



HIGHTOWER

Westchester



## Raising a Teenager? Focus on these Key Points

By Lisa Damour, Ph.D

Helping teenagers navigate the challenges of adolescence can feel daunting. But psychologists have spent decades researching and treating stress, anxiety, depression and the still-growing minds and feelings of tweens, teens and young adults. What we know and recommend can be surprisingly reassuring.

Here's a concise guide to helping your teens with mental health challenges, stress and anxiety, risky behaviors, family relationships, and peers and friends. I've also included a section at the end on schools and colleges because the "teen years" don't always end when kids hit the two-decade mark.

## Mental Health

Mental health is not about feeling good. It's about having the right feelings at the right time and being able to manage those emotions effectively.

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- Teens are often moody, but their moods only become grounds for concern when they get in the way of a teen's ability to grow personally, academically, socially, or in their ability to manage challenging emotions.
- Anxiety is a healthy, protective emotion that alerts us to threats. We diagnose anxiety disorders only when anxiety occurs in the absence of a threat or when the anxiety response is far too intense given the threat that brought it about.
- Depression in teenagers can look like depression in adults, but it also can take the form of extreme irritability, especially in teens.
- If you are concerned about your teenager's mental health, connect with a health care provider for support. If you are concerned that your teenager might be suicidal, speak with your pediatrician or go to the nearest emergency room.

## Risky Behavior

All teenagers have two sides: a mature, broadminded side, and an immature, impulsive side. The side you speak to is usually the side that shows up for the conversation.

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- Frame all conversations about risky adolescent behavior in terms of safety concerns, not judgments about a teen's character.
- Make it clear that we don't want teens to worry about whether they might get caught, we want teens to worry about whether they might get hurt.
- Encourage teens to blame their good behavior on you when they need to save face with their peers.
- Be clear that you will never make your teen sorry for asking for your help.



## Family Relationships

There are two things that kids and teens need more than anything else: warmth and structure. Our children benefit when we make a point of enjoying their company and when life at home follows predictable patterns

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- Our relationships at home teach our kids what to expect from their relationships everywhere else. Treating our children with respect, and expecting them to be respectful, helps them to hold high standards for all of their relationships.
- When kids and teens bring us their problems, they're usually looking for empathy, not suggestions. If you're unsure of how best to be supportive, ask, "Do you want my help, or do you just need to vent?"
- While we often feel most connected to our children and teens when we are having deep or important conversations, our kids often feel most connected to us when they get to enjoy our quiet, agenda-less company.
- Kids can be impulsive and sometimes say things in anger that they immediately regret. To keep things moving in the right direction, consider saying, "Let's pretend I didn't hear that," or "Would you like a do-over?"

## Peers and Friends

Research consistently finds that the happiest kids have one or two good friends.

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- Being part of a large social group can be fun, but it can also be stressful for kids to maintain many relationships, or to belong to social groups where not everyone gets along.
- Help kids understand the difference between conflict and bullying. Conflict happens when kids find friction with each other; bullying describes a power imbalance that makes it impossible for victims to defend themselves.
- Accept that kids will not always get along with their peers and focus on teaching them to use healthy forms of conflict, such as being respectfully assertive or making a tactical decision to disengage.
- Teach your child that bystanders need to respond to bullying. When children witness bullying, they should know how to do at least one of the following: reach out to the victim, stand up to the bully, or get help from an adult.

## Stress and Coping

Stress is a normal and healthy aspect of being human. It occurs any time we need to adapt to new demands and it almost always fosters growth.

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- Stress is only considered to be harmful under two conditions: when it is traumatic, meaning that it overwhelms a person's coping resources, or when it is chronic, meaning that it becomes unrelenting.
- Psychological and intellectual stress can be likened to physical strength training. Working at the edge of our capacity is stressful, but it's also growth-giving when paired with time to recover.
- Stress mindset matters. Viewing stress as inherently toxic makes stressful experiences worse. Viewing stress as growth-giving makes stress easier to bear.
- In order to be growth-giving, stress must be accompanied by restorative intervals that involve healthy coping in the form of positive social connections, enjoyable distractions, and/or self-care.



## School and College

School measures and rewards a very narrow band of skills. Some kids thrive at school, and some thrive outside of school. Make sure that your child has a way to shine, even if it's not through traditional academic outlets.



- The most successful students have a growth mindset. They welcome feedback, know that making mistakes means that they're learning, and understand that hard work is the path to success.
- To help kids adopt a growth mindset, focus on their efforts, not their outcomes. Celebrate hard work, avoid praising talent.
- Kids won't like every teacher and that's okay. We can let kids know that we are impressed when they work hard for teachers they like and even more impressed when they work hard for teachers who are not their cup of tea.
- Don't confuse high school graduation with college readiness. To be ready to go to college, young people need to be ready and willing to take good care of themselves.

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### ABOUT LISA DAMOUR

Lisa Damour is the author of two New York Times best-selling books, *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood* and *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*. She writes about teenagers for the New York Times, co-hosts the Ask Lisa podcast, appears as a regular contributor to CBS News, and works in collaboration with UNICEF. Dr. Damour also maintains a private practice and consults and speaks internationally. She is also Senior Advisor to the Schubert Center for Child Studies at Case Western Reserve University and is the Executive Director of Laurel School's Center for Research on Girls. She and her husband are the proud parents of two daughters.



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