

*Survey Results on
Parenting Teens Today
from Three Important
Points of View*

Parenting Teenagers: The Agony & The Ecstasy

by Sue Blaney

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How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride*

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Sue Blaney, founder and president of ChangeWorks Publishing

Executive Summary

In 2006 and 2007 **ChangeWorks Publishing** conducted a survey project with several goals:

- To identify the key issues and challenges that parents of teenagers face,
- To explore their feelings about raising teenagers today,
- To learn from parents who have already raised teenagers about what matters most,
- To find out from young adults what parents can and should do to raise teens successfully.

Our survey was entitled “Three Sides of the Coin” and we launched it from our web site that provides information for parents of teenagers: www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com. We received 559 survey responses during a 12-month period. This qualitative survey has yielded responses that truly capture parents’ issues today, as well as advice and insight that can help parents take the actions that really count.

1. Highlights from Parents of Teenagers

- Parents are highly emotional about their teens, and frequently worried about them on a *life and death* level!
- Most parents feel that our culture is at odds with the values and lessons they are trying to teach their teenagers.
- Parents of teens feel out of touch with their children and often are unable to connect with their own peers.
- Parents are aware that they must hold teens accountable and apply rules while also giving them enough freedom to develop and grow. This balance is often difficult to find.

2. Highlights from “Veteran Parents”

- Time with teenagers counts the most. Spend time together above all else.
- Parents need to listen more than speak.
- The material “extras” that kids demand are unimportant in the long run.

3. Highlights from Young Adults

- Teenagers rely on their parents to keep them safe, apply the rules, and hold them accountable.
- Communication and trust are the foundation to the parent-teen relationship.
- Parents need to find a balance between applying boundaries and giving teens freedom. Both are necessary.

Countering the messages teens receive through mass culture is the greatest difficulty faced, according to 20% of our parent respondents. Their worries range from television and the internet to materialism and war. The other top difficulties mentioned, each by 14% of respondents, are communicating with teenagers, teaching healthy attitudes – self esteem, honesty, etc., and providing the balance between freedom and guidance.

For all three respondent groups we have tapped into a profound depth of feelings so please read on for the verbatim comments that provide the real value in this report. Through their revealing honesty our respondents provide insight that is of value to all parents and can truly help those parenting teenagers today.

Survey Demographics

- 559 Respondents
 - 389 Parents of Teens
 - 101 Veteran Parents
 - 69 Young Adults

 - Respondents from 43 states and Canada
 - 88% female; 12% male
 - 65% of parents of teens were college educated
 - 19% received graduate degrees
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About ChangeWorks Publishing: Founded by Sue Blaney, ChangeWorks Publishing delivers programs and products that educate, empower and connect parents of teenagers and those who work with them. Sue Blaney is the author of the nationally acclaimed *“Please Stop the Rollercoaster! How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride,”* a parent discussion group program in a book. As a communications specialist and the parent of two teenagers, Ms. Blaney speaks frequently to parents, educators, and other professionals about parenting issues, improving communications, increasing parent involvement and creating parent discussion groups.

1. Parents of Teenagers Speak Out

We asked three open-ended questions of parents of teens:

- **What is your biggest fear for your teenager right now?**
- **What's a recent issue you faced with your teen and how did you resolve it?**
- **What's the hardest part of raising teenagers today?**

"It's hard to be the voice they actually listen to."

What are the fears that parents express? It will come as no surprise that alcohol and drug use top the list of parents' fears. Parents also worry about teenagers in cars. They are afraid of teenage pregnancy. Parents worry about peer pressure, teens' motivation and grades in school, poor communication and the materialism and values consumed by their teens from myriad media outlets.

Parents' worries and emotions are strong. What comes through with poignancy is the intensely emotional quality behind parents' experiences. The parents we heard from are not detached, emotionally absent parents; these parents care deeply as they are struggling through the dynamic changes in their relationships with their teenagers. Parents feel judged by kids and by other parents, they feel pushed away by their teens and bemoan the lack of communication between them; and despite their best intentions and deep love, many feel their parenting struggles intensely. Most strikingly of all, though, many parents describe their fears for their teenagers in life and death terms...they say: **"I fear that he won't make it out of his teens ALIVE!"**

"My biggest fears for my teenagers right now are:

- "That she will make a decision that will haunt her for the rest of her life."
- "That he will not make good decisions and the results of his actions will have life threatening consequences."
- "That they will drink/smoke pot, drive and die."

