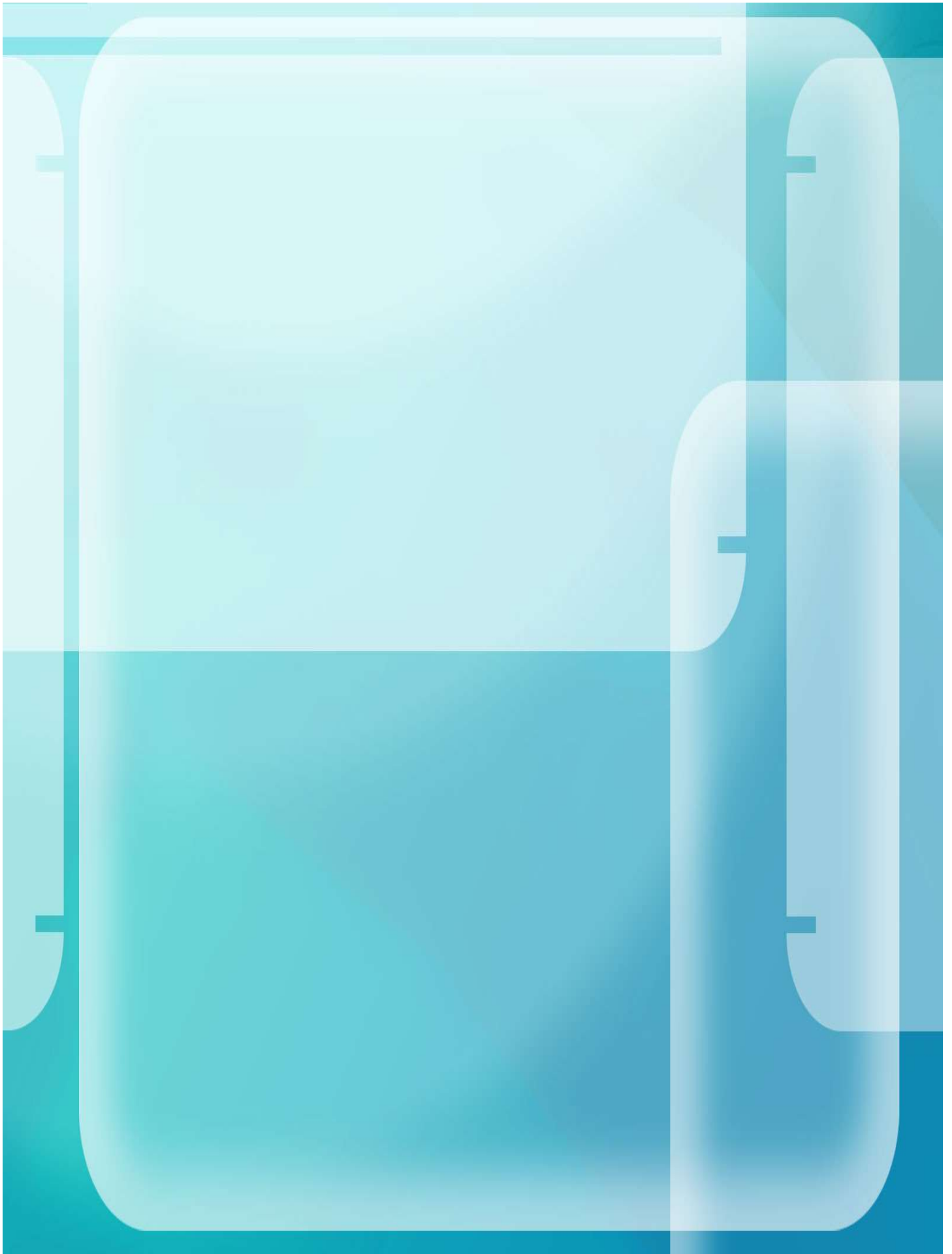


PARENTING



Evidence-based guidelines
for communicating with
your teenagers



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OVERVIEW

For teenagers and their parents, adolescence is a period of both happiness and troubles. It is a time when an adolescent breaks from the past, and yet, retains some childhood behaviour. As children reach puberty, important biological and cognitive changes affect their behaviour. In turn, parents need to make significant adjustments to their parenting roles.

Many people other than parents have an influence on children's personality and behaviour. But **parents can encourage a strong 'immune system' in their children – protection against some of the stresses of growing up.**

Befriending Your Teens

Teens who are struggling with the pressures in their lives need caring adults who can lead by example to help them enter adulthood with confidence.

A sense of family and school connectedness is vital for adolescents' emotional and psychological health. As a parent, you can seek to develop positive connections with your teens by remaining emotionally supportive, encouraging, and receptive.

This can be achieved by **actively listening, giving positive reinforcement, and encouraging the communication of emotions and feelings.**

ACTIVE LISTENING

As a parent, you may often feel that your children are speaking a different language from you.

Still, listening to your children during their teenage years is important because this is the time when they are forming their identities and taking ownership of their values and beliefs.



