

How to tackle a teenage daughter

A quick and simple guide to overcoming some of the "differences of opinion" that can occur between teenage daughter and parent

By Dawn Stannard

And no, I don't mean wrestle her to floor, flip her over, put her in a head lock and insist she apologises for the derogatory remarks she made before breakfast, although you might be sorely tempted. I mean understand what's going on in your and her life and how to make the best of the changes so that you are still friends with the beautiful adult that emerges out the other side of adolescence.

I am a single mum with a 16 year old daughter whom I love unconditionally and would travel to the ends of the earth for her. But for the past 18 months as she has begun to grow into a young woman, there have been times when I have struggled to remember what it was I found lovable about her.

I can trace the beginning of the end of childhood all back to the

morning I suggested that we should redecorate her bedroom. I proposed that we should go and choose some paint and a new duvet / pillow set and curtains and make a start on the transformation that day. I had visions of a pretty shell pink, with flowery chintz's merging cream with beige. Of course, my daughter had completely different ideas. So after a very heated discussion at the checkout at our local DIY shed, we abandoned the shop in favour of a catalogue store. We finally came home with candyfloss pink 'Playboy' linen and matching curtains. From that moment on I realised that my daughter definitely had her own ideas and opinions and that they didn't remotely coincide with mine!

As a result I have pieced together some hard won tips advice

gleaned from my daily experiences coping with the changes a teenager brings to the household. Hopefully these tips will help you get through this tricky time, all the while maintaining a sense of fairness and discipline and yet still managing to remain friends with your teenager whilst being a good mother (or father).

This article has been specially written for dadcando by Dawn Stannard, a single mother and regular visitor to the dadcando. Even though she has written about her experiences of the relationship between a mother and daughter, the tips and advice she gives are just about perfect for any parent wrestling with the hormone charged atmosphere of a home that has gained a teenager.

Give her her own space and her privacy

We all need time to be alone, we all need our privacy. We need time to collect our thoughts, nurture our feelings and have our own space. As a child grows up they move from dependent to independent. This is usually a painful process for both parent and child and the root cause of most of the issues surrounding adolescence. Give your daughter her space. Don't constantly call up the stairs after her or bang on her bedroom door when she's chatting on the mobile phone, even if it feels like she's been on it all evening. She'll join you much sooner if you don't hassle her.

The legal age for reaching adulthood (and therefore independence and personal responsibility) depends on the law where you live. In reality, everybody matures at a different rate, and some may be ready to be treated at home like adults before others and before they are legally an adult. Treat your daughter's growing independence with respect, don't read her diary, pry into her text messages or open her mail. If you

do inadvertently see or overhear something that you weren't meant to, handle the information with care, in the most adult way you can, and think before you react.

Really listen to her and hear what she has to say

When you're busy and concentrating on a hundred things at once, it's all too easy to only half listen to what your teenage daughter says about her friends, her school and her life in general. This chit chat is an important window into her life. If you half listen, you may find yourself, like me answering on auto pilot, "really dear, that's nice" when your daughter announces that a large pink elephant wearing a tutu has just landed on the car bonnet. If you're lucky, she'll just be angry with you for not listening, if you're unlucky, she'll completely give up trying to tell you things.

How can we be actively involved in our children's lives as they grow up if we don't have a clue what is going on in them and don't take more

than a passing interest in what is important to them? Try to focus completely on what she is saying whenever possible, or tell her that you are busy and can't concentrate till you have finished what you are doing. Then when you are free make a point of making time to listen. Be determined to take a real interest in her busy life.

Respect her choices and opinions

As you grow up you have to learn how to make, and take responsibility for, important decisions that affect your life. As parents and adults, our choices and decisions are influenced by our life experiences, by our successes or the many mistakes that we have made along the way. Of course it's great to be able to pass on the benefit of our experience gained from the mistakes we have made, but there are some things that can only be learned by doing them. You might not always agree with her choices, but where possible let her learn how to make her own decisions, learn to judge risk and take responsibility for her actions.

Respect her opinions, even if you don't particularly agree with them. They maybe based on less experience than yours, but for her, until she learns one way or the other, they remain true. In any case, opinions are largely subjective and so before you dismiss any of her opinions and ideas that you don't agree with, think on them carefully to see whether or not you could learn something from them that might change and improve the way YOU think about life.

Praise when praise is due

As a parent who wants the best for your child it can be all too easy to criticise poor school performance, especially when we feel that they could or should have done better. Remember how important praise is though. Think: Do you work harder for a boss who is constantly criticising you for your failures, or one that praises you for the things that you do well and feel proud of? Make sure that your daughter knows how pleased you are of any success or achievements. Where possible, encourage your daughter to continue to strive to be the best she can be in the subjects she does well at and spend more collaborative time with her to help her improve where she needs it. Be creative and see how you can make difficult topics or subjects interesting in some way.

Remember, in arguments you are an adult as well as a parent

As your teenager moves from child to adult you have to change your interactions with her from parent-child, to adult-adult. Of course your

daughter will never stop being your daughter but when tensions are high and the atmosphere is charged with hormones, remember that you are the adult, take a step back and try to not get drawn into a fight. Part of bringing your children up is teaching them how to behave and how to relate positively with those around them. The most powerful way you can do this is by example.

