

RAISING COMPETENT TEENAGERS

...IN AN AGE OF PORN, DRUGS, AND TATTOOS

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**ROCKPOOL
PUBLISHING**

A Rockpool book
PO Box 252
Summer Hill
NSW 2130
Australia
www.rockpoolpublishing.com.au
<http://www.facebook.com/RockpoolPublishing>

First published in 2013 by Tafelberg
an imprint of NB Publishers, a division of Media24 Boeke (Pty) Ltd
40 Heerengracht, Cape Town 8001
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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Friedland, Linda, author.
Raising Competent Teenagers: ...in an age of porn, drugs and tattoos / Dr
Linda Friedland.
9781925017397 (paperback)

Includes index.

Parenting.
Parent and teenager.
Teenagers — Family relationships.
Teenagers — Drug use — Prevention.
Adolescent psychology.

649.125

Cover design by Jessica Le
Editor: Mark Ronan
Proofreader: Vanessa Vineall
Indexer: Anna Tanneberger
Typography: Jean van der Meulen
Printed and bound by 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD

PARENTING IS LIKE GOLF. Just as there are three distinct parts to a golf hole, there are three different parenting stages.

Each requires something different from you.

You start by hitting the ball off the tee, usually with a wood, which is relatively straightforward. Your total focus is on hitting the ball off the tee cleanly to give yourself the best possible approach to the hole. This is akin to early childhood, when the parents' focus is on getting their children off to a good start in life. There's pressure at this stage, but it's manageable.

In golf, the walk down the fairway after your initial tee shot is generally enjoyable. You can replace the wood with a number of irons, which are easier to use. There's plenty of margin for error as a fluffed shot on the fairway doesn't matter too much. This part of the hole is like parenting children from four years of age through to ten. It's a more relaxed period for parents: children are generally fairly malleable, and the rewards are high in terms of the pride you can take in your children's achievements, the enjoyable time you spend as a family and the affection you receive from children in this age group.

After the relative ease of the fairway, the green looms on the horizon and suddenly you need to up your game. There are water hazards and sand traps everywhere. You replace your trusty irons with your putter and now every shot counts. The pressure ramps up and before you know it, you are playing a very different game. It's challenging and you need to concentrate on every shot.

Similarly, most parents of teenagers find they must adapt to greater pressures. As they demand more freedom, teenagers are less pliable and more likely to challenge you and your authority. You need to use different communication tools if you are going to get through to them

and help them navigate the risks and hazards they face. Just as a golfer must change his or her game around the green, you need to adapt if you are going to stay in the parenting game with your young person.

Dr Linda Friedland has produced a fabulous manual to help mums and dads adapt to the modern parenting game. It's eminently practical, wise, time-saving and very down to earth. I applaud Linda for distilling the wisdom of many prominent parenting educators, and faithfully drawing on their thoughts and advice throughout this great book. Her own voice can be clearly heard too, both as a medical practitioner and a parent.

You will find that the information she presents is very current, and organised into bite-sized, easy-to-read chunks. Just like the book's title, many of the topics she covers, such as pornography, cyber bullying and tattoos, may make you feel a little uncomfortable but they are topics that need addressing if you want to stay in the game with today's young people.

There are two ways to approach *Raising Competent Teenagers..in an age of porn, drugs and tattoos*. You can use it as a 'how-to' guide, reading it from start to finish so you feel empowered and informed as a parent. Alternatively, you can approach it as a problem-solver, dipping into its wisdom when you find yourself scratching your head, wondering what to do next with the young person in your family. Either way, this book deserves a prominent spot beside the bed of any person who has a teenager in their life!

Importantly, Linda Friedland places authority in the hands of you, the parent, and encourages you to be a confident, compassionate leader as you raise your young person through the potentially tricky years of adolescence. Enjoy the journey.

Michael Grose
Director, Parentingideas.com.au
November 2012

AUTHOR'S NOTE

PARENTING IS SIMPLY DEFINED AS the 'act of raising a child' and yet nothing can adequately prepare us for this major task. I am still in the midst of it: my two youngest children are teenagers; the older three are in their early 20s. Although much of the distress of adolescence attracts a great deal of attention and even media awareness, I don't believe raising teenagers has to be an entirely awful experience. I think much of it can in fact be trouble free and at times even quite satisfying. There is a wonderful African proverb – it takes a village to raise a child. There are many things and people other than you, the parents, that influence your child's development. Struggling with challenging adolescents is no less daunting than dealing with toddlers. Remember that adolescence is a life stage and most testy teens grow into wonderful adults, but they do require healthy parenting, strong role models, love and patience to get through this stage. We often judge ourselves harshly when it comes to parenting, but there are many types of parents and various ways to parent well. Let go of the guilt and self-blame. It is never too late. This book will hopefully give you some new insights and perspectives on parenting teenagers, supported by views and data from some of the world's leading parenting experts.

Note: Throughout the book, I have chosen to interchange gender and make use of both 'he' and 'she' when describing teenagers.

