

Raising Teens

MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The MIT Work-Life Center



An extraordinary body of research

exists on the powerful ways in which parents and families make a difference in the lives of teens. Yet, little of this knowledge has been reaching the media, policymakers, practitioners, and parents*. The Raising Teens Project aims to make the research more accessible and useful to those who work with and on behalf of parents, adolescents, and families.

The report reveals a surprising degree of consensus among experts. Based on an analysis of more than 300 research studies, the Raising Teens Project distills the major findings into Ten Tasks of Adolescent Development and Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents, including key messages and strategies for parents. Information also is provided on the special issue of Abuse of Teens.

Readers also may be interested in Parenting Adolescents in Developing Countries, a follow-up report drafted by Raising Teens Project Director A. Rae Simpson, PhD, for the World Health Organization.

In addition, Dr. Simpson's Young Adult Development Project extends her research analysis to the dramatic developmental changes taking place between ages 18 and 25.

For more information, visit About the Raising Teens Project or download the full report in English or Spanish.

**The term "parents" is defined broadly to encompass all those adults with responsibility for raising children, whatever their biological relationship.*

Ten Tasks of Adolescent Development

In order to help parents influence healthy adolescent growth, the Raising Teens Project identified 10 critical developmental tasks that teenagers need to undertake to make a successful transition to adulthood:

1. Adjust to sexually maturing bodies and feelings

Teens are faced with adjusting to growing bodies and newly acquired sexual characteristics. They must learn to manage sexual feelings and to engage in healthy sexual behaviors. This task includes establishing a sexual identity and developing the skills for romantic relationships.

2. Develop and apply abstract thinking skills

Teens typically undergo profound changes in their way of thinking during adolescence, allowing them more effectively to understand and coordinate abstract ideas. They begin to think about possibilities, try out hypotheses, plan ahead, think about thinking, and construct philosophies.

3. Develop and apply a new perspective on human relationships

Teens typically acquire a powerful new ability to understand human relationships. Having learned to “put themselves in another person’s shoes,” they begin to take into account both their perspective and another person’s at the same time. They learn to use this new ability to resolve problems and conflicts in relationships.

4. Develop and apply new coping skills in areas such as decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution

Teens begin to acquire new abilities to think about and plan for the future, to engage in more sophisticated strategies for decision-making, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and to moderate their risk-taking to serve goals rather than jeopardize them.

5. Identify meaningful moral standards, values, and belief systems

Teens typically develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice and caring for others. They question beliefs from childhood and adopt more personally meaningful values, religious views, and belief systems to guide their decisions and behavior.

During the teen years, adolescents grow in size, sexual maturity, emotional development, and thinking capacity. The developmental changes during adolescence rival those of infancy and early childhood. Research indicates that the human brain does not reach full maturity until at least the mid 20s.

Most milestones occur gradually, with frustrating starts and stops along the way. Each task depends on others to be fully accomplished, and all are part of underlying developmental forces propelling adolescents toward maturity.

In addition, many researchers see human development as a lifelong process, with parents developing alongside their adolescents.



Continued on next page

Ten Tasks of Adolescent Development

Continued from previous page

For more information about brain changes in adolescence, visit the Young Adult Development Project website: <http://hrweb.mit.edu/worklife/raising-teens>

6. Understand and express more complex emotional experiences

Teens shift toward an ability to identify and communicate more complex emotions, to understand the emotions of others in more sophisticated ways, and to think about emotions in abstract ways.

7. Form friendships that are mutually close and supportive

Teens develop peer relationships that play powerful roles in providing support and connection in their lives. They tend to shift from friendships based largely on shared interests and activities to those based on sharing ideas and feelings, mutual trust, and understanding.

8. Establish key aspects of identity

Forming an identity is a lifelong process, but crucial aspects of identity are typically forged during adolescence, including developing an identity that reflects a sense of individuality as well as connection to valued people and groups. Another part of this task is developing a positive identity around gender, physical attributes, sexuality, ethnicity, and (if appropriate) having been adopted—as well as sensitivity to the diversity of groups that make up American society.