Parents are very concerned about our culture's influence on their teenagers.

"The 'hardest part' about parenting teenagers today is:

- "Maintaining the values in our house despite the daily deluge of inappropriate messages."
- "Teenagers have unlimited access to information and communication. I feel like a dog chasing a tail. I feel powerless and totally out of control. I cannot possibly keep up with the constant barrage of messages they receive. Of course, this is the backdrop to my constant fear that they will use drugs and engage in unhealthy and unsafe sexual activity."
- "Most of society seems to be giving a diametrically opposed message to the ones I am giving my kids. The outside message, from films and TV and music and the media, seems to be 'have sex, drink and take drugs, resort to violence to solve disputes, treat partners badly, and never confide in your parents. Oh, and driving fast is cool too."

Parents complain that it is difficult to compete with the media's messages; in fact they have to work hard to even get their teen's attention.

"The hardest part is:

- "The media onslaught that portrays bad behaviors as being fashionable and cool."
- "It's hard to be the strongest voice for your child in the sea of messages."
- **"It's hard to be heard when the iPod is on..."**

Parents aren't clear on when to let go, and when to step in; finding the right balance is a challenge.

"The hardest part about parenting teenagers today is:

- "Knowing when to be involved and knowing when to step back and let them fail"
- "Figuring out how much space and independence to give them and knowing when to lay down the law."
- "Balancing 'being there' with a full time job."

Parents find that their world changes as their kids become teenagers, and being a parent becomes far more challenging. Finding ways to communicate, to be involved, to keep teens safe.... This isn't a simple set of tasks. Parents say it is hard "staying involved as they [teens] want less and less to do with you." "Now that my child is a teenager she does not talk to me about anything." Feeling pushed away, parents say it's hard "holding your temper when they act so snippy toward you, (when you'd really give them your life.)" Sharing the sadness of being pushed away, another says ... "it's important for all parents of teenagers to have a dog -- for their unconditional love!"

"My role of nurturing caregiver is slowing shifting to chauffeur and banker."

Parents feel insecure. They complain because the hardest part of parenting teens is "that you never have a 'right answer.'" Another complains about "Having no definitive answers and wondering how your actions and decisions will affect your teen in the long run." "Their self-centered behavior coupled with their waffling between independence and dependence can be very frustrating." The hardest part is "managing their defiance." It's difficult "trying to place yourself somewhere between Gestapo and Friend." "I feel like the Police." Indeed, seeking the balance between "Keeping them safe and letting them experience life for themselves in a world full of dangers," is a struggle voiced by many parents in our survey.

Communication issues abound. Family dynamics are impacted today because of "not enough family time." Difficulty communicating with teens is constantly expressed because they "won't listen," they "won't share," and "time is scarce." "My son thinks he knows it all and doesn't like to listen to our suggestions." "Our household is constantly on the cusp of an explosion." "The hardest part is "The ROLLERCOASTER— one good day, one stressful day, one good day, one stressful day!"

Parents complain about other parents who do not share their values or who want to be the "cool" ones to the teenagers. Many comment on lack of support from other parents. "Dealing with other parents who do not set boundaries for their children," is an oft-heard complaint, as are the issues that are raised when some families "provide so much [materially] without imposing much responsibility." One respondent observes "Parents of younger kids are often on the same page. Parents of teenagers very often are not." Parents often feel they cannot look to one another for support: "As the kids hit the teen years ... it's very difficult to talk to others, even your best friends, because most people are shocked, or they judge you, or they think that their kids would never do those things." "...It's hard to find someone to talk to, that's why I pay a therapist."

