

How Parents Can Support Their Teens

We all know that the Senior Phase can be a very stressful time for students. What we don't always remember is that parents are often going through this journey as well and can feel just as stressed. **Senior Clinical Psychologist at the University of Technology Sydney, Anna Wallace, offers her tips on how parents can support their teens through this time.**

One thing that is easy to forget is that while courses, assessments and exams are a definite focal point of anxiety, young people are simultaneously experiencing many other challenges associated with simply being a teenager such as asserting their independence from parents, dealing with relationship issues and finding their own sense of identity.

Here are 4 Top Tips to help you navigate this important year.

1. Stay connected

It is very important to maintain a sense of family connectedness or belonging. We know that having this sense of connectedness is one of the greatest protective factors for adolescents. Feeling valued, listened to, and safe means that they are more likely to come to you for help with problems than engage in risky or harmful behaviour. If you think about it, this is true for all of us – the more connected we feel to someone else, the more respect we have for them, the less likely we are to do something that would disappoint them or hurt them.

So how do we foster this connectedness and respect? It begins with effective communication: you don't want your young person to say 'my parents don't listen to me'.

Often as parents we're too keen to jump in with advice or lectures, what WE think young people should do or not to do.

Active listening is a way of responding which encourages the other person to continue the conversation while making sure you understand their message. Take time to validate their thoughts and feelings (without dismissing them) and ask how the problem can be solved (rather than you providing the solution).

The other thing parents sometimes forget to do is to praise their kids or tell them how proud they are of them when they're doing, or trying to do, the right thing. Instead often the focus is on the things they're not doing, or not doing well enough.

Sometimes parents might even threaten them to scare them into action: 'If you don't get a good mark you won't get into uni/won't get a decent job...'. Can you imagine how you'd feel if your boss constantly nagged and criticised you – 'have you got the report done yet?'; 'I can't believe it's taking you so long'; 'What are you doing with yourself all day?'. How irritated would YOU feel? And how much more productive and happier you'd be if you had an encouraging boss – 'Thanks for the effort you put into that, you did a great job!'; 'I'm really impressed you got that done in time'. It's the same with kids, nagging doesn't help – all it does is increase frustration on both sides. Instead they need encouragement to keep going and

reassurance that they're valued. Just a simple 'Thank you for helping with the dishes' can make all the difference, even if you feel it's a job they're expected to do.

Finding activities or interests you can share with your older adolescents can be more challenging, but don't give up – going for a bike ride together, playing cards, just asking about their music or being willing to listen to it without sticking your fingers in your ears can help cement those connections.

They may give the impression that you're the last person they want to spend time with, but secretly many young people want their parents to take an interest in their lives.

2. Keep it in perspective

This is such an important message – help your child keep this year in perspective. It's fine to encourage them to give it their best shot, but if they don't get the marks they want it's not the end of the world – there are many, many pathways to success in life, and life will go on after this school year.

Not every student is suited to going on to University, but that's not to say they're not smart. There's a lot of evidence from neurobiology that indicates our brains are still developing well into our early twenties, and sometimes it takes a few years after school for people to work out what they really want to do with their lives. It can take time - it's not the end of the world!

3. Help young people challenge their negative and unhelpful thinking

We all have the propensity for negative self-talk – that little voice in your head that says 'It's too hard', 'I can't do it', 'I can't cope' - often the difference between managing stressful situations and not managing comes down to the way we THINK ABOUT those situations – and our thoughts then influence how we FEEL and what we DO. For example, if your child is thinking to themselves 'it's all too hard', they will most likely feel miserable and despondent, and will procrastinate by watching TV or spending time on social media. And when we feel down or stressed, we tend to think in unhelpful ways.

When you notice your teen falling into the negative talk trap help them challenge their thinking by asking them these questions:

- *What is the evidence for/against this thought?*
- *What would you say to a good friend in this situation?*
- *Is it really that bad?*
- *What else might happen instead? Are there other ways of looking at this?*
- *Is this way of thinking helpful to you? Does it help you get on and achieve your goals?*

4. Look after yourself

And lastly, as parents and carers, it's also important that you look after yourselves during this year – it's very easy to let your own anxiety spiral out of control and then impact not only your children but your own health. You can't do it for them! Let them take responsibility for their own study, and don't see it as a reflection of your parenting if for whatever reason they can't buckle down – you may just have one of those late

starters that we talked about earlier. Monitor your own self-talk, avoid buying into those destructive HSC myths, and take time for yourself – whether that be exercise, reading, listening to music, gardening or whatever.

Think of yourself as a bank account – you can't keep giving out if you don't put in regular deposits.

And sometimes just talking to other parents can be reassuring - you're not the only one whose family is at this stage.

Some other reading:

- [Why Healthy Sleep Is Vital For School Success](#)
- [10 Ways To Avoid A Homework Meltdown](#)
- [How To Understand And Communicate With Your Teens](#)