

Raising teenagers: The top psychologist's guide for parents

Slammed doors, bad moods and hours lost staring at their smartphone? Expert Ian Williamson explains how to deal with your child

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There's every chance that Ian Williamson knows what your teenagers are thinking before they even think it, and certainly before they grunt it. Over a 30-year career as a child and adolescent psychologist he has seen 50,000 teenagers, so if anyone is qualified to give advice on how to manage this tricky time for parents, it's him.

Williamson has distilled his experience into a practical book for parents, *We Need to Talk*, published next month. As a new report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that British teenagers are among the most stressed and unhappy in the developed world, it's clear we could do with the help. Girls in particular were at risk of mental health problems, according to the report, with social media and pressure of school tests partly to blame.

We're focusing on the wrong things — chaos and mess are the normal adolescent state

Williamson, who has a practice near Harley Street in London, but has also worked in the NHS, is alarmed at the state of teenage mental health. He believes it's far harder to raise teenagers now than it was for our parents' generation. Two reasons stand out for him: the ubiquity of smartphones and our inability to police their use, which cuts teenagers adrift from family life too young; and parents' misplaced desire to make their teenagers happy rather than stand firm and prepare them for life's knocks.

“We're focusing on the wrong things — not taking a position on the things that are really important because we fear the conflict, and obsessing over irritating things that don't really matter in the long run, like messy bedrooms, rudeness, chaos and moodiness. Chaos and mess are the normal adolescent state, so it's a mistake to think we can eradicate them. If we spend all our time focusing on the wrong things, we miss the really important ones.

“We can't just busk through adolescence now, making it up as we go along, because there are too many things coming at us. We have to have a plan, and a view of how we want to

approach things: what's our position on parties that start at 11pm, phones in the bedroom, gaming during the week? This requires you to be up to speed on what your teenager is doing, which means a more intensive engagement with their world."

The danger is that we tiptoe around our teenagers because we fear that by thwarting them we will damage their mental health. It doesn't help that they use hysterical language, which makes it hard for parents to decode. "I get calls from parents saying, 'Emily says she wants to kill herself and can we have an urgent appointment for tomorrow?' Then the next day they cancel, saying Emily's fine now. It's like an episode of *Friends*. I think what's happening is that the extreme way they communicate on social media — saying 'my life's not worth living' over a bad selfie — makes it really difficult for parents to work out if they are depressed or just frustrated because something's not worked out the way they wanted."

If he could change one thing about the way we bring up our teenagers, it would be to concentrate harder on giving them the skills they will need as young adults. He is doing more and more consultations with 20 to 22-year-olds who feel lost and ill-equipped for life. "We need to think less about the provision of perpetual happiness and more about preparing them for being adults," says Williamson. "What do they need? Resilience, a work ethic and a moral compass. So that's our job. And whether they dislike you on some of that journey is kind of irrelevant."

Be a proper parent— not your teenager's BFF

Williamson sees a lot of parents who try to avoid conflict with their children and be their friend. "But if you're busy being their friend, who is doing the parenting?" he asks. He is not big on the negotiated settlements beloved of liberal parents, which we feel are terribly civilised and democratic, but are in fact just a way to avoid conflict and fudge the boundaries that teenagers need.

"Teenagers have their own internal logic, which is not logical at all because it's driven by impulse, not reason, and are very articulate about arguing for what they want. This lures us into thinking we've got a thoughtful and mature person," he says. "But nine times out of ten they've decided what they want and how to get it — they've been listening to us for 15 years so they know how to play us."

Better to lay out what you expect from them, with consequences if they don't broadly comply, he says. So, when your teenagers first start wanting to go out in the evenings, decide in advance what you're happy with — do you mind them meeting in a house where the parents are not in, for example? "If not, state this clearly and say that if you find out they have been doing it behind your back, they will forfeit their independence. Say, 'This is the deal, take it or leave it.' Your capacity to stand firm in the face of anger or hate is worth its weight in psychological gold."

Let the small things go — don't worry about the messy bedroom

There's a list of typical teenage behaviours that parents traditionally get worked up about (rudeness, moodiness, lying, messy bedrooms), but they're usually not the things we should be worrying about, says Williamson. Take messy bedrooms — he thinks we obsess about them because it makes us feel as if we are still in control and it seems like safe ground; it's easier shouting about old yoghurt pots under the bed than talking to your son about how viewing porn is affecting him or what your daughter would say to a boy who wants her to sext him. "It can stop you thinking about the bigger, more important conversations. Adolescents are by nature chaotic, messy and unreliable. By all means try to get them to tidy up, but don't get too stressed — they'll grow out of it in time."

Other classically annoying teenage traits, such as selfishness, lethargy and irritability, are by-products of the adolescent process, the internal psychological work they're doing to work out who they are. "They have to be preoccupied with 'self' to work it out," he says. It doesn't mean we can't chide them about their behaviour, but keep interventions low-key; use gentle humour and avoid stern lectures and monologues.

We shouldn't even get too het up about lying and one-off incidences of stealing, he says. "All teenagers lie," he says. "Their relationship with truth is elastic at best. If you catch them at it, ditch the moral outrage and concentrate on the central issue, which is that lying undermines trust and trust is crucial if they are to have independence."