INTRODUCTION: BODY PIERCINGS AND OTHER POWER STRUGGLES

IT WAS AN UNUSUALLY HOT day as we trampled through the African bush, trying to avoid thorns scratching against bare legs, and treading carefully over potential snake pits. We hadn't anticipated the walk would take so long and were looking forward to the end of the incessant 'are we there yet?', grumbled by the youngest boys. My then 13-year-old daughter decided it was a good time to engage in an important conversation. She obviously believed that in the middle of this arduous hike, I would be worn down enough to simply say 'yes, sure'. She wasn't entirely wrong. 'Mum, can I get a belly ring?'

'Oh, yeah, sure!' was my sarcastic response, 'as long as Dad says it's okay,' knowing full well what his response would be: 'Not a chance!'

So off she trotted a hundred metres ahead to where Dad was leading the hike into a herd of zebras. Two minutes later, she ran jubilantly back to me as I continued dragging myself up the hill with two small, exhausted hikers in tow. 'Dad says it's fine!'

'What!? Well it's absolutely NOT fine. Dad's wrong or joking, and I say no. No ways. There is no way that you are getting a belly ring. The final answer is no.'

The whys and wherefores continued for a short while. But then silence ensued. There is no doubt that my thinking was wavering somewhat, but not my resolve. It was crystal clear to me in that moment that (in my book of rules) a belly ring was entirely inappropriate for a 13-year-

old. But I also knew that, although I am not fond of body piercings at all, in choosing my battles, body piercing (a few select types only) is not one of the absolute non-negotiables.

‘How is this plan, Leigh?’ I continued. ‘When you are 16, we will revisit this conversation, and if you are still keen on the belly ring, I will take you to get it done.’

At the time, she obviously wasn’t happy with my response, didn’t believe the 16-year-old part of the plan and was infuriated by my initial sarcasm. She gave me the most unpleasant ‘I hate you’ glare. By the way, she has an extremely fierce stare, which she has inherited from her dad, and which has more to do with the shape of their eyebrows and foreheads than genuine disdain. But on this particular occasion, she was certainly using those facial features to her advantage and intended to show me how angry she felt. It is the kind of look an adolescent girl will use on a friend after being extremely hurt. It is the kind of look that says ‘it’s over, you are not my friend’. I received her message loud and clear. In that mument I also realised that this was an important crossroads in our relationship. I would have to choose to do the right thing over being popular. I glared back at her and shared with her the difficult words that needed to be said: ‘I know you are angry with me. I know right now you don’t like me at all. But I am not your friend. I am your mother. I am here to love you, but I am also here to guide you in what I feel is correct. If by standing my ground and doing what is right, you continue to dislike me, I will live with it. If I can never be your friend, it may be painful for me. But my role is as your mother. You may hate me for some things, but I cannot give up on what I think is best for you in order to be your friend.’

When I decided to begin writing this book, it was on her and her twin sister Elle’s 21st birthday that I reminded Leigh of this incident. As we chuckled about it, she blurted out: ‘But you’ve left out the most important part of the story! The real significance of this story is what you did three years later,’ she asserted. ‘You need to share with your readers how you took both me and Elle to the piercing parlour to get the belly-ring piercing, as promised. You need to include how all our friends went behind their mums’ backs, had the belly piercing and then hid it from their parents. You kept your word about my 16th birthday.’

You investigated the different piercing parlours until you found the most clinical and sterile environment that met with your medical standards, inspected the instruments, ensured they used disposable needles and gloves, and then went on to almost perform the procedure yourself.'

And what Leigh forgets is that as we waited, she became quite squeamish witnessing the piercing procedure on someone else. She even asked if we could please leave and come back another day. We eventually went back, she had the piercing done, inserted a small belly ring and it really ceased to be a significant issue. Elle also decided to have a tiny nose ring inserted at the time.

Against the backdrop of my most challenging life experiences, raising teenagers has certainly not been the worst. Newborn infants, medical studies and internships, and moving country have ranked as far more stressful. I personally enjoy the teen years – the transition of a child into an adolescent, and guiding and witnessing the emergence of an adult. I think as parents today, we have become obsessed with early childhood, as well as performance and outcomes. I also believe that we have possibly lost the way and the courage when it comes to taking charge in the teenage years. This book is not about adolescent psychology or theory. Although most of my books have been written wearing my medical hat, this book has me wearing the hat of my 25 years of parenting. I have written these pages with honesty and frankness but always backed up by sound research and the best expert opinions. Through a few personal anecdotes as well as those of patients and clients – and many fictitious examples too – the focus of this book is how best to handle each situation, and how best to raise a child into a quality adult in the midst of this totally new world order. Yes, our Y- and Z-generation teenagers may be internet based and high tech, but they desperately require our reality-based and high-touch parenting.

A NEW LIFE STAGE

ADOLESCENCE IS NOT JUST A period of dramatic physical growth and pubertal burgeoning; perhaps even more significantly, it is a time of explosive brain development. In many ways, this period of change is no less dramatic than the miraculous emergence of a self-sufficient toddler straight out of babyhood. The teenager, neither a child nor an adult, finds himself in a totally new phase of life, requiring freedom and self-expression at the same time as boundaries, guidance, support and nurturing.