9. Meet the demands of increasingly mature roles and responsibilities

Teens gradually take on the roles that will be expected of them in adulthood. They learn to acquire the skills and manage the multiple demands that allow them to move into the labor market as well as meet expectations regarding commitment to family, community, and citizenship.

10. Renegotiate relationships with adults in parenting roles

Although the task of adolescence has sometimes been described as “separating” from parents and other caregivers, it is more widely seen now as adults and teens working together to negotiate a change in the relationship that balances autonomy and ongoing connection. The emphasis on each depends in part on the family’s ethnic background.

The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents

The Raising Teens Project identified five significant ways in which parents can foster healthy adolescent development—the Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents:

- **Love and Connect**
Offer support and acceptance while affirming the teen's increasing maturity.
- **Monitor and Observe**
Let teens know you are paying attention.
- **Guide and Limit**
Uphold clear boundaries while encouraging increased competence.
- **Model and Consult**
Provide continual support for decision making, teaching by example and ongoing dialogue.
- **Provide and Advocate**
Provide a supportive home environment and a network of caring adults.

Researchers agree that the essential role of parents really changes very little from childhood to adolescence. What can and must change are the strategies for carrying out this role.

Research in no way suggests that “one size fits all.” Rather, these parenting strategies offer starting points from which to adapt ideas that fit the characteristics of each family, culture, circumstance, and teenager.



The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents: Love and Connect

Key Message for Parents:

Most things about their world are changing.
Don't let your love be one of them.

Teens need parents to develop and maintain a relationship with them that offers support and acceptance, while accommodating and affirming the teen's increasing maturity. Studies find that supportive relationships with both mothers and fathers are linked with lower risk of substance abuse, depression, and delinquency—as well as with higher levels of self-reliance, better school performance, and successful future relationships.

The challenge for parents is to provide this support at the same time that adolescents are working to establish their own values and identities—efforts that often manifest as increased criticism, emotional distancing, and withdrawal from family activities.

The research-based strategies at right provide a starting point for parents wishing to encourage and support their developing adolescents.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Watch for moments to express genuine affection, respect, and appreciation for your teen.

Acknowledge the good times made possible by your teen's personality and growth.

Expect increased criticism and debate. Strengthen your skills for discussing ideas and disagreeing in ways that respect both your teen's opinions and your own.

Spend time just listening to your teen's fears, concerns, interests, ideas, and perspectives.

Treat each teen as a unique individual distinct from siblings, stereotypes, his or her past, or your own past.

Appreciate and acknowledge your teen's new areas of interest. Appreciate the positive aspects of adolescence, such as passion, humor, and deepening intellectual thought.

Provide meaningful roles for your teen in the family, ones that are genuinely important to the family's well-being.

Spend time together one on one and as a family. Continue some familiar family routines, while also finding new ways to connect.



The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents: Monitor and Observe

Key Message for Parents:

Monitor your teen's activities.
You still can, and it still counts.

A number of studies link the seemingly simple act of monitoring the whereabouts and activities of teens to a lower risk of drug and alcohol use, depression, early sexual activity, victimization, and delinquency. As teens move into a larger and larger world, there is more to monitor than ever before—yet parents of adolescents must balance supervision with respect for their teens' need for privacy. As a result, monitoring teens increasingly involves less direct supervision and more communication, observation, and networking with other adults.

Monitoring a few specific areas has been shown to be particularly effective:

- **School progress and environment**—paying attention to grades and behavior is associated with better academic achievement and fewer disciplinary problems.
- **Physical and mental health**—watching for signs of depression and other problems in teens is important since rates of suicide and mental illness rise to adult levels during these years.
- **After-school whereabouts, friendships, and peer activities**—keeping tabs on what adolescents are doing and when is related to lower rates of drug and alcohol use, early pregnancy, and delinquency.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Keep track of your teen's whereabouts and activities, and activities, directly or indirectly. Listen, observe, and network with others who come into contact with your teen.