Teens and entitlement comes up a lot. "Teens today seem to have this feeling of entitlement. My daughter thinks she's entitled to anything and everything she wants and we should spare no expense to make her happy." "They are constantly bombarded with 'expensive things' and 'privileges.' The hardest part is saying "NO!"

Parents express their desire to be the best parent they can be: "I have been in tears, my heart is hurting deeply because my son is the world to me..." "I am willing to do anything to better myself to help my daughter." "I am the mother of two 14 year old boys and I haven't a clue as to how the male minds work. I am reading everything I can ...to get ideas on how to handle (and cope with) the boys."

What are the recent issues parents have dealt with? No surprises here: Lying, sneaking out, drinking alcohol, having sex, flunking tests, not handing in homework, cutting classes, being lazy, not helping with chores, keeping a messy room, finding "pot," lying about where they were, coming home late, endless needs for money, dealing with over-scheduled, over-pressured kids...

What's the hardest part about parenting teenagers? "Honey, it is all hard! We live in such a complicated world, it does take great intention and attention to raise strong girls (and I assume the same is true for boys.) ...And even though I am relatively clear on my own baggage, it is still hard not to look at my kids through that filter. I have to remind myself constantly – it's their journey, not mine! I think an awkward middle schooler is alive and well inside me, still."

And one dad speaks for many when he says: “I miss the little guys that loved it when I came home, and could not wait to tell me all about their day. **I miss the hugs and butterfly kisses good night.** I miss sitting on the couch and watching Saturday morning cartoons with them, coaching them in sports.”

A positive spin. There are a few respondents who air positive feelings about raising teenagers, and it's important to share their point of view as well:

- “I honestly don't think it's so hard to parent teenagers. I have two boys 19 and 16 and they are pretty good kids. They are generally respectful, responsible, hard-working, honest kids. They are not perfect [note incident about finding two cases of beer] but I don't expect that. I think setting clear expectations for them is critical – as well as keeping the lines of communication open.”
- “There is no hardest part for me because **I think that teenagers are a gift sent down to us from the heavens above.** I love their innocence, the inquisitive minds, their outlook, their optimism, their humor. I work in a high school and get paid to surround myself with 1,600 of them every day. I am honored and proud to be a parent to a teenager. The hardest part of all of this is that they do not stay teenagers forever.”

2. The Perspective from “Veteran” Parents

Parents who have already raised their teenagers share insight about this experience that helps today's parents puts things in perspective. As we've seen, current parents are immersed in their fears and worries while veteran parents have the benefit of hindsight. What can we learn from veteran parents? Quite a lot, it turns out.

We asked veteran parents three questions:

- **If you could raise your teenager again, what would you do differently?**
- **What was the worst mistake your teenager made, what did you do about it, and how did it work out?**
- **What's the best decision you made or action you took as a parent of a teenager?**

There is one consistent sentiment expressed over and over again and that is, if a veteran parent could do anything over again, it would be to spend more time listening to their teens, and less time being drawn into things that didn't matter.

“What would you do differently?”

- “I would talk less and listen more.”
- “I would probably be a bit more attentive to their needs and feelings.”
- “Be more involved with activities and friends. Spend more time one on one.”
- “I would try to have more patience on a daily basis. I would never say, ‘I don't have time to --- right now.’”
- “Take more family trips and vacations.”
- **“I would take the time to enjoy every stressful minute of it... It goes too quickly and suddenly they are gone and you see so little of these wonderful young adults who are set to rule the world.”**

Veterans believe in accountability: While a few parents said they now wish they had “lightened up,” this was a definite minority. More often, veteran parents see the value in holding their teens accountable in terms of chores, grades, and spending time with family. “What would you do differently?”

- I would “require more accountability on school grades”
- “Help my teen to become more accountable for money and spending habits...”
- I would “seriously cut back on the time they were permitted for TV, computers, headset music...basically whatever allowed them to become isolated from the family.”
- “I would make them have more responsibility around the house and yard.”

“I would worry less about cleaning my house and spend more time doing things with them.”

The power of the culture is bemoaned: Numerous veteran parents note the influence of cultural temptations delivered by TV, the internet and elsewhere, and many complain about the demands for material items that ultimately had little positive value.