As parents, this new life stage often leaves us bewildered and baffled. We need to understand that teens aren't intentionally making bad choices or being careless. Many of their behavioural changes are due to significant reorganisation and 'rewiring' of the brain structures. They still need us to hug them and to truly listen to them, but they also need the space to express themselves. Do whatever you can to 'stay in the game,' urges Michael Grose, Australian parenting expert and author of eight books on the subject. He highlights the importance of staying connected and present as a parent through this challenging stage. He encourages us to take an interest in our teenagers' activities, drive them to places, talk to them about their friendships, about their life right now. Do whatever you can to keep connected and maintain a relationship.

I. TRANSFORMATION

Q: My sweet child has turned into something unrecognisable: What is going on here?

DAUGHTER: Why are you looking at me like that?

MUM: Like what?

DAUGHTER: I dunno, you are looking at me funny. And you embarrassed me in front of my friends by talking so loudly.

MUM: What do you mean?

DAUGHTER: Just like that. Whatever!

.....

Doors slamming, raised voices, sulking and monosyllabic responses may be just some of the features you have experienced during the transformation of your cherubic child into a gangly teenager. Far more difficult, however, for teens than the physical changes of oily skin and pimples is the enormous brain development they undergo at this time. Teenagers endure (unbeknown to us or to them) changes as radical as when they were toddlers. Remember your excitement and praise at each major developmental milestone – clapping your hands every time your toddlers said a word or took their first shaky steps? As 14- or 15-year-olds reveal the by-products of a similar brain surge, challenging our assertions or expressing beliefs in conflict with our own, they are (sadly) unlikely to receive similar applause.

Also, cerebral and physiological growth spurts are accompanied by a new phenomenon – their peers' opinions matter more than their parents'. In the book aptly titled *Whatever!*, Gill Hines and Alison Baverstock explain that because teens fall awkwardly between two phases, namely childhood and adulthood, they are very different from either group: 'Their socialisation is different, their needs and wants are different and their bodies are different.' They are also trying to express their independence at the same time as being compelled to conform to their peer group. It's no wonder they're at risk for depression, anxiety, substance abuse and reckless behaviour. However, we can help our children through this stressful transition, with a few wise strategies.

WHAT TO DO:

- A combination of compassion, firm boundaries and open and honest communication is required.
- We need to expect change and, more importantly, expect our authority to be challenged.
- It's a good idea to give them space to take the steps.
- Keep those lines of communication wide open. It is a great relief and comfort for teens to know that they can express anything and not be judged.
- Respect their space and privacy.
- Don't stop hugging them.

2. BRAIN CHANGES

Q: Why doesn't my teenage son use his head clearly?

DAD: What were you thinking? Don't you think before you do anything?

SON: I just went over to Dean's house to hang out. I forgot I was supposed to meet you after soccer practice. It's not a big deal.

DAD: But we were worried. Why didn't you call? Don't you use your head?

SON: What are you talking about?

Science in the form of brain imaging has changed our understanding of adolescence. Recklessness, risk-taking and thoughtlessness, once thought to be products of pure self-centredness or raging hormones, are also the result of major brain development. Until fairly recently, we had no idea just how profound the brain changes during adolescence are. Research in the past decade has revealed that the brain undergoes significant reorganisation and suggests that teens aren't intentionally making bad choices or being careless.

Dramatic brain reconfiguration takes place in an area called the prefrontal cortex. This is the reasoning part of the brain, responsible for clear thinking and decision-making, and it undergoes a process often referred to as pruning. Areas of this critical brain structure are being rewired, making the brain more efficient. Some connections (called synapses) are literally whittled away or sloughed off, making way for new and stronger connections. The prefrontal cortex is also wired into the limbic system, the emotional part of brain that helps us make sense of the world and relate to others. The thinking processes are often thrown off course by activity triggered in the emotional part of the brain. A simple explanation for adolescent moodiness is that the thinking part of the brain has not yet developed to the point where it can rein in the intense reactions of the emotional brain. Dr Laura Kastner, clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at the University of Washington, explains how neuroscientists characterise the

risks inherent in teen years as a big engine, poor driving skills, faulty brakes and high-octane fuel: the big engine refers to the brash new push for autonomy, poor driving skills result from the reconstruction of the teens' prefrontal cortexes, faulty brakes describe the teens' lack of impulse control and high-octane gas refers to the intense emotions accompanying adolescents' hormonal changes.

WHAT TO DO:

- Understand that a lot of your teen's thoughtlessness is part of the building of a 'new' brain. This doesn't excuse poor conduct and insolence, but it does explain some sloppy behaviours and seemingly poor judgements.
- Use moments of calm and clarity, such as in the evening before bedtime, to engage with the teenager's thinking brain. This may be the optimum time to talk about, for example, the dangers of drunken driving and speeding, and the need to keep you abreast of their whereabouts.

3. BODY CHANGES

Q: How should I handle these dramatic physical changes in my teen?

MUM: Do you want to talk about periods?

DAUGHTER: No, not really, Mum.

MUM: Why don't you tell me what you know about periods?

DAUGHTER: Well, okay. Actually, I wanted to ask you something...