Keep in touch with other adults who are willing to let you know of trends in your adolescent's behavior. This includes neighbors, family, teachers, and other parents.

Involve yourself in school events, such as parent-teacher conferences and special needs planning meetings..

Stay informed about your teen's progress in school and employment. Be aware of the nature of outside activities, and get to know your teen's friends and acquaintances.

Learn and watch for warning signs of poor physical or mental health, as well as signs of abuse or neglect. These include problems eating or sleeping, a drop in school performance, drug use, withdrawal from activities, promiscuity, unexplained injury, or high levels of anxiety or guilt.

Seek guidance if you have concerns about these warning signs or any other aspect of your teen's health or behavior. Consult with teachers, counselors, religious leaders, physicians, parenting educators, family and tribal elders, and others.

Monitor your teen's experiences in settings and relationships inside and outside the home that hold the potential for abuse—including relationships with parental figures, siblings, extended family, caregivers, peers, romantic partners, employers, and teachers.

Evaluate the challenge of proposed teen activities, such as social events, media exposure, and jobs. Match these challenges to your adolescent's ability to handle them.



The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents: Guide and Limit

Key Message for Parents:

Loosen up, but don't let go.

Adolescents vigorously question rules and limits as they struggle to achieve a sense of identity, apply abstract reasoning, and develop more mature relationships—but they still need parents to uphold boundaries and maintain family values. The challenge for parents is to set limits in ways that acknowledge and encourage their teens' own decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Two key parenting principles emerge from the research:

- **Combine rules and expectations with respect and responsiveness.** Parents need to set limits that allow adolescents to develop and maintain their own opinions and beliefs, and the reasoning behind rules needs to be explained.
- **Combine firmness and flexibility.** While the relative emphasis on firmness varies within families, all teens need the experience of negotiating rules and resolving conflicts with parents in ways that are respectful to both parent and teen.

The importance of providing guidance and limits in a non-intrusive way is emphasized even more strongly in the international research. This analysis has shown that adolescents who feel parents have consistently violated their individuality through disrespectful, controlling, or manipulative actions (referred to in the literature as “psychological control”) have significantly higher rates of problem behaviors.

Physical punishment also has been associated with a number of negative effects—including rebellion, depression, and physically aggressive behavior. This research has been questioned, however, for failing to consider differences in the severity of the punishment as well as the cultural and religious context.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Maintain family rules and values. Uphold some non-negotiable rules that concern safety, while negotiating those rules that involve household tasks and scheduling.

Communicate expectations that are high, but realistic.

Choose battles and ignore smaller issues in favor of more important ones, such as drug use, school performance, and sexually responsible behavior.

Use discipline as a tool for teaching, not for venting or taking revenge.

Restrict punishment to forms that do not cause physical or emotional injury.

Renegotiate responsibilities and privileges in response to your teen's changing abilities. Turn over some areas to your teen with appropriate monitoring.

The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents: Model and Consult

Key Message for Parents: Parents still matter; teens still care.

While teens are influenced by a growing circle of adults and peers during adolescence, parents remain surprisingly influential. Research has found that the values and beliefs that teens hold on such major issues as morality and politics tend to be similar to those of their parents. In addition, adolescents whose parents model appropriate behavior have better skills and attitudes regarding academic achievement, employment, health habits, individuality, relationships, communication, coping, and conflict resolution.

Research indicates that parents who have a stronger connection to their teen tend to have more influence on teen decisions, as do parents who choose ways of conveying their ideas that are respectful of their adolescent's growing maturity in thought and action. The strategies at right reflect research findings that indicate teens need environments with neither too little nor too great a level of challenge: they need opportunities that enable them to learn from mistakes, as well as opportunities to try new coping strategies and experience success.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Set a good example around risk taking, health habits, and emotional control.

Express personal positions on social, political, moral, and spiritual issues, including those of ethnicity and gender.

Model the kind of adult relationships that you would like teens to have.

Answer teens' questions in ways that are truthful, while taking into account their level of maturity.

