.

### ***Becoming Independent***

Has your teen become more critical of you or less willing to be seen in public with you? The teen years are a time when young people are becoming independent of their families. They are figuring out who they are, and they spend a lot of time thinking about how others see them. What their friends think becomes very important, which is one reason why they worry about looking and dressing like their friends. Friends provide a supportive environment for teenagers because they are struggling with the same kinds of issues.

Teens need to become independent sometimes leads to family conflict. Although it's a myth that the adolescent years are constantly filled with conflict, you may see an increase in disagreements with your teenage grandchild. Remember that they're trying out new ways of thinking. One way to figure out who they are is by challenging your beliefs and ideas. Some common areas of conflict are haircuts and clothes, allowance, curfew, music, and dating.

So how do you manage this need for independence? Teens need the chance to express themselves and find their own identity. At the same time, they still need adult help to set and enforce limits on their behavior. Allow teenagers to express their feelings, but remember that they still need your guidance. Let them make some choices on things like clothes

and hairstyles, even if you don't like what they choose. Set clear limits and explain the reasons behind them. It's okay to disagree, but teens need to understand that you expect them to follow the rules. Try involving your teen in making the rules. She's more likely to follow them if she helped create them. Be calm and flexible, and keep the communication lines open. Remember that most teenagers still agree with their families on important values. Let your grandchildren know that they can bring their feelings and problems to you.

### *Changing Household Rules*

You can help your teens exercise their new feelings of independence by giving them choices and allowing them to help make decisions. Remember that you may need to adapt rules as children get older. Younger children may need to be in bed by 8:00, but teens do not need that much sleep and can be allowed to stay up later. Similarly, teens are more ready to handle money and so might receive a bigger allowance than younger children. Adjusting the rules as teens mature shows them that you recognize that they are growing up.

### *Should Teens Get a Job?*

Most adults think that working is a good idea for teens because it teaches responsibility. For some families, teen work is a financial necessity; the money that some teens make helps support their family. Teens who work may be able to learn skills that they will use in later careers. Working outside the home can help teens become more self-disciplined. After-school jobs can help teens focus their career plans and learn more about what a full-time job is like. If your grandson wants to become a teacher, for example, working at a school or after-school child care program may help him see the kinds of roles and responsibilities teachers have.

But there are some downsides to getting an after-school job. Most jobs available to teenagers are boring, repetitive, and don't teach important skills. These early jobs can actually teach teens to dislike work. Also, keep in mind that teens may be exposed to negative role models at an after-school job.

Teens who have after-school jobs need to learn how to balance school and work. Make sure your grandchildren understand that succeeding in school needs to be a priority. If grades start to drop, you may need to help your teen manage her time by prioritizing school assignments, changing the work schedule, cutting back on work hours, or even quitting the job until the summer.

## *What About Serious Problems?*

Despite your best efforts to be involved and concerned, some teens still get into serious trouble. If your grandchildren are showing signs of school failure, drug or alcohol use, gang involvement, law-breaking, or other serious problems, get help as soon as you suspect a problem. Talk with other adults who have influence with your teen, such as coaches, teachers, counselors, or youth workers. Explain your concerns, and get their advice. Enlist their help in keeping your teen on track. Don't hesitate to get help from a counselor or therapist if your teen continues to have problems. And stay involved in your grandchild's life. Your support and concern may help her handle the problems in her world.

### *In Summary*

Although the teen years bring many changes in most families, knowing what to expect can eliminate some of the problems. Grandparents need to recognize that their grandchildren are changing in ways that they may not understand. Be warm, but set and enforce clear limits with teens. Keep the lines of communication open. Let them know that you are available and willing to answer their questions or help them solve problems. Talk to your teens about puberty, sex, drugs and alcohol, and other tough issues. Remember that if they don't get their information from you, they'll probably hear it somewhere else. Above all, be caring and concerned. Let your teens know that you love and support them as young adults.

### *References*

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*Adapted and released by Diane Bales, Extension Human Development Specialist, from a series originally developed by Sam Quick, University of Kentucky Extension Service. Thanks to Caroline Bookout, Kate Fogarty, Emily Purvis-Montford, and Bowden Templeton for their assistance with writing and editing of the "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren" series. June 2003. Reprinted with permission for PASTA, 2009.*

# 10 Principles for Parenting Your Teen

1. **Remember, parenting matters.** Make a difference in the life of your teen by providing guidance and support. At times, it may seem like your teen does not want you around. However, your child really does need you and needs to know you care.
2. **Stay warm and close.** It's impossible to love your teen too much. Spoil your teen with love and support every day. Spend time together at meals, and remember to say, "I love you."
3. **Stay involved with your teen's life.** Ask questions about schoolwork and friends, and attend your teen's extracurricular activities. Teens need to know you are interested in them just as much now as you were when they were younger.
4. **Set limits and provide structure.** Clearly communicate your expectations to your teen. Rules and expectations should change throughout your child's life, but children of all ages need clear rules.



5. **Enforce rules and consequences.** Let your teen know what the consequences of breaking rules will be ahead of time. Follow through on enforcing punishments.
6. **Be consistent.** All adults sharing parenting responsibilities should discuss and agree on basic principles for guiding their children. Then, be consistent each day and in every situation. Mixed messages from adults can lead to frustration for both caregivers and children. Children need consistency to help them structure their lives.
7. **Explain yourself and engage your teen in decisions and conversations.** Discuss the reasons for rules and consequences with your teen. This does not mean that the rules or consequences will change, but it will help your teen understand your reasons and respect you. Teens don't respect authority when it seems arbitrary.

8. **Don't use harsh discipline.** Harsh discipline, like yelling or slapping, is not an effective long-term approach to discipline. Do not discipline your teen when you are angry. Instead, make arrangements to talk to your teen at a later time when wisdom and good judgment, not anger, will guide your discipline choices.
9. **Treat your teen with respect.** Your teen is growing up. Acknowledge your teen's increasing independence and ability to make decisions. Guide your teen in making positive choices, but realize that he or she will make mistakes.
10. **Understand adolescence is a period of change - for both of you.** In your parenting role, you are changing as you develop new information and skills to help guide your teen. Your teen is changing physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Look for resources to help you understand the changes your teen is going through. Such resources include your local Cooperative Extension office, other parents of teens, and books. Remember, your relationship with your teen is changing, not ending.

*Resource adapted from*

[www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/SP213.pdf](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/SP213.pdf)

*Steinberg, Laurence and Ann Levine. You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10 to 20. New York: HarperPerrenial, 1997.*

*This publication is based on the video Parenting Your Teen, produced by Iowa State University Extension, and featuring Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from an ISU Extension satellite uplink October 17, 2002. Written by Kimberly Greder, Assistant Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, and Family Life Extension State Specialist, and Shannon Sayer, graduate assistant. Reprinted with permission for PASTA, 2009.*