Veteran parents say, “What I would do differently is...

- “I would never have set up a teen-friendly family room with TV and computer that was on a separate floor from the family living space. Were I brave I would not have a TV or computer in the house!”
- “I would put more limits on her spending.”
- “Not give them so much.”
- “My best decision was being strong enough to say “no” and stick with it. I didn’t buy them every new thing that all the kids had to have, and I didn’t let them do everything they wanted because ‘everyone else is...’”
- **“We shut the television off. The kids did not watch TV from Sunday night until Friday night. This made them better students, readers, and encouraged them to talk more.”**

“Family time is far too valuable to give away to ‘things.’”

Communication is the key: Veterans who had open communication with their teens felt this was key to building a strong relationship. One mom said she was “...never surprised by anything they told me. Frequently they were looking for guidance and boundaries regarding friends’ behaviors. By remaining open and hopefully non-judgmental, they shared a lot more with me than their peers did with their parents. This opened up many more opportunities for guidance.” Parents who express regrets say they wish they had “talked more openly about sex and drugs, and tell them that I love them more often.” One Mom wishes she had listened more. She notes “Teens need parents to just listen to their thoughts, joys, fears, dilemmas. We are often too quick to try to fix things for them. This is not what they need the most from us. They need us to listen and respect their process in learning how to make wise decisions. **They are more apt to listen to us if they feel truly heard first.”**

Consequences count: A common theme expressed by many parents was the value of consequences. Allowing kids to accept the consequences of their actions provided teens with many valuable learning opportunities.

- “He had a car accident (age 18) and was charged with reckless driving. We did NOT hire a lawyer to get him off. He lost his license, paid his own fine and found his own way to school and work. He is almost 28 and has not even had a parking ticket since!”
- “Our teenager wrecked our car. We made sure he was okay. Unfortunately we did not hold him accountable for the damages and this gave him a sense of entitlement which lead to him having more tickets and accidents.”
- **“I took care of my boys, but from a distance, allowing them to fall, make mistakes, try again.** I taught my boys that they are responsible for their behavior. If they got a traffic ticket, they paid it. If they missed the bus for school, they could figure out how to solve the problem. It was their problem, not mine.”
- “My best decision was reinforcing to my kids that they are great kids, I know they aren’t perfect and will make mistakes but they need to learn from them, accept responsibility from them and do better as they move on.”

Parents learned the hard way how to help their teens in school:

- “One thing I would do differently is to make them responsible for their homework and not help them as much, as it impeded the development of responsibility...”
- “I sat with my son as he did his homework in grade school, and as a result when we went to high school he found it difficult to work on his own.”

Veteran parents value family time and community connections—and say these had an extremely positive impact on their teenagers.

- “We stressed the importance of family – parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents etc. They weren’t always happy to be at family gatherings, but now they wouldn’t miss a family event for anything.”
- “My husband and I both made the decision long ago that family came first and that being a part of their lives was the most important thing we could do for them. We both worked, but always found the time to be with them when they needed it the most. We took family vacations a few times a year...we always knew where they were and who they were with. By letting them know that we were always there watching what

they were doing, they had a sense of security and knowledge that we cared and that is the most important thing that you can do as a parent. **Many parents are misguided with the notion that they need to give their teens freedom and stay out of their lives. We made sure that we were a big part of it.**

Connect with others. Many veteran parents express the value of being connected with their teenager's friends and with other parents while raising teenagers.

- "My best decision was talking with their friends' parents (so that we all knew all the parts of the stories.)"

"Have confidence in your teens," veterans recommend:

- "What I would do differently is I'd be in favor of discussion instead of arbitrary rules. I would live less in fear and have more confidence in my children's ability to make good decisions."
- "My best decision was trusting them both, especially during senior year of high school to test limits but use good judgment. We felt we needed to let them make any mistakes while they were still at home to have us to discuss the consequences of their actions. This has worked well with both kids."

Trust your instincts.