Maintain or establish traditions such as family, cultural, and religious rituals.

Support teens' educational and vocational training to develop skills, interests, and a sense of value to family and community.

Help teens get information about future options and strategies for education, employment, and lifestyle choices.

Give teens opportunities to practice reasoning and decision making. Ask questions that encourage them to think logically and consider consequences, while providing safe opportunities to try out their own ideas and learn from their mistakes.



The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents: Provide and Advocate

Key Message for Parents:

You can't control their world,
but you can change it.

The idea that children have the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare—and that parents have a responsibility to provide or advocate for these basic needs—is widely shared across cultures. Less widely recognized is the concept that adolescents also need parents to help provide “social capital,” seeking out resources, guidance, training, and support within the community that will prepare the child to enter a widening world.

For parents, the challenge is to accomplish these tasks in the face of barriers such as family poverty, racism, oppression, unemployment, domestic violence, and a lack of community resources. It helps for parents to collaborate with teens in addressing the problems they face. Mentoring also can be a significant means of providing adult support, guidance, and training.

The strategies at right can be effective across a broad range of family circumstances.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

Network within the community as well as within schools, the family, religious organizations, and social services to identify resources that can provide positive adult and peer relationships, guidance, training, and activities for your teen.

Make informed decisions among available options for schools and educational programs. Take into account safety, social climate, approach to diversity and special needs, community cohesion, opportunities for mentoring, and fit with your teen's learning style.

Offer continual support for decision making through teaching by example and ongoing dialogue.

Arrange or advocate for preventive healthcare and treatment, including care for mental illness.

Identify people and programs to support and inform you in handling parental responsibilities and the challenges of raising your adolescent.



Abuse of Teens: First Do No Harm

The bottom-line message that emerges from research on adolescent development and parenting is that teenagers are vulnerable. Their boldness and bravado mask an inexperience in solving problems and coping with stress that is often no match for the unsupervised, risk-laden environments in which they live.

In the United States, teens have rates of abuse and neglect that are as high as or higher than those of young children—much of it at the hands of family members.

- **Nearly 25% of reported child maltreatment in the United States involves victims who are 12 to 17 years old.**
- **About one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused by age 18.**
- **Thousands of U.S. teens and preteens become victims of sex trafficking as runaways, through abduction, or even via coercion by parents.**

Worldwide, risks for teens are equally grave.

- **An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under the age of 18 have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence.**
- **Over one million children are victims of sex trafficking, and 218 million are involved in child labor, most in hazardous work.**

Physical abuse of adolescents is linked to mental disorders, poor school performance, substance abuse, suicide, and aggression. Sexual abuse is linked to depression, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and early pregnancy, as well as to increased risk of further sexual abuse and abduction into sex trafficking.

Adolescents are also frequently subjected to psychological harm by parents who are excessively critical or manipulative—a danger highlighted in a 2007 report by the World Health Organization.

In all cases, the consequences of abuse are profound—threatening the strength of our workforce, the cohesion of our families, and the quality of our social fabric.

HOW TO HELP

If you are worried that a teen may be a victim of abuse, take action. These resources can help you decide what to do:

Warning Signs That Teens May Be Victims of Abuse: The Children's Hospital Boston Child Protection Team website includes signs of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in children and teens. www.child-protection.org/CPT/CPT.htm

How to Report Suspected Abuse: The Child Welfare Information Gateway at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website includes links to each state's hotline. www.childwelfare.gov/can/

Resources for Teens Who Are Being Abused: Special section of the Children's Hospital Boston Child Protection Team website. www.child-protection.org/CPT/Teens/TeensPage.htm

Trafficking of Children in the United States: U.S. Department of Education site includes a fact sheet on trafficking, how to identify a victim, and how to report a crime. www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/factsheet.html

Internet Abuse: The NetSmartz Workshop website (a program of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children) includes tips on how to recognize and avoid dangers on the Internet. www.netsmartz.org/netparents.htm

For statistics, see the U.S. Department of Human Services and the U.N. World Report on Violence against Children.