THREE TYPES OF RESPONSES IN ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is about focussing on the person who is speaking. Parents can show active listening by:

- 1 Asking good questions** — ask questions in a way that allows your teens to feel comfortable about answering truthfully and openly.
- 2 Paraphrasing** — restate what you hear to make sure that you understand what your teens say.
- 3 Empathising** — take time to see things through your teens' eyes and understand how you, as an adult, are experiencing a given situation.

1 ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS



Often, children may feel accused or blamed by the type of questions asked.

For example, if a parent asks, "*You didn't like the movie, did you?*" It seems that the parent does not approve of the movie. If the teen *did* like the movie, he or she will end up feeling the need to defend his or her position.

Consider how it would have been easier to respond to "*What do you think of the movie?*"

Once your teen has expressed an opinion, rather than giving yours, ask more questions to encourage him or her to think further.

The intent behind asking questions is to understand, rather than advise, criticise, or pry.

Active-listening questions are intended to:

- **Clarify meanings:** "*I hear you saying you are frustrated with David — is that right?*"
- **Learn about others' thoughts, feelings, and wants:** "*Tell me more about your ideas for the project.*"
- **Encourage elaboration:** "*What happened next?*" or "*How did that make you feel?*"
- **Encourage discovery:** "*What are your options at this point in time?*"
- **Gather more facts and details:** "*What had happened before this fight took place?*"

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS: A SELF-EVALUATION



Do you...

Assume that you know what your teens are saying?

Don't try to complete your teens' statements or say, *"I know just how you feel."*

Ask for clarification through questions?

For example: *"What did you mean when you said I had been unfair to you?"*

Check your tone for sincerity?

When talking to your teens, check that your tone matches your feelings and body language.

Ask open-ended questions that allow for a variety of responses?

Closed-ended questions limit the range of responses and suggest that you already know what is going to be said.

Show interest in the speaker and the conversation?

This can be done by saying, *"Tell me more about that"* or *"Keep going — I'm listening."*

2 PARAPHRASING (RE-STATING)

Paraphrasing is restating the information you just received to make sure that you understand it. This is communicative in several ways:

- **Helps parents make sure they understand the message correctly**
- **Helps parents draw more information from their teenage son or daughter**
Allows teens to know that their parents have heard them and are interested in what they have to say
- **Provides teens an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings immediately**

Example: A father and daughter discuss about curfew. **(paraphrased responses are underlined)**

Dad: "Amy, I'd like you to come home from this party at 1am."

Amy: "Dad, there is just no way. The party is until 2am and I have to be there until the end".

Dad: "It sounds like this party is a big deal for you, and that being there until the end is important."

Amy: "Yeah! There's going to be a live band...and all my friends will be there! Dad, you just have to let me stay until 2."

Dad: "You're excited about the party and want to make sure you have every opportunity to hang out with your friends."

Amy: "Yes, I can't come home before 2."

Dad: "I get that this party means a lot to you, and I am concerned about your safety. Let's get more details about this party — and your ride there and back — and see if we can work out something we're both comfortable with."

3 EMPATHISING

Empathising means that you, as a parent, have the ability to put yourself in your teens' shoes. To do so, you must ignore your own perception of the situation, and **accept your teens' feelings and thoughts of the situation as yours.**

Empathising...

- Does not mean you need to agree with your teens.
- Does not mean you need to give in to your teens or allow them to set their own rules.
- Means you **do not dismiss what your teens say as silly.** Your acceptance of your teens' thoughts, ideas, and feelings increases the chance that they will talk to you about the problems that they are facing.

When you are being empathetic...

1. Your body language and tone match.
2. Your tone and your feelings match.
3. You are focussed on what your teens are saying and try to see things from their point of view.

RESULTS FROM ACTIVE LISTENING



Active listening takes **time** and **practice**.

Over time, conversations will get **easier** and include more active listening from both sides.

You, as the adult, must lead the way.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Praise is powerful. It motivates children to persevere with difficult tasks, build up self-confidence in taking risks and grow into self-reliant individuals.

Research has repeatedly shown that **not praising or paying attention to good behaviour often leads to misbehaviour and poor self-esteem.**

Praising effectively

Many people do not know how or when to give praise. It may be because they received little praise when they were young, causing them to feel awkward when the need to praise their teens arises.

Often, parents who do not praise their teens do not praise themselves either. Instead, they are quick to criticise themselves.

Parents should learn to praise themselves as it is likely that they will do the same for their teens.

Praise and encouragement can have a dramatic impact on teens' behaviour.



DOS AND DON'TS OF GIVING PRAISE

1 Be specific

Specific or "labelled" praise describes the behaviour you like. Instead of saying "*good job*", you would say, "*I've noticed that you are making fewer spelling errors in your homework.*"

2 Show enthusiasm

Smile, make eye contact, and/or give a pat on the back. You should praise your teens with energy and sincerity as words thrown carelessly over the shoulder will be lost on them.

Here are a few phrases to help you get started:

- **I like it when you...**
- **It really pleases me when you...**
- **Hey, you are really sharp. You...**
- **I'm very proud of you for...**
- **Thank you for...**
- **That's a great way of...**
- **Wow, what a wonderful job you've done of...**



3 Praise immediately

The most effective praise is given within 5 seconds of the positive behaviour. Praise your teens as soon as they begin the desired behaviour. The praise should be frequent and consistent at first, then gradually more intermittent.