- "I learned to trust my instincts and not go by whatever the doctors said or thought; ... I knew my children better than anyone else."
- "Go with your gut feelings and never allow other teens or their parents to sway your decisions as to what you feel is best for your teenager."

More significant responses made by several veteran parents:

- "College is not for everyone."
- It's a mistake to hover, as some parents do. **"We do no favors mothering them into their 20's."**
- "It's more important to be a parent than a friend." "My best decision was not to try to be their friend, and stayed being their parent." "It's harder to be a parent while trying to be your child's friend."
- "If your kids are going to a party, call the host's parents to find out if they will be home. Stay up until your teenager gets home. And don't go away for a weekend and leave your teenager at home!"

"What would you do differently?" One man summed it up best, "I would take the long view.

Now that I've been through it, I can see that it all turned out just fine. The irresponsible behavior, the insults, the resentment – none of it meant that my boys were headed down a path of life-long anti-social maladjusted behavior. Not at all. If I had been able to see into the future, I would have been able to put their behavior in a broader context – and been more patient than I was at times in dealing with it."

What mistakes did the veterans' teens make? Car accidents, drinking, drug abuse, involvement in abusive relationships, a few teen pregnancies. Or, maybe no mistakes at all. **"I think this is an interesting question. I don't think my children make "mistakes." They made choices.** Some went well. Some did not. They learned from all of them.... Each one is now an independent young adult making their way in the adult world in their own, individual way. It's quite wonderful to watch them unfold."

"Using the community and the school to raise our kids [was helpful] – it really does take a village to raise kids."

3. Words of Wisdom from Young Adults

Most poignant of all are the responses from recent teens. We included young adults (in their twenties) in the survey to gather their reflections about parenting teenagers. As recent participants in parent-teen relationships, and with their new levels of maturity, we suspected they would have worthwhile insight...and we weren't disappointed! We asked young adults to reflect and answer three questions:

- **When you were a teenager at home, what did your parents do right and wrong?**
- **Describe your relationship with your parents now.**
- **What advice do you have for parents currently raising teenagers?**

“Teenagers need boundaries whether they say so or not.”

The advice and insight from the young adults demonstrates remarkably consistent themes. In response to the request for advice for current parents of teens, young adults say:

- “Do not spoil them; you're not doing them any favors.”
- **“Be strict with boundaries but rich in love.”**
- “Know what they are doing and who they are hanging out with.”
- “Be consistent!!! Follow through on rewards and consequences.”
- “Don't be their friend; it's not your job.”
- “Love them unconditionally. Raise them in a spiritual environment with an emphasis on values.”
- “Do your homework. Enforce logical consequences.”
- “Never let your freshman date a senior!”
- **“Listen to them. Make them feel comfortable talking to you.”**
- “Be strict and offer guidance, but don't be too severe or they will rebel.”

Most of the young adults who answered our survey have wonderful relationships with their parents now, but not all of them had smooth relationships with their parents during their teens. Significantly, these young adults now express their appreciation for parents who remained consistent and firm during their teen years, and they express the importance of parents modeling the behavior they want to teach. Parents of teens are called upon to find a important balance between holding kids accountable and giving them enough freedom to make mistakes; to listen without judgment; to calmly guide their teens, and to love them unconditionally.

What Did Your Parents Do Right and Wrong?

While responses from the three young adults below may appear to be contradictory, they aptly capture the challenge parents experience in finding balance.

RIGHT: trusted me, loved me, supported me, said that I was a good kid (really nice to hear), taught me how to be my own person and love myself, gave me confidence. **WRONG:** didn't trust me, made me feel like I didn't do anything right or good enough (sometimes you can push too hard,) yelled, didn't treat me like an adult, didn't give reasons for their decisions.” (E, in college, 20 – 22)

RIGHT: They supported me in everything I did. They showed genuine interest in my activities and hobbies. They had high expectations for how I performed in school, but they did not demand perfection. They disciplined me. They allowed me to be my own person, and develop in my own way. **WRONG:** They didn't show up to as many activities as I wanted them to. My Dad did not seek me out on a regular basis to spend time with me. We didn't have regular family meals. My mom felt distant at times because of her job.” (M, 23 – 25)

RIGHT: They protected me when needed. **WRONG:** They were overprotective at too many times.”