As they move from childhood into physical maturity, adolescents go through dramatic changes. We welcome these changes, but we also find them a little disturbing. Hormones, which are substances released by glands, signal the body to develop in certain ways. Puberty occurs when sex hormones signal the development of organs and systems related to sexual reproduction. Although many of the pubertal changes occur internally, there are also outward indications of the onset of sexual maturation. For girls, sexual maturation is marked by breast development and menarche, or the first menstrual period (on average, at between 10 and 15 years of age). For boys, it is marked by the production of viable sperm and the first ejaculation (on average, between the ages of 11 and 16), which is often indicated by nocturnal emissions, otherwise known as wet dreams. The sudden and rapid physical changes that they go through make adolescents very self-conscious and sensitive. Because body changes may not occur in a smooth, regular schedule, teens may go through awkward stages about their appearance and concomitant physical changes. The hormonal surges and fluctuations have a direct effect on emotions and thoughts too. Although male hormones kick in a little later than in girls, parents should still openly discuss sexuality and puberty with their sons as frankly as with their daughters.

WHAT TO DO:

- Address the issue of puberty with your young teens in an open and easy manner.
- Use a questioning approach, rather than dispensing lectures. Ask

them, for example, what they know about erections rather than giving them a lecture on the subject.

- Don't stop physical contact. Just because they are quite awkward about their bodies doesn't mean they need less physical contact.
- Dads sometimes feel reticent and nervous, and give up physical contact with their daughters. Do respect their boundaries, but don't stop hugging your daughters.
- Many dads may become physically more distant from their sons too. Both mums and dads should continue to show their teens a lot of physical affection even if they resist it somewhat.

COMMUNICATION

COMMUNICATING WITH TEENAGERS IS ONE of life's great contradictions. We want them to open up and speak to us. By contrast, they can think of nothing they would like to do less than have a heart-to-heart chat with their parents. 'If you are living with a teenager,' explains Australian parenting expert Michael Grose, 'you have probably noticed that they can be notoriously difficult to communicate with.' They mumble, they grunt, they speak in monosyllables and they become increasingly distant.

We genuinely want good communication with our children. We want them to feel that they can share ideas and opinions with us, and feel comfortable doing so. We want them to be able to discuss their problems with us. We want the daily exchange between us to be congenial. We wish for as little conflict as possible. The experts agree on good communication being the key to the best parenting. South African adolescent psychotherapist Serenne Kaplan emphasises that 'the core issue is reciprocal trust and mutual respect'. The trouble is that with teenagers effective communication is vastly different from what we think it should be. When we talk to our teens, there is so much that we want to convey as parents. We incessantly remind them to watch their language and not be rude; we feel the need to correct them frequently and point out when they just don't get it. This type of instruction comes naturally to us as parents. We have done it this way for more than a decade. It worked just fine when they were toddlers and preschoolers. It seemed to work really well through most of their primary-school years. But it just doesn't work any longer. This form of didactic guidance is in fact fairly useless with a teenager. 'Teenagers don't lose their ability to communicate, but their attention shifts away from parents and focuses like a laser beam onto their peers, particularly for those in the 14- to 16-year-old age groups,' explains Grose.

I often ask this question of teenagers: ‘Why do you not like talking to your parents?’ A frequent answer is: ‘When we talk, they never shut up. They either don’t listen to me, they lecture or they criticise. They don’t really want to hear my point of view. So most of the time I don’t even try.’

When a teenager initiates a conversation, unfortunately we almost always seem to add our agenda to the subject. We also feel the need to correct their point of view and we often object to the rude way in which they speak and the bad language they use. All of these, our agenda, our guidance and our objection to insolence, are most important and valid. But to encourage our teens to talk, we need to keep our opinions out of the way until a later stage.

Effective communication means that each person’s needs, desires and opinions are considered. Teens need to know that their parents respect them even though we may not agree. Although they don’t always show it, they appreciate it when we truly listen and pay attention to what they are saying in a non-judgemental manner.

4. 'I HEARD YOU!'

Q: How do we get teens to listen to us?

MUM: Ned, please could you take out the garbage?

SON: Yeah, okay.

MUM: Are you listening to me, Ned?

SON: Yeah, sure.

MUM: So, you'll take out the garbage?

SON: Yes.

MUM: Please go now?

SON: I'll do it in a minute.

MUM: No now!

SON: I heard you!

.....

How often have your kids answered your second or third request to perform a simple task with 'I heard you!', but then felt no compulsion to actually do it?

OR CONSIDER THIS:

MUM: Leigh, please tidy up your incredibly messy room.

DAUGHTER: I will.

MUM: When will you do it?

DAUGHTER: Soon.

MUM: What does that mean?

DAUGHTER: Ah, Mum, please. I heard you!

.....

The reality is that both Ned and Leigh are well-mannered and obliging young people. They are not defiant (well, generally not). If they were communicating with friends or school or university peers, they would not respond to a request with 'I heard you'.

So why is it that the response to a parent is so vastly different from the way they respond to peers or strangers? Dr Anthony Wolf, author of *I'd listen to my parents if they'd just shut up*, sheds light on this fascinating variance. He explains that adults and children have two distinctly different modes of behaviour, which he calls two different 'selves'. One he calls a domestic self, which just wants to unwind and be fed and will tolerate no stress. He calls this the 'baby self'. The domain of the baby self is the home, where it feels most comfortable and safe. In contrast, the 'mature self' functions at a much higher level. It goes into the world, is able to endure stress and delay gratification. This mature self has patience and self-control. Although we start life as a baby self, as we grow up, the mature self takes over most of our functioning. However, we all keep a part of our baby self, which emerges and seems to take over from time to time. Only in the baby self do we get the deep nurturing we need. Wolf explains that without a safe place for a baby self to rest, life would just be too difficult to endure.