4 Don't combine praise with commands or criticism

A parent might say, "*I'm glad you're making your bed, but why didn't you do it yesterday?*" Praises should be clear, unambiguous, and should not include reminders of previous failures.

Doubling the impact

- Reinforcing a new behaviour is a long and difficult task. Whether you're using attention, a hug, a smile or verbal praise, **try to reinforce the positive behaviour every time it occurs.**
- If there are two adults in your family, discuss which behaviour you want to improve and how you will try to reinforce it. **With both parents participating, learning will occur much faster.** In addition, adults can double the impact by praising their teens in front of other adults.



EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Emotional regulation is a person's ability to have control over his or her emotional responses.

Emotional dysregulation is when one's emotional responses are often out of control, like when a child habitually withdraws from emotionally challenging situations or is unable to participate in new activities.

What can parents do?

Parents can have a huge impact on their teens' ability to regulate their emotions. As a parent, you can help by:

1 Accepting your teens' emotions and emotional responses

Remember that it is normal for teens to have emotional outbursts sometimes. Your patience and acceptance are important in helping your teens learn to cope with their emotional responses.



2 Encouraging teens to talk about their feelings

Teens may have difficulty staying in touch with their true feelings when they are told **how** they should feel. Avoid saying things like, "*Don't be sad.*"

Instead, accurately label the feeling and encourage your teens to talk about it: "*I see you are sad about that. Can you tell me what happened?*" Let them understand that while it is not always acceptable to act on our feelings, it is alright to talk about them.

3 Modelling emotional regulation

Teens often model after their parents on how to handle emotions. You can help by sharing your emotions and coping strategies: *"I'd better stop and calm down before I continue fixing this thing. Maybe if I get away from it for a while, I'll figure out what I need to do."*

4 Teaching teens positive self-talk

When teens experience negative emotions, there are often underlying thoughts ("**self-talk**") that reinforce it. A teen who feels discouraged may say to himself, *"I'm just a failure."* Teach your teens how to counterbalance their frustrations by running through some positive thoughts that can calm them down: *"Tell yourself, 'I played the game well. Maybe next time our team will win'."*

5 Teaching teens problem-solving methods to handle situations of emotional outbursts

Teens often resort to emotional outbursts as they lack better ways to express their needs. You can teach them several solutions to a problem. For example, you can review a problematic situation that occurred recently, label the emotions involved, and review how your teens could have handled the situation differently. The focus is on helping your teens identify how they felt and think of effective ways to manage their feelings.





ACTION LIST

Ask

Ask good questions that allow your teens to feel comfortable.

Paraphrase

Restate your teens' information to make sure you understand it.

Empathise

Put yourself in your teens' shoes.

Praise

Give specific and enthusiastic praise to your teens.

Encourage

Label the emotions your teens are experiencing and encourage them to talk about their feelings.

Model

Share positive strategies for coping with emotions.

Teach

Teach your teens positive self-talk and problem-solving methods.

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RESOURCES



Helplines

- **For families and individuals in need of family support services:**
 - **National Family Service Centre Helpline**
Daily: 24 hours
Tel: 1800 222 0000

- **For the Mandarin-speaking community with family, marital or personal problems:**
 - **Care Corner Counselling Centre**
Daily: 10.00am – 10.00pm
Tel: 1800 353 5800

- **For Malay/Muslim families with youth, marital, family or financial problems:**
 - **Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) Helpline & Counselling Service**
Mon – Fri: 10.00am – 5.00pm
Tel: 6416 3960

- **For Indian families in need of assistance or counselling**
 - **SINDA Helpline**
Mon – Fri: 8.30am – 6.00pm
Tel: 1800 295 4554

Ⓢ **For single-parent families seeking help:**

- **HELP Family Service Centre**

Mon – Fri: 9.00am – 6.00pm

Tel: 6457 5188

Tools for Parenting and Family Needs

- **Focus on the Family**

Website:

<http://www.family.org.sg/>

If you require assistance related to mental health, please contact your child's school counsellor, or call any of the hotlines listed below:

- Ⓢ **CHAT (youth aged 16 – 30):** 6493 6500
- Ⓢ **IMH 24-Hour Emergency Helpline:** 6389 6500
- Ⓢ **NUH Neuroscience Clinic:** 6772 2002
- Ⓢ **Samaritans of Singapore (SOS):** 1800 221 4444
- Ⓢ **SAMH Counselling Service:** 1800 283 7019
- Ⓢ **Silver Ribbon:** 6386 1928
- Ⓢ **Tinkle Friend:** 1800 274 4788

This pamphlet is brought to you by:

- REACH (West)
- Department of Psychological Medicine (National University Hospital)
- Psychological Medicine Department (National University of Singapore)

National University Hospital
5 Lower Kent Ridge Road
Singapore 119074
Tel: (65) 67795555
Website: www.nuh.com.sg

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