“My parents were **RIGHT** in giving me a midnight curfew. (After midnight a teen can't do anything that isn't illegal.) My parents were **WRONG** in constantly going through my room and reading anything they could find; this only made me resent them and caused me to find more elaborate hiding places...” (E, n/a)

“Honestly, I wanted to spend more time with my mom and dad.”

“I always felt like I was in trouble even though I was a good kid.”

From the 20-somethings’ Point of View, Communication is the Key

- “Find ways to have them talk to you. Be the kind of parent where your children feel the freedom to tell you anything, any struggle or any joy.” (M, 23-25)
- “I really believe all children want a healthy relationship with their parents so why not take the time to ask them how their day was!” (E, in college)
- “...because I had freedom I felt I was able to talk to my parents about the choices I made and nothing was undiscussable from sex to drugs. This way there were no secrets.” (M, 20-22, in college.)
- “Don’t get mad when they talk to you —LISTEN!” (M, 26-29, working)
- “Trust your children to make the right decisions and don’t try and butt into their lives; but let them know you are there and willing to listen if they need to talk.” (E, 23-25, working)
- “Be aware of ... when they are trying to ask for help. All teenagers are too insecure to ask for help for themselves.” (E, 20-22, in college)
- “Keep in touch—no matter how much the two of you might be afraid to talk...talking won’t hurt the issue...stay 100% available to them, whether it’s through a notebook, a journal that you share...Definitely don’t give them too much space...be there for them but don’t suffocate them.” (E, 20-22, other)
- “Parents should stay calm when teens get upset and start throwing a tantrum.” (E, 26-29, working)

The Element of Trust

The theme of “balance” also gets played out in the critical issue of trust. Like communication, trust is a basic building block of the parent-teen relationship. The way parents and teens play this card impacts the relationship and teens’ self-image. But parents are NOT being told to trust blindly.

- “Absolutely 100% the thing that my parents did right – and they did it often—was trust me. The fact that they trusted me to make my own decisions really guided me – often without my noticing it!”
- “If the child has earned trust then don’t question them or make them believe the trust is superficial or unimportant. Don’t directly prohibit anything, especially as the child gets older and proves he/she can be trusted and makes good decisions.” (M, 20-22, in college)
- “Have a healthy distrust. Teenagers these days are doing things that you would never think possible. With this healthy distrust you need to put responsibility on your teenagers. But do not distrust so much that there is a distance.” (M, 20-22, working)
- “My parents trusted me too much! I was a good student and generally made good decisions about drugs and alcohol, but engaged in risky sexual behavior with my boyfriend...” (E, 23-25, working)
- “My parents were way too controlling. Their behavior was so over-bearing that to this day we have a terribly strained relationship. They also didn’t trust me, and I never really gave them a reason not to.” (E, 23-25, working)

Discipline, Freedom and Boundaries

Might you assume that recent teenagers would advocate parents loosen their grip? Not this group. They see parental discipline as a parental responsibility, and they know it is a demonstration of love. Here are some comments and recommendations:

- “Discipline them, of course, but be diligent to do it out of love and not out of a desire to conform them into someone they are not.” (M, 23-25)
- “Keep them [teenagers] in check.” (F 23-25 working)
- My parents “gave in to me a little too much. I kind of wish they were stricter with some things.” (E, 20-22, in college)
- “Don’t let them get away with murder...Show them boundaries and teach them to respect those around them. Give time to your kids.” (E, 26-29, in college)
- “I’d say in my case I was allowed a little bit TOO much freedom...” (M, 23-25, working)

Material Things and Financial Independence:

Interestingly, a number of post-college young adults complained that they are still struggling to achieve and manage financial independence. In all the comments about this topic, young adults express appreciation for parents who didn't give in by providing too much.

