

Living with Teenagers: Risk and Resilience

Sue Roffey Cairns April 2014



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Be prepared

- The life task of teenagers is to be adventurous, independent and try things out – the role of parents is to keep them safe and protect them from harm
- Adolescents press forward, parents pull back
- Maturity is a non fixed commodity.

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Remembering

- Cast your mind back to when you were a teenager.
- What things were important to you
- What were you worried or scared about
- What were your influences?
- What were your hopes for yourself?
- What pre-occupied you
- What upset you

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What happened for us?

- What did we value about our parents' response? At the time? Now?
- What would we keep?
- What did we not like? At the time? Why?
- What would we change?

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Are teenagers the same today?

- Society is different
- Life is probably more challenging
- Pressures are different

- But their developmental pattern, their life task and their needs are the same as they have always been

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Built-in challenges

- Conflicting feelings – love for parents and loathing for them and their petty restrictions
- Time of uncertainty and emotional difficulty about what's happening now
- Re-emergence of buried feelings
- Peers, pressure, loneliness
- Uncertainty about the future

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Conflict is inevitable

- It is how it is managed that matters
- This will depend on:
 - History of the relationship
 - Parenting style
 - Individual factors / stress levels

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What are the life-tasks of an adolescent?

- To work out who they are and who they want to be, what their values are, what their goals are, their priorities in life, their sexuality
- To become independent

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The life tasks of parents of teenagers

- To love them unconditionally - but not always their behaviour
- To learn to let go and encourage independence
- To allow them their privacy
- To let them make mistakes and cop the consequences
- To be there
- To seek alternative meanings and roles in life for yourselves
- Find out where your support lies
- To not be perfect

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Parenting teenagers is rarely easy

- Teenagers often save their confidences laughs, and best selves for their friends
- They may appear to actively reject you, your values and your support
- THIS HURTS
- Look elsewhere for your emotional needs to be met
- In most cases you will get through this

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Worth remembering

- Most adolescents come through this phase without any permanent damage to themselves or others
- How they handle challenges depends largely on what they have already learnt about life, themselves and others.
- Your children will be different people the other end - and so will you. This is not such a bad thing!

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Identity

Erik Erikson

- Healthy identity development:
 - **Moratorium:** in the process of working it out
 - **Achieved:** having explored options, weighed up alternatives and worked it out
- Unhealthy identity development:
 - **Foreclosure:** taking on the values of others without thinking this through
 - **Diffusion:** lacking clear direction, uncaring and uncommitted - going with whatever fits with the moment

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Working it out

- Active exploration
- Passive exploration
- Discussion
- Peer support

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They learn how to be in the world...

- From their experiences
- From conversations about these experiences
- From watching and hearing others - especially those who are significant to them

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Developing independence

- They need to establish themselves as independent from their original family
- In the Western world young people do this by looking to peers for support
- Peers provide social referencing (values, priorities etc)
- The media is also influential

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Part of the gang

- Belonging is critically important to teenagers
- Has positives and negatives
- Welcome your teenager's friends
- Never make them choose between you or them

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Learning to make choices

- Young people need to learn to evaluate situations and make good decisions
- If we tell them what to do all the time they will not learn how to do this
- We therefore need to support young people in the process of co-regulation. This needs to begin by mid childhood at the latest.

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Letting out the apron strings slowly!

- Have conversations about how you need reassurance to do your job well.
- The more you can trust them to be safe and responsible the easier it is for you to let them fly

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Co-regulation

- Sharing control
- Making decisions together
- Sharing responsibility for outcomes
- Balancing support with independence
- Acknowledge developing autonomy
- Negotiation

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Not telling but asking good questions

- What do you want to do / have?
- What options are there?
- What are the benefits?
- What might be the difficulties?
- Who else is affected by this decision?
- How can you persuade me this is a good idea

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Why adolescence can be challenging

- Brain Development
- Thinking patterns
- Hormones
- Inconsistent messages - be a grown up, be responsible, do as you're told, you're not old enough

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The developing brain

- The brain is 95% formed by the time a child is 6 years old
- But it is extensively remodelled during adolescence
- How this happens impacts on more than you realise

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One reason teenagers are emotional and irrational

- The pre-frontal cortex is the part of the brain concerned with planning, decision-making, resisting impulse and thinking things through.
- It gets remodelled last!
- This means that other parts of the brain – such as the limbic system – the seat of the emotions is more influential.

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This may lead to...

- Greater risk taking
- More kick out of taking risks – highly sensitive to the rewarding feeling
- More impulsiveness
- Pre-frontal cortex (which stops us taking risks) is still developing so the pull back mechanism for taking risks is weaker
- Greater difficulty in understanding situations from another point of view

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Risky behaviour

- Is not necessarily pathological or maladaptive
- It may have short term gains that outweigh longer term consequences
- Can increase autonomy, peer group status and affiliation, sexual opportunity, testing out new competencies

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Changes in teenage thinking and feelings

- From concrete to abstract thought
 - focus on the self
 - easily embarrassed
 - acutely sensitive to criticism
 - bad things happening may feel overwhelming
 - anxious, depressed
 - out of control
 - negativity
 - Some teenagers also seek out intense feelings.
- May need help to regulate and manage emotions.
- Drug and alcohol abuse can be triggered by peer pressure and also as a way of regulating emotion

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What is resilience?

- The ability to bounce back to a positive sense of self after dealing with adversity
- It involves a positive outlook, a sense of humour, putting things in perspective, a pro-social attitude and problem solving skills
- It is aided by the opportunity to belong, to participate and have someone believe in the best of you.

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Encourage resilience

- By helping all young people realise that life is about ups and downs for all of us
- They cannot expect to feel good ALL the time
- It is how they manage the down times that really matters
- Kids need to know it is OK to make mistakes and not be perfect
- Help them acknowledge the good things, however small.
- Help them to support others so that others will support them.

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Trust in a relationship...

- is a fragile commodity – it is easily broken and hard to mend
- Never offer what is unrealistic or you don't intend to deliver
- Do not lie to your children
- Involve them in important family decisions where possible
- Do not invade their privacy

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Words matter

- What you say and how you say it
- Do they model what we want from our teenagers?
- Do our words trigger / increase difficult emotions or promote positive ones?
- How often do we make statements and demands compared to how often we ask questions and give choices?
- How often do we focus on the negative rather than the positive

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Deficit based language

- ungrateful
- selfish
- lazy
- moody
- rude
- messy


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Strengths based language

■ thoughtful	■ inclusive
■ creative	■ generous
■ caring	■ gentle
■ determined	■ energetic
■ independent	■ courageous
■ humorous	■ adventurous
■ colourful	■ kind
■ friendly	■ positive


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Worth remembering

- Information is easier to hear than accusation
- 'I' statements are more effective than 'you' statements
- Being defensive doesn't help
- Do not address difficulties at the height of emotion – do it later
- Seek to understand intent rather than make assumptions about behaviour

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What does encouragement mean?

- Someone believes in you
- Makes it clear you can succeed
- Does not coddle but supports and guides
- Finds out your personal goals and makes connections with these.
- Fits their expectations to you not try to shape you into their expectations

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