So although it is infuriating when you hear 'Mum, where are my soccer boots?'; 'Mum, I can't find the TV remote'; 'Mum, I can't find my school jumper', this behaviour simply reveals that children need a place where they can fully be a child. And that place is at home, with us, their parents. There is no doubt that for most teenagers, the mature self is the major part of who they are, but the baby self comes to the fore very frequently as they swing between adult and infant. Rest assured that most teenagers will move out of this phase into perfectly good citizens as adults. How to tackle this problem is quite simple in theory but much more difficult in practice.

WHAT TO DO:

- Your teen needs a place where his baby self can emerge – and you want that place to be home.
- Do allow for the baby self to have a comfortable resting place within the confines of the home, but that doesn't mean tolerating insolence.
- There is no need to be overly concerned, as the mature self will certainly become the dominant part of the teenager with normal psychological development.

5. PARENT-TEEN CONFLICT

Q: Why is there so much conflict between teens and parents?

DAUGHTER: You said you don't like any of my friends.

MUM: I did not say I don't like any of your friends.

DAUGHTER: Yes, you did.

MUM: No, I didn't!

DAUGHTER: Yes, you did. You hate all my friends.

MUM: I do not hate all your friends; I dislike some of their behaviour.

DAUGHTER: There you go, you said it. Well I don't like your friends.

MUM: Do not bring my friends into it and don't be so rude.

DAUGHTER: I am not rude.

MUM: Yes, you are!

.....

There are a huge number of issues that may generate some sort of conflict between a parent and a teen. Most of the time, if we were able to disengage and move on, we could defuse many of these conflicts. The problem arises when we get locked into them and cannot shift. There is a clear explanation for this 'locked in conflict' state. We too as parents become our baby self when we are attacked or defied. Can you see this happening in the dialogue above? This is two baby selves in full-blown action and neither is prepared to back off and let go. If you have something you wish to say, stick to your original comment, plan or decision and then withdraw because your teenager certainly will not. Once they have heard your point, as the parent you must then back off. Serenne Kaplan urges parents to 'argue the point rather than the person and avoid harsh critical language and labelling but don't be afraid of your teen either'.

WHAT TO DO:

- Be aware that both you and your teenager have a 'baby self', whose

domain is home where it feels most comfortable and safe, and a 'mature self'. Much of our conflict occurs when we are both in baby-self mode.

- As a parent, it is up to you to move into your adult rational state.
- When a baby self is not getting its own way it will go on and on, just like a two-year-old.
- The greatest skill we can learn as a parent is to disengage sooner rather than later in the conflict.

6. WHEN TO SHUT UP

Q: Are there times when I should just refrain from commenting and shut up?

MUM: Why are you so angry? What happened?

DAUGHTER: Caitlin's dad was late as usual to collect us from netball!

MUM: Well, now you can eat dinner and you've got some time to just relax.

DAUGHTER: I am so annoyed! It was so flippin frustrating!

MUM: I hope you weren't rude to Caitlin's dad.

DAUGHTER: Wow, Mum, I can't even talk to you! You always interrupt. You always have to try to pick on me.

.....

There are many times we need to shut up. That's correct: keep quiet as much as possible. Have I personally mastered this? Hell, no! But I am trying. It is one of the great lessons of parenting and has taken me almost a quarter of a century to begin to learn. If you were to ask any of my children whether I do the proverbial shutting up, they would say quite the opposite. They have a standard in-joke, which they find hilarious, but which I don't find particularly funny. As I am about to say something extremely important, all of them roll their eyes to the ceiling and one will exclaim, 'Now, which chapter of Mum's books is this?'. This has the effect of immediately shutting me up.

The reason we find it so hard to shut up is that we feel that if we don't correct our teen then and there, we miss the opportunity to teach her the right way. This feels like a loss of control, which it is. But that's exactly the point. Shutting up means letting go of the control that we may feel we need to exert. Of course, you need to use your discretion. You certainly won't shut up if he bashes your car, or she gets seriously drunk or you find marijuana in the house. But for everyday conversations and interactions, don't feel you have to use every opportunity to instruct. Let some of the issues go. Letting go of some control allows your teenager to talk and communicate further. If he doesn't feel judged,

criticised or corrected then he may just begin sharing more than his three favourite words – ‘fine’, ‘nothing’ and ‘later’.

WHAT TO DO:

- As difficult as it is to implement, learning to shut up when your teenager communicates with you will go a long way to enhancing your interactions and dialogue.
- Try to obstruct as little as possible.
- If we introduce our own agenda, we take his conversation in a new direction. It is far better to allow him to continue the flow by just listening, saying nothing or continuing the conversation in the direction it was originally heading.
- If you feel that there is something that needs to be commented on, it's best to wait until later. By stopping to correct him, the moment is gone and you may very well switch him off.
- Restraint and delay are very effective tools with teens.