- “They gave me everything I needed but not too much.” (F, 20-22, in college)
- “My mom did a lot right: she gave me space, trusted me to make good decisions for myself, didn't stifle or smother me, gave me a small weekly allowance but didn't buy me expensive things like cars, clothes, etc. (F, 23-25, working)
- “My parents could have let me stand a little more on my own financially... the money was always there for when I wanted to go out.” (M, 20-22, working)

“I do wish I hadn't been so spoiled! Even though my parents made both my sister and me get jobs at 14, I'm still trying to learn financial responsibility and adult independence!”

Risky Behavior:

This is tricky for kids, as it is for adults. On the one hand, parents are told they need to “keep a lid on” things, and not give kids too much freedom. On the other hand, young adults say teens deserve to be trusted and must learn to make decisions...as well as have the room to make mistakes. No wonder this is such difficult turf to negotiate; there are no clear rules. Communication and trust remain the key building blocks.

- **“Most of the kids I know who are irresponsible about drinking have parents who think they are angels.”** (M, in college)
- “Make sure your teens are associating with a good crowd. Parents are stupid when they believe the lies: If you find pot, drugs, alcohol or a birth control method in your child's belongings...IT IS THEIRS, they may say it was their friends, but please don't fall for that...Follow your gut if you think your child is up to no good...you're most likely correct!” (F, 20-22, in college)
- It was good that they gave me a curfew of 12am.... it kept me out of trouble.” (M 20-22, in college)
- “Understand that the more restrictions you place on your children, the more they are going to want to test those restrictions.” (F, 23-25, working)
- “Understand that teenagers need their own lives, and that sometimes you have to let them make mistakes in order for them to figure out what is right and what is wrong.” (F, 20-22, in college)
- “...Instead of being unrealistic and demanding that I never drink, hang out late, etc., they were very open and up front. Once they realized I was starting to encounter those things, they simply told me that they would rather know where I was and what I was doing than have me sneaking around behind their back. This essentially did two things: it showed that they trusted me and my judgment. And as a result of that trust, **I was more inclined to make responsible decisions to live up to the respect my parents had bestowed on me.** Meanwhile, my friends were lying to their parents and making completely irresponsible decisions (including drinking and driving.)” (M, 23-25, in college.)
- “While I was in high school, and going through some of the hardest times of my life, they [my parents] went on vacation and left me home alone for two weeks at a time sometimes. To tell you the truth, while they were gone, I did things that I would never have done if they were there, and those things ended up hurting me more than anything else in the long run.” (F, 20-22, in college)

Disappointments

“I wish they had...” often referred to communication about sex:

- “We discuss a lot of topics but sex has been the one topic that we never really discussed.” (F, 20-22, in college)
- “I wish they had talked with me about important topics and issues. I know it may have been embarrassing for me to listen about sex, drugs, etc. But the more I know about something the better off I will be. (M, 20-22, in college)
- “...I engaged in risky sexual behavior with my boyfriend...**no one had ever really talked to me about the EMOTIONAL effects of sex.** I knew all about STDs and pregnancy and how all that happens, but I had no idea what would happen to me psychologically.” (F, 23-25, working)

“My dad has never once talked to me about sex.”

Here's Some General Advice for Parents from Recent Teens:

- “Make them hate you and get angry with you if you have to, to keep them healthy and safe, because in the long run they’ll love you more for it.” (F, 20-22, in college)
- “Give your children freedom or they will eventually revolt against you. Teenagers go through rough times that you may not understand, so **give them space when they need it.**” (M, 20-22, in college)
- “Not everyone takes the same path. This is the time when most are struggling to figure out who they are. Insubordination, piercings, and attitudes are all normal. Accept nonconformity. (F, 23 – 25, working)
- “Always lead by example. **Be a friend, but be a parent first.**” (F, 20-22, in college)
- “Listen to the details of what your kids say, what other parents and teachers say and connect the dots so that you aren’t caught unawares of problems. (F, 26 – 29, in college)
- “Remember they are still children. They may be smart, articulate, and seem together, but on the inside they are confused just trying to figure out life, new feelings, and growing up ...And don’t try to be “cool” with them – no matter what, you won’t be and it will only hurt your relationship.” (F, 23 -25, working)
- “Love them and let them live. Teenagers need to learn some things on their own without their parents making certain decisions for them.” (F, 20-22, in college)

“My parents made me go to youth group, but I ended up loving it and still am very close with many friends I met there.”

