

What this booklet is about

You've probably picked up this booklet because you want practical, accurate and user-friendly information to help you raise your teen. You want to know what's considered normal adolescent behaviour, how to determine whether your child is on a good path, how to encourage his healthy development and how to get help when problems arise. There are many new things influencing teens today, but your parenting role is as important today as ever before. Spending time strengthening your relationship with your teen is the best investment in her future, just as it was when she was a child.

In my work with adolescents, I'm often asked by parents, "What do I need to know to help my teen avoid alcohol and other drugs, abusive peers or dating partners and other worries?" News reports are filled with upsetting stories about injuries and other forms of harm stemming from drinking, driving, partying or bullying—which makes parents all the more concerned. Today's pressures on teens come in different forms than in previous generations, but pressure is pressure, and to a teen it can seem overwhelming at times.

Parents may also feel overwhelmed with the problems and situations teens bring home, especially when some of these didn't exist when they were growing up, like Internet bullying or chat rooms. Many parents feel they would benefit from advice about how to meet their teens' needs, how to promote maturity and responsibility, and ways to avoid danger.

It's true that adolescence is the most dangerous period of development, especially from ages 16 to 19, and even extending to age 24, when many finish

their college or university studies and save a bit of money before leaving (or being gently nudged from) the family nest. After age 16, the combination of greater access to adult privileges such as driving, extended curfews, alcohol and other drugs, empty family homes or even separate living arrangements makes this age ripe for trouble. But, the image of teens as immature, fun seeking and irresponsible is overblown and inaccurate. The vast majority of teens emerge from this period unscathed—especially when their parents or caregivers practise effective parenting and do their utmost to prepare, not scare, their teen for assuming these new responsibilities and the pressures that may accompany them.

As parents, we know that simply letting our teenagers learn for themselves is not a good choice. The risk of injury or long-term health problems that could result is too high. Likewise, simply telling teens they can't do certain things ("Just say no!") doesn't work. Threatening them with consequences ("If I catch you drinking, you'll be grounded for a month!"), or putting up legal, or family, roadblocks to curtail activities are not very effective with teens. We need to help them develop personal strategies, a sense of responsibility, and values that reduce their chances of harm, especially now that they are spending much more time doing things on their own.

We can choose to sit and wait for our teenagers to make mistakes and react to them—usually through punishments or lectures—or we can try to head off problems by being a reliable source of information and support. While we can't make all the choices for them, we can assist them in making the most responsible choices possible. The best way to achieve this goal is to maintain a balance between being sensitive to their desires and needs, yet firm in providing guidance and direction.

Keep in mind that adolescence is all about *experimentation*. Because a certain amount of experimentation is normal, our job as parents is to figure out how

to strike a balance between setting limits (yes—teens need limits) and promoting their independence (yes—teens need to develop their *own* limits). This balancing act between hanging on and letting go is a major challenge of parenting a teenager.

As the parent of a teen you need information about three key issues:

- You need information about what behaviour is “normal” during adolescence so that you can better understand and guide your teen. Because none of us is born an expert parent, you probably worked hard to understand your child during infancy and early childhood. Adolescence requires the same amount of effort—if not more!
- You need a basic understanding of how you and your family, in addition to your teen, are changing. By recognizing the challenges that you and your teen face during this time of rapid transition, you will be better prepared to be a source of strength and guidance.
- Finally, you need information on the best ways to be an effective parent during this period of development so that you are strengthening your relationship with your teen and avoiding some of the common “traps.”

The purpose of this booklet is to help you get a better understanding of these key issues pertaining to adolescent development, and how your role as a parent can make an important difference in how teens develop the ability to make good choices. In three future booklets, we will discuss topics of specific concern in greater depth—topics such as substance use, peer and dating relationships, Internet use and adolescent well-being.

How teens manage their relationships—with family members, with peers and with other important adults—is a key element in how they learn to make safe and responsible choices. Ultimately, the process begins with their relationship with you. Now as much as ever, what parents do *does* matter.