7. BACKCHAT

Q: How do I deal with this backchat?

MUM: Just watch your mouth, Isabella! I don't like the way you are talking to me.

DAUGHTER: But you are rude to me!

MUM: You heard me now. Cut the backchat!

DAUGHTER: You should hear yourself!

.....

Although it's not an easy thing to do, wait until a little later to address the issue. Allow the emotions on both sides to calm down. A common response to this is: 'If we don't respond immediately to this backchat, won't my teen feel as if she is getting away with it?' Anthony Wolf, author of *The secret of parenting*, says: 'Absolutely not. Just try my approach and see how much they hate for the power to rest in your hands.' They want the response. The backchat is to spark off your emotion, giving them a chance to manipulate you. When a child gives you backchat, you have two options – either to respond immediately or not to respond. If you respond to the backchat, chances are you will just get more of it.

WHAT TO DO:

- You may feel compelled to stop the backchat in its tracks. But by trying to stop it at the point of the exchange, you will probably just elicit further backchat.
- State what you need to say, do not respond to the backchat at all and if necessary, repeat your request calmly.
- The backchat will die down if there is nothing to feed off.
- Your teen will probably give far less backchat if you do not respond to it.
- Deal with it at a neutral mument, when the broader issue of disrespect can be addressed without emotional flooding (see page 150).

8. THE BEST WAY TO COMMUNICATE – LISTEN!

Q: What is the best way to communicate with my teen?

The best way to communicate with adolescents is counterintuitive: just listen. Truly listen. And if they still choose not to talk, let them know you are there to listen at any time and about anything. The notion that teens don't like to communicate with their parents is only partially true. They abhor being told what to do and they are not very good at taking criticism. (Neither are most adults, for that matter.) But they do like to be heard. Even the most introverted and monosyllabic teen appreciates being heard. It is the most basic part of being human. To a lesser or greater degree, we all want to share with someone what we feel and think. With teens, the people they choose to share with are not usually their parents, however. The reason is simple: at this stage, they would much rather share with their peers, explains Stephen Biddulph, child psychologist and author of bestseller *Raising boys* and *The new manhood*. It's a normal developmental experience, but it doesn't last forever. They eventually move out of adolescence into early adulthood and once again for the most part, value the relationship with their parents. Teens are also often betrayed or let down by a friend or partner and then need someone to turn to. But they will only share with you if they feel it's safe. We could take our relationship with our teens to the next level simply by being as non-judgemental and uncritical as possible while they are talking to us.

WHAT TO DO:

- Listening does not necessarily mean you say nothing. The 'shutting up' part means withholding correction, criticism or rebuke.
- Being heard requires us to make eye contact and truly listen.
- For your teen to feel heard also means letting her know that you have understood what she has said, each step of the way. Psychotherapists use this technique all the time and it works. I am not suggesting we need to be using psychotherapy with our children,

but we do need to let them know they are being heard every step of the way. This involves some repetition of what they have said, instead of interjecting with what we think.

INSTEAD OF:

MUM: How was the party?

DAUGHTER: It was crappy.

MUM: Why was it crappy?

DAUGHTER: It just was.

MUM: Is something wrong? Did something happen at the party?

DAUGHTER: Casey is an f – – ing bitch.

MUM: Don't use that language!

DAUGHTER: Oh to hell with it, you always lecture me!

HOW ABOUT?

MUM: How was the party?

DAUGHTER: It was crappy.

MUM: So it was really crappy?

DAUGHTER: It so was! And Casey is a real bitch.

MUM: So Casey was bitchy to you?

DAUGHTER: She embarrassed me in front of everyone.

MUM: You must have felt awful.

DAUGHTER: I did and I'm happy that I came home early.

MUM: It's a relief that you left the party?

DAUGHTER: Yip, anyway goodnight.

9. UNCOMMUNICATIVE TEENS

Q: Why is my teen so uncommunicative?

PARENT: How are you feeling?

TEEN: Grunt.

MOTHER: How was school?

DAUGHTER: Okay.

FATHER: Did you take out the garbage?

SON: I'll do it.

PARENT: What's news at school?

TEEN: Nothing.

.....

Since their earliest years, you have instilled in your kids great language skills through reading and spoken communication. So it is a bit disappointing to observe their verbal skills regress into monosyllables. But this is perfectly normal. It is also quite normal during adolescence for children to withdraw emotionally from their parents. Their peer group, which has its own language and set of rules, becomes their new forum for communication. Teens often disengage from parents if they sense we are not interested. They also withdraw when parents are overly critical. The secret is that 'communication with a teen doesn't necessarily mean talking', explain Michael Grose, author of *One step ahead: Great ideas for tired parents*. 'It can be hanging around and doing things together, perhaps playing a computer game, watching sport or driving to where they want to go.' There is little doubt that communication is the key to effectively parenting teenagers. Grose suggests a few helpful strategies to improve this relationship-building with your teen:

WHAT TO DO:

- Try to limit the amount of time they spend in their bedrooms.

Although they love their own space, and the time spent in their bedroom is part of an important developmental need for privacy, 'make sure they come out of their bedrooms for mealtimes and other opportunities to catch up,' emphasises Grose.

