

Handling your Teen's Mood Swings

There you are, minding your own business, washing dishes, paying bills, preparing dinner, and suddenly, your teenager screams at you from across the house that you have ruined their favorite jeans because you washed them, or because you threw out an important paper they needed for homework (3 weeks ago), or just because they *feel like it*. You get the picture, right? Maybe they even said that they hated you (it won't be the first time), or that they can't wait to "leave this house!" Often, I hear from parents that they just don't know what to do anymore and/or that their teen is out of control. We were all teenagers once, so why is it still so hard to understand them?

As you have probably already guessed, there is no one right way to deal with teenage angst (aka mood swings). But, thanks to years of research and guidance (from some very brave people), there are some methods that we can conclude **do** make positive changes in the overall behaviors of adolescents.

In order to understand teenage mood swings, you must first understand something about the brain and its development: teenagers are only just starting to develop their **prefrontal cortex**, the part of the brain that is responsible for **judgment, impulse control, emotional regulation, aggression, self-regulation, planning, reasoning, and social skills**. The prefrontal cortex won't be finished developing until they reach age 25 (and some studies are even starting to push that number up to 27).

Over the ages of 13-17, the prefrontal cortex begins to "prune" itself (like you would to a tree with dead branches), getting rid of the responses and behaviors that they no longer feel they need. During this time of pruning, however, teens are learning which behaviors and moods work for them, and which don't, so most of them try everything (aka response unpredictability). In addition to not yet knowing how to appropriately respond to a whole mess of

things, they also can't regulate their moods – more on this in a minute.

Now that you have this information, it is probably easier to understand **why** teens act the way they do. Let's now discuss using proven therapeutic and communication techniques so you can learn to better understand and support your teenager(s) during these trying moments.

First, **do not yell back**. All this will do is show them that no matter what age they are, this is indeed an appropriate response to whatever it is that's bothering them. It's not. Keeping a level head, speaking to them calmly, and providing feedback on their behavior, are all helpful ways of managing an outburst. An example of an appropriate response might be: "I know that you are feeling a lot right now, and I know it's hard to handle, but the only way that I can help you is if you lower your voice." This response not only recognizes and acknowledges their feelings, but it creates an opportunity for them to choose how to react. They may choose to continue yelling, but they will not receive the attention they were seeking until they change their behavior. The hardest part of this one is consistency. You won't win every argument with them, nor will you always keep your cool, but try and keep a consistent pattern of response to their behavior as often as you can.

Second, whenever possible, offer a choice. Adolescents are beginning to establish autonomy and independence, as well as trying to figure out who they want to become. This is a really difficult and confusing time for them, but simply telling them what to do won't work (as you've probably already noticed). They need to be able to make the choice for themselves. Allow them to choose where you're going to eat for dinner that night, or what movie the family is going to watch that weekend. Involve them in choices and they will choose to involve themselves in the family. Start with small, easy choices, and eventually, once trust is established, move on to bigger choices that you feel comfortable with them making.

Third, set house/family rules **and** rewards for following them. When it comes to changing a behavior, rewards work. Make sure that you involve your teenager in the establishing of the rules. If they have created the rule, they are more likely to respect said

rule. Setting rules together also gives you the opportunity to compromise and promote respect amongst the family unit as a whole. It's also fairer (if you have multiple children), as all of them will be subjected to the same consequences if not followed.

The rewards you choose don't have to be physical; they could be as simple as permission to go to a friend's house or using the computer for longer than usual. The consequences of not following a rule should reflect the severity of the rule broken. Let's say a rule you've established is that your teenager must clean their room weekly if they want to be able to hang out with friends on Friday night. If they do not clean it, then they will simply not be allowed to go. You should never punish them for not completing it, just don't reward the behavior. Yes, this may result in a messy room for a few days (as well as a possible mood swing), but a kind reminder that they have all of the power to change this situation is a great way of fostering independence and promoting good choices. Again, a very important key element here is consistency. Without it, you won't see any changes any time soon.

Whatever technique you choose to incorporate into your family, know that there will always be resistance to change. That is perfectly okay and expected. Teenagers will test you, that is their job. It's your job to keep going, no matter what. You got this!

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