Do kids ever say “thank you?” You bet they do! More than a few expressed appreciation for their parents...and almost all of them say they have excellent relationships with their parents now, as young adults.

Conclusions

Parenting teens today is not for the faint-of-heart! The message – loud and clear – is parents can’t take the easy way out. They must be engaged, attentive and intuitive...and be good role models on top!

Finding BALANCE is a theme that comes up over and over again. Parents need to find balance:

- between monitoring their activities and giving teens freedom,
- holding teens accountable and allowing them room to make mistakes,
- being consistent in behavior and rules, and yet recognizing that each child is different from another,
- trusting teens...but not too much,
- giving teens enough materially, but not too much.

The conclusions derived from an analysis of the 559 responses in this survey demonstrate that parenting teens requires a tremendous amount of maturity, insight and skills from parents:

- Parents who are respected and appreciated by young adults are parents who were engaged enough, and strong enough to stand up against the will of a teen who didn’t know better (because they didn’t.) Teens expect their parents to keep them safe and to look out for their best interests.
- Parents who take the easy way out – giving in, giving too much, believing lies – are held accountable for this. Parents are expected to be strong and make tough choices. This comes with the territory.
- Trust is the basis of the parent-teen relationship, but this again, is an area requiring balance. While teens demand trust, they also recognize that they sometimes abuse trust and, at least in hindsight, they see the dangers in too much freedom. On the other hand, if parents don’t trust teens who are trustworthy, they can seriously damage their relationship.
- Communicating with teens who don’t want to communicate with parents requires new skills of parents, which they are expected to learn. Adult behavior is required of adults, and parents are advised to not get upset when teens are. They are expected to smooth the waters, not rock the boat.
- Family-unfriendly cultural messages abound, presenting a major obstacle for parents trying to teach values. Messages about casual sex, alcohol and drug use, driving fast, mistreating others are of great concern to parents today. Parents need to develop strategies in their own homes to counter the myriad negative cultural influences.

What Can Parents and Professionals Do?

- **Encourage “Parental Development:”** Raising a teen requires maturity, knowledge, insight, information, and frankly, courage...all areas in which parents must continue to develop as their parenting role changes over the years. “Parental Development” should be discussed, explored, valued and supported.
- **Connect with other parents in supportive discussion groups:** Parents who are connected with one another have a place to learn from peers, discuss issues and discover other ways to respond to situations. And parents who are connected with one another create communities in which teens are safer. *Please Stop the Rollercoaster! How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride* is the curriculum for parenting discussion groups that has initiated such groups across the country.
- **Parents must “Counter the Culture” in their homes, every day:** Parents of teens must be teaching values, demonstrating behavior, and spending time shaping family culture and beliefs. In the long run, the “culture” that kids will embrace is learned from caring adults. Please join me in a discussion forum where you can share ideas on how parents of teenagers can counter the cultural messages they feel are so harmful to families and teens. In what specific activities can parents engage? How can parents combat the cultural negativity that they bemoan? I invite you to share your thoughts in my blog at www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com.

About ChangeWorks Publishing

ChangeWorks’ flagship product by Sue Blaney, *Please Stop the Rollercoaster! How Parents of Teenagers Can Smooth Out the Ride*, is a parent discussion group program in a book. This offers parents a guide for their discussions as well as valuable information on the range of issues typical parents are likely to face. Parents can run the program on their own (as in a book group), or it can be facilitator-led using our secular, Christian or Jewish Leader’s Guides. The program has positively changed thousands of parents’ lives across this country as they learn effective strategies for parenting their teens AND smooth out their own rides.

ChangeWorks also offers “Tips” booklets, reports, tele-seminars and podcasts for parents of teenagers and the professionals who support them.

Sue Blaney speaks to parents, educators and other professionals about parenting issues, improving communication, increasing parent involvement and creating parent discussion groups.

Contact Sue for more information.

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