- 'Do take an interest in their interests.' Nurture something that you have in common, 'whether it's a shared love of music, sport or even shopping'. This is important relationship-building.
- 'Create the space for communication,' encourages Grose. You may need to create the environment where you and your teenager can talk. This may mean going out for a coffee or a meal alone.
- Be sensitive to their need for privacy.
- Truly listen to what they have to say.

10. 'I'LL DO IT LATER'

Q: Why is my teen's standard answer 'I'll do it later'?

MUM: Please tidy up the mess you left in the TV room.

SON: I'll do it.

MUM: Cameron, please go and tidy up that mess!

SON: I'll do it later.

The problem with 'later' is that it usually means never. When your teen says that he will do it later, what he is generally thinking is if he puts it off for long enough, you will eventually give up on nagging him and he won't have to do it. He is probably also thinking that you will then do it for him. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us procrastinate at some time or another, but there is something innate about teens and procrastination. They are masters at it. It becomes so frustrating for parents that we tend to just give up. It becomes much easier to do it ourselves. 'Don't do this,' warns James Lehman, one of America's top child behavioural therapists and author of *Transform your child*. 'What you need to understand is that you are setting your child up to have a false sense of entitlement later on in life, a belief that the world owes them something.' It is a form of passive aggression that can be turned around, explains Lehman.

WHAT TO DO:

- The best time for later is now.
- If your teen's track record demonstrates that after saying 'later' he does get it done, then let up on him.
- Mostly, however, 'later' means never, so your prerogative is to make them do it now.
- Implement consequences for not responding to you. For example, if they don't bring their laundry to you, don't do their laundry.

II. SHARING WITH OTHER PARENTS (THE GOOD AND THE BAD)

Q: Why is it that all I hear from other parents is their children's successes?

PARENT NO. 1: What can I say? She is a natural swimmer.

PARENT NO. 2: We are very proud. This is his 10th goal this season.

PARENT NO. 3: Oh, academic success does come fairly easily. He doesn't do much studying.

PARENT NO. 4: She seems to have a natural talent for music.

.....

It's understandable that as parents we all want to present our children in the best possible light. And when things aren't going well, we certainly don't want to reveal any of their problems or failures. Parents mistakenly absorb their kids' failures as their own and erroneously take on their offspring's achievements as well. In reality, most kids are not superstars even if their parents would have you believe so. Every child has some strengths and weaknesses. In a recent interview with Michael Grose, in which he spoke about some of his best advice on the subject of raising adolescents, he emphasised the 'drawing of strength from other parents'. Children today are very highly connected to each other; parents are not. 'You don't parent well in isolation,' he stresses. Grose encourages parents to connect through events at school and other organisations, and to speak to each other regarding children's boundaries and behaviours.

It would be liberating if we, too, could be a little more honest with each other. What emerges for many parents is the impression that no one else has any problems with their kids. Parents are reluctant to be open, honest and vulnerable. Obviously much of what goes on in our family lives is indeed private, but in reality even the best families have challenges and concerns. Every teenager, every relationship and every family has its obstacles, weaknesses and issues. Without having to expose

ourselves totally, we could nevertheless draw strength from each other if we shared a little more than just our children's accomplishments.

WHAT TO DO:

- Without having to make yourself vulnerable, it is a good idea to begin to share your experiences of raising teenagers with like-minded parents.
- Become a good listener. You can provide support to fellow parents or friends going through a difficult time. No one is immune to many of the significant troubles experienced by teens. You never know when you may be in a similar situation.
- Remain modest about your kids' achievements. Although it is wonderful seeing them succeed, we should laud our children's qualities such as compassion, kindness and common decency with as much gusto as their successes.

12. TALKING TOUGH TOPICS

Q: How do I bring up difficult subjects with my teenager?

DAD: Did you see that your favourite British footballer has been charged with possible date rape?

TEEN: Are you serious?

DAD: Yes, it's on the news. Why don't you come and watch the headlines with me now?

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We know that we need to begin a conversation with our teens about many very uncomfortable subjects. But how do you start to talk about safe sex, drug abuse or date rape? They are not merely awkward topics but these touchy subjects unfortunately may turn into parental lectures, which teens loathe. A great approach is to utilise the news, other media and what's current as a springboard to broaching such subjects with teens. This method takes the personal edge off the topic. A celebrity gets charged with rape; a football player is caught using cocaine; a teenager gets beaten into a coma at a party – are all opportunities to engage in a very meaningful conversation. But allow your teen to express his opinion on the matter before trying to jump in with the obvious moral message.

WHAT TO DO:

- Watch the news on television with your teen and use this as a springboard to ask his opinion, particularly on teen-related matters. The same applies to news sites on the computer or iPad.
- The nightly news or live talk-show programmes on relevant current issues provide an ideal opportunity for discussion and sharing your views on those tough topics.
- Reality TV shows, which teens are particularly fond of, provide countless muments for discussion and sharing.
- Listen more than you talk and you will discover that your teen will begin to want to hear more of your opinion.