- » www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm09/cm09.pdf
- » www.crin.org/docs/UNVAC_World_Report_on_Violence_against_Children.pdf

Parenting Adolescents in Developing Countries

To identify ways in which parents and programs can help adolescents in developing countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) convened leading researchers and practitioners from around the world in 2006. Their report, *Helping Parents in Developing Countries Improve Adolescents' Health*, drafted by Raising Teens Project Director A. Rae Simpson, PhD, identifies the five basic principles of parenting adolescents in the developing world:

- **Connection:** Love
- **Behavior Control:** Limit
- **Respect for Individuality:** Respect
- **Modeling of Appropriate Behavior:** Model
- **Provision and Protection:** Provide

These principles, based on international research and consensus, are remarkably similar to those identified by the Raising Teens Project—which was based on cross-cultural U.S. research. The international report, however, combined the concept of monitoring and limiting behavior in its second principle, “Behavior Control.” The WHO report also gave special attention to “Respect for Individuality.” Across cultures, parenting that is controlling, critical, intrusive, and manipulative can result in problem behaviors—including risky sexual activity, substance abuse, and depression.

About 85 percent of the world’s adolescents are growing up in developing countries, where lives often are compromised and cut short by poverty, famine, war, ethnic and racial discrimination, oppression, trauma, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Parenting programs in the developing world face a number of extraordinary challenges, including a wide range of cultural expectations; the difficulty of involving parents, particularly fathers, in such endeavors; and the ramifications of living in desperate conditions where trauma, poverty, and disease are commonplace.

Ultimately, the most urgent need of parents and families—everywhere in the world—is relief from conditions that cripple their efforts to support their adolescents.



About the Raising Teens Project

Prepared by A. Rae Simpson, PhD, *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action* (Harvard Public School of Health, 2001) is the culmination of a groundbreaking initiative to pull together current research on the parenting of adolescents and to distill from it key messages for the media, policymakers, practitioners, and parents.

This initiative was launched in collaboration with the Harvard Center for Health Communication and was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Kathy Simons of the MIT Work-Life Center served as research specialist for the project, working closely with Dr. Simpson in gathering, analyzing, and summarizing the research findings. More than 20 researchers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines and ethnic groups provided essential assistance by contributing materials and reviewing the draft report.

The Raising Teens Project found significant areas of agreement among experts on the parenting of adolescents—in spite of the broad diversity of cultures represented in the United States and the myriad individual differences in parents and children. Its central findings—Ten Tasks of Adolescent Development and Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents—cut across a broad range of disciplinary and cultural perspectives. More than 10,000 copies of the report have been distributed around the world, and Dr. Simpson has presented its highlights to parents and professionals nationally and internationally.



Contact



A. Rae Simpson

rsimpson@mit.edu
P 617-253-1592

A. Rae Simpson, PhD, co-directs the MIT Work-Life Center, where she has developed a broad range of initiatives for the MIT community, many of which have won national and international recognition.

As chief consultant to the Harvard Parenting Project at the Harvard School of Public Health, with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Dr. Simpson wrote the widely disseminated report *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action* (Harvard Public School of Health, 2001). This groundbreaking report is the basis of the Raising Teens website.

A specialist in communicating research knowledge to the public, Dr. Simpson also created the MIT Young Adult Development Project. In addition to highlighting the unique needs and characteristics of this age group, the project explores the implications for employers, parents, educators, policymakers, and others.

Dr. Simpson has consulted on issues in parenting education, parenting and the media, youth development, and research communication to national and international organizations. These include the World Health Organization, CBS Television, the National Science Foundation, the United Nations, the Public Broadcasting Service, as well as major advertising, publishing, and law firms. She is founding chair of the National Parenting Education Network, a professional organization for parenting education.

Under her former name, Rae Goodell, she is the author of *The Visible Scientists* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), which explores the relationship between experts and the media. Dr. Simpson's numerous articles have appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *the Columbia Journalism Review*, and *The Washington Post*. She holds a PhD in communication research from Stanford University.

