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The Teenage Years

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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 will need to change your grandparenting style in order to meet the new needs of your teenagers. You may feel like you don't know them anymore, but don't be alarmed; most of these changes are very 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 family still has an enormous influence on children during their adolescent years. Most teenagers agree with their parents and grandparents on topics such as what to do with their lives, the value of education, and religion. Your teenagers 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 you will need to adapt your approach to the ages of your grandchildren. Expand limits as your grandchildren get older, and give them more choices within those limits.

Be “askable” or approachable—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 take time to discuss difficult topics with your teenagers, including puberty and body changes, sex, 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 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 a children's librarian or children's section manager at a local bookstore, or search online 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

Many adolescents want to be able to talk with trusted adults about sex. The idea that your grandchildren are curious about sex may make you uncomfortable, but remember that you are their best source of information. 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 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. 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 sexual behaviors.

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 drugs and alcohol before your grandchildren need to make decisions. Make sure they have accurate information about the laws against underage drinking and illegal drugs. Explain the risks of drunk driving. 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 grandchildren is one of the most important ways to influence their drinking and drug use.



Remember 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—like movies, television, or their friends—and you may not approve of what they hear.

Risk-Taking

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 aspects of this world and explore 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 well-developed. Many teens don't understand that they are vulnerable to risks. They might drive too fast or stop 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 believe they are different and don't always recognize that it could happen to them, too. You can handle teen risk-taking by helping your teens evaluate risks and find safer outlets for risk-taking urges. Riding roller coasters, for example, is a safer risk than driving too fast.

Becoming Independent

Have your teens 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 more 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 teenagers. Remember that they're trying out new ways of thinking and figuring out who they are. One way to do this is by challenging your beliefs and ideas. Some common areas of conflict are haircuts, clothes, allowance, curfew, music, and dating.

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 adults 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 teens in making the rules. They are more likely to follow them if they helped create them. Be calm and flexible, and keep the lines of communication 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 p.m., but teens can be allowed to stay up later. Teens are more ready to handle money, so they 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. Teens who work may learn skills that they will use later in their careers, and working outside the home can help them 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 that teachers have. For some families, teen work is a financial necessity; the money that some teens make helps support their families.

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 actually can teach teens to dislike work. Keep in mind that teens also could 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 is the top priority. If grades start to drop, you may need to help your teens manage their time by prioritizing school assignments, changing their work schedule, cutting back on work hours, or even quitting the job until the summer.

What about Serious Problems?

Despite your best efforts, some teens still get into serious trouble. If your grandchildren are showing signs of school failure, drug or alcohol use, gang involvement, lawbreaking, 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 find a counselor or therapist if your teen is having serious problems.

Stay involved in your grandchildren's lives. Your support and concern may help them handle the problems in their world.

In Summary

Although the teen years can be turbulent in some families, knowing what to expect can eliminate some problems. Grandparents need to recognize that their grandchildren are growing up and need to adjust their parenting style accordingly. 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.

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