- We do not need to try to be cool about every contentious issue. It is okay to have differing opinions, but do allow teenagers a chance to express their views even when they go against yours.
- Communicate your love as well as your expectations for decent conduct frequently and consistently, encourages Denise Wittmer, a recognised US author on parenting books, including *The parent's guide to raising a successful child*.

13. CONFRONTATION – ‘WE NEED TO HAVE A TALK’

Q: How do I best confront my teen about something he has done wrong?

DAD: We need to have a talk this evening, Sam.

SON: Oh come on, Dad, you look furious! What did I do now?

DAD: Have a shower and after dinner, we will talk.

.....

‘Confronting our children is one of the less enjoyable aspects of parenting. Letting them know that they have done the wrong thing or that certain behaviours or attitudes are unacceptable is not pleasant,’ explains Stephen Biddulph. He encourages us to ‘give them some warning’. “We need to have a talk” or “I need you and I to sit down after dinner, there is something we need to talk about” gives them time to process what it may be about and demonstrates a level of composure on your behalf,’ recommends Biddulph.

What tends to happen with many parents is an eruption of anger, which leads to a most unproductive experience. You feel awful about losing it and you may lose the whole point of the discussion. Although it is okay for your teen to see you lose your composure, it is not the behaviour you want them to model. Make sure you have had a discussion with your partner or spouse before you confront the child and that you are in agreement. Biddulph also emphasises that fathers need to be actively involved in this aspect of parenting and not leave the tough stuff up to the mother.

WHAT TO DO:

- It is vital to choose a good mument to confront your teen. Do not begin as he arrives home, or as soon as he gets in the car.
- Don’t confront him when you are furious. Wait until you feel calmer.
- If you land up shouting inappropriately, ‘be sure to apologise after,’ recommends Biddulph.

- Be cautious about how you speak and choose the content of what you have to say carefully.
- Say it straight and be direct. Don't attack your child, but be clear that you are angry at the behaviour.
- Be clear about the issues at hand. Once again reinforce the boundaries and stipulate your expectations for his behaviour.
- Try to end with a positive affirmation, such as: 'This is not the kind of behaviour I would expect from you. You are better than this.'

14. GENERATIONS Y AND Z

Q: How do parents cope with the whole new concept of Generations Y and Z?

MUM: What are you doing?

SON: The usual. I'm listening to music. Doing some homework, looking at Facebook. Why?... MIR.

MUM: What does MIR mean?

SON: Mum in room... Are you looking over my shoulder at what I'm texting?!

.....

There has always been the proverbial generation gap. Parents were slated for not understanding their kids. But today's Gen Ys and Zs seem as though they're from another stratosphere. It has happened so fast that you could have children from two different generations in the same family. My three eldest are Gen Ys and the two youngest are Gen Zs, with me just making Gen X (or the tail end of the baby boomers).

Gen Y kids, born between 1980 and 1994, are known to be incredibly sophisticated and technology savvy. They have often grown up knowing it all, they've seen it all and been exposed to it all since early childhood, aided by the rapid expansion of the internet and cable TV channels. Having labelled them 'Generation Why', Eric Chester, speaker and author on the subject, explains that 'they are stimulus junkies, easily bored but also adept at multi-tasking, fast thinking, creative and tolerant of diversity'. They are often called the iGeneration or the MyPod generation. Dr Erica McWilliam of Queensland University, Australia, calls them the 'Yuk/Wow' generation. The media calls them Kippers (kids in parents' pockets eroding retirement savings). Technology is natural and normal for them. As 'netrepreneurs', they are smarter than Gen X (early/mid-1960s to 1980) and baby boomers (1946–1964), and they know it. They are into lifestyle, image and being entertained. They are always looking for the next opportunity or new job rather than promotion, as their parents did. Michael Grose calls them the zigzag generation, as they tend to change jobs frequently. He states that the

average Australian 28-year-old will already have changed jobs three times. Some Gen Ys move back home after some years of freedom, after possibly having made some mistakes. 'But all is not lost,' he explains. 'There is a recovery period where many of them make a comeback in their mid-twenties.'

Generation Z children were born after 1995. They can multi-task, gather information quickly and make decisions faster. While we don't know as much about Gen Z as adults yet, we know a lot about the environment they are growing up in. Gen Z kids are growing up in a highly sophisticated media and computer environment, with digital communication and social networks, and are even more internet-savvy than their Gen Y forerunners. They have developed different communication styles from their parents and, ultimately, have experienced a radically different childhood from other generations. Unfortunately, many Gen Z kids are the products of significant affluence and helicopter parenting. They are learning far less in the form of life skills and more about being pushed to the limit.

WHAT TO DO:

- It is of great value to keep up to date with technology and social media so you can truly understand the digital environment that is so natural for our teens.
- Maintain your ethical and moral standards and expectations of your teens but make an effort to understand the differences between your generation and value system, and theirs.
- Although multi-tasking is natural, encourage activities and forms of engagement that require uni-tasking, for example a conversation without the presence of a cellphone, or a game of tennis.
- Gen Y and Z children are well known for wanting everything, now. Don't give in all the time. Train your Gen Ys and Zs in delaying gratification.
- Self-entitlement is also a strong feature of Gen Y and Z. Encourage gratitude and working towards goals and rewards.