When a disagreement starts, try to see her point of view as well as yours. Listen to the argument as objectively as possible and explain your point of view clearly, in a sensible way. As the homemaker (and financier) you are in a position to make the rules in your home, so do so fairly. Remember that it is her home too, even though she may not be contributing to it financially. Take a firm reasonable line that you feel is accommodating and shows integrity, and demonstrate by example, the sort of even handed, considerate behaviour you yourself are expecting.

Establish clear rules and boundaries for acceptable behaviour

Throughout her life your daughter will be governed by rules and regulations. It is important to have limitations and boundaries within the home. Make it clear where you have drawn the line and what you deem to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Your idea of what is permissible will be very different from hers so try and be consistent. When you say no to something, make sure you remain unmoved, (unless new information is available) no matter what emotional pressure is heaped upon you by your daughter to relent. If you remain resolute you will be respected in the long run and she will learn that working within boundaries is a large part of life. Don't make promises or threats that you know you can't keep.

Make sure they help with the housework

Part of growing up and taking more responsibility for ourselves is learning to contribute to the family unit. For many this is a difficult transition because it comes at a point where lots of new personal and social distractions start to become important. It is disheartening when requests for help round the house are invariably repeatedly greeted with the "yeah, in a minute" type reply. After the long haul of child rearing, full time work and a partner to look after, it seems easier to just do the job (if a little resentfully) yourself and thus avoid further confrontation.

You are not doing your daughter any favours by excusing her from helping around the home (this completely applies to teenage sons as well). To make the home run smoothly and to learn about life and how to work as a team together, your teenager needs learn how to help with the chores and housework.

Give a timed warning of the task and say clearly when you expect it to be completed. Help to get things moving; do things together or nearby at the same time to start with, so that you can encourage them and spend a few moments together. Don't be ashamed to use bribery (the payment of an allowance or pocket money) or the withdrawal of privileges to get the tasks done. If you are having problems getting going, then, where possible contain the task or limit it to a series of smaller tasks, so that the job appears more easily achievable, i.e. "load / unload the dishwasher", or "make your bed" are preferable to "clear away the kitchen" or "tidy your bedroom".

Never ask her to do a chore and then do it yourself after a few minutes, as this sets up a very bad pattern of behaviour and makes future requests for help worthless. Don't get angry if the task remains not done. Don't escalate the bribe or punishment you set initially, just remind your daughter of the agreement, and calmly stick by the request or the bargain you made.

Take her social arrangements into account within your family's activities

As your daughter gets older she will have less time for you and the rest of the family and spend more time planning on how to "escape" to be with her friends or boyfriend. Suggestions of a family outing are likely to be met with a look of complete horror and a list of the hundred other things she has already planned to do (ages ago apparently). Try to let go a little, this is all part of growing up and the beginning of separating from the family unit and the beginning of the process that will lead to her going out into the big wide world as an adult.

Try and give her some notice of special occasions and events when she really must come along. If you want to plan family outings, do so with her input and move with the times to make it something that she will enjoy, so that you can all continue to spend quality time together. Make sure that the date is remembered by keeping a family diary, so that she doesn't book up other things that clash by mistake.

Include her friends or her boyfriend where possible, as much as to get to know them as to widen the family's horizons to accommodate her expanding life.

Be flexible and pragmatic and understand that her social arrangements are an important part of her life.

Be forgiving of her mistakes

We all make mistakes. If you think back to your own teenage years with the benefit of hindsight, I am sure that there is no one who wouldn't have done things a little differently if they had the chance.

So when your daughter makes a mistake, big or small, try and remain as calm and as rational as you can and be as approachable as possible. You will only be able to help by being by her side. If she is facing a major problem she will need the reassurance and help she can get. You are only likely to be able to give this to her if she feels she can speak openly to you about her problem without being negatively judged and chastised for it at every opportunity. Try and help her sort it out and see where she went wrong and how she can avoid making the same or similar mistakes next time. She will really appreciate your support and there is not a single person on this planet that benefits from hearing the words "I told you so".

Instead, use your experience to avoid disaster before it happens. Some of the most difficult problems facing teenagers are drugs and unwanted pregnancy. Try to understand your teenager's world and the pressures and drives that shape it. This is no time for prudishness or wishful thinking. Discuss the important issues with your daughter and promote a frank and open relationship between you and her. Finally, regardless of your beliefs, consider the benefits of contraception and seek advice from your family doctor sooner rather than later.

Set aside a regular special time when you can chat about what is important to BOTH of you

I have found that as a busy single working mum, managing my own time can be very difficult. With so much on your agenda it may sometimes seem to your daughter that she rates pretty low on your list of priorities. Try and set aside a regular time each week over a meal or out shopping to spend time together to discuss any problems, issues, achievements, worries, triumphs etc that you have BOTH experienced over those last few days. Use the time to open up to her a

little about yourself and your feelings and to swap ideas and opinions in a non-confrontational way.

So next time I gaze at my daughter in a state of confusion and wonder when her happy, smiling face was replaced by a sullen countenance; or at what point had she stopped trusting that I was capable of making wise decisions on her behalf; or at what point did the sharing of simple daily tasks become a petty battle of wills, I will remind myself that I must try and help her find her own way and encourage her to become a happy balanced and confident young woman with a zest for life and an independent spirit, who has a firm grounding in knowing right from wrong.

I want her to feel secure in the knowledge that whatever she does and wherever she goes, I will always be here for her and as she becomes less dependant on me, I'll console myself with that old saying, "A son is a son till he finds him a wife, but a daughter's a daughter for all of your life"!