It's not fair to just leave them to it on their phones. They need rules and curfews

Phones are more than toys to teenagers, they're life-support systems, says Williamson. It's tempting to leave them to it; after all, they're quiet in their bedrooms every evening and we can have a civilised time watching TV downstairs away from the conflicts. "I get that, I really do," he says. "But I do think we need to be stricter on phone use."

He believes you can't expect them to self-regulate until the age of 16 or 17, and he advises a phone curfew from 7pm or 8pm every evening for under-16s. He admits that it's hardcore, but believes it's essential to give them respite from the incessant demands of the adolescent social media world and allows them to reconnect with family life.

"If they're in their bedroom every night on their phones, they get disconnected from family life too soon. If they're upstairs, they're not having a chat and catch-up with Mum, the kind where Mum reads between the lines and senses what's bothering them. And those conversations you need to have about sex, drugs and alcohol do not happen because they're upstairs and have blocked you out."

Phones also distract them from the psychological "work" of being an adolescent, he believes, because they fill in the boredom that would have otherwise been filled with thinking, mooching, processing and working things out in their heads. "Phones distract young people from the alarming business of facing the world and themselves."

No teenager under 16 should be allowed a password on their phone, he says, and parents should check incoming messages and social media feeds occasionally, although they should not stalk them.

Don't get drawn into verbal arm-wrestling

Teenagers love a drama — those exhausting *Groundhog Day* encounters that are such a feature of adolescence: the goading, the undermining, the belligerence and rants. "But they need you as the audience to generate the requisite emotional drama. So if you sense a confrontation developing, either walk away, or if you can't, stay neutral," he advises. "Don't rise to the goading or rants, which are essentially an adolescent stream of consciousness. If you keep butting in with your alternate view, then the emotional temperature will inevitably go up."

When it comes to important discussions that could end up as high dramas — such as discussing a bad grade at school — stay calm and try to keep the temperature low. "They're waiting for you to launch your Exocet, the monologue about how they're wasting their lives, so they can launch theirs," says Williamson. "They want to create an absolute shit storm, with both of you screaming at each other, so they can walk off into their bedroom and bang the door. Then it's over for them and they've escaped any consequences."

“It’s a big ask, but if you can stay calm, you wrong-foot them. Say, ‘What we want from you is your best effort and that’s not happening, yet you want the freedom that comes with age. Come back with some plans if you want to continue having those freedoms.’ Put the ball in their court.”

Use consequences that hurt (but no lectures)

When it comes to discipline, long lectures and monologues may make us feel better, but they don’t work, and neither does moral outrage or humiliation. “You need to concentrate on consequences because these focus the adolescent mind like nothing else,” says Williamson. His go-to consequences are what he calls the “two Ms” — money and mobile. “Not having the two Ms hurts them, and badly — even if they say they don’t care,” he points out. “Their world of friends, parties and adventures is moving on apace and they are missing out — a situation that for them is untenable.”

Where you can, link responsibility and trust to independence. So in the case of a teenager who refuses to tell his parents who he’s going out with and what time he will be back, present him with a deal. “If he wants to go out, he has to tell his parents where and with whom. If he chooses not to, then his parents will stop his allowance and take away his mobile phone. It is up to him. I realise this is not easy to put in place; his response is likely to be explosive and unpleasant. But if you can weather the storm without too much compromising, then you are more than halfway there. Do not do deals or back down.”

Beware if it’s going well

With the 15 to 19 age group, if everything seems fine, the chances are you are missing something, says Williamson. “They are masters of deception by this age. They know what you want to hear, so they will tell you that. I can’t tell you the number of times parents have said to me, ‘Everything seemed absolutely fine, this has come out of nowhere.’ It’s like they’ve fallen asleep at the wheel. It’s not that you have to automatically distrust them, but you have to be canny and smart. Don’t allow yourself to be seduced by complacency.”

So if your daughter has been in her bedroom for three consecutive nights and it has seemed almost eerily peaceful, think about checking her phone. Or if your son claims that he needs late nights on the computer to finish a project on Tudors and Stuarts, check the computer’s browser history. Williamson got caught out with his youngest son in his GCSE year. He thought he was revising on the computer, but he was actually playing *World of Warcraft* and did dismally in his exams. “I took what he said at face value and I didn’t check the computer. If I could go back, I would have been more intrusive, paid more attention.”

Low grades for effort show fear of failure

If we’re honest, achievement grades are what parents are really interested in. “Good ones reassure us that our child is clever and on track to do well, but they are an illusion,” says Williamson. “Largely, they just reflect a child’s innate ability. Eventually most children in late adolescence will hit the glass ceiling, and this is where effort comes into play.”

He points out that research consistently shows that effort and persistence predict life outcome as much as IQ — stickability and resilience are the key traits to encourage. If they’re getting low effort grades, it’s often because they fear failing, not because they are lazy. It’s a real red flag for low self-esteem. “A commitment to mediocrity can be their insurance against fear of failure or fear of the challenge. But if left unchecked it can corrode self-esteem, so do some digging around if they’re not putting effort in.”

Finding an out-of-school activity they’re keen on, such as sport, drama or playing in a band, can help to raise self-esteem and feed into effort at school.

***We Need to Talk* by Ian Williamson is published on May 4 (Vermilion, £12.99)**