

CARER TOOLKIT

Most young people and their families experience some ups and downs during the teen years. It's completely normal for tweens and teens to be moody and uncommunicative at times, and more inclined to hang out with their friends than their families.

But some kids who have experienced trauma may have particular challenges to overcome. They may have a deep sense of fear, a mistrust of adults, and a belief that they have to look out for themselves. It's important to understand they're not trying to make life hard for you. For now, they're just behaving the only way they know how.



Look beyond the behaviour of a teen to what is really going on in their mind and heart by listening to them. Pick your battles wisely. And don't sweat the small stuff!

Jo-Anne, Blakehurst

Kids who have been through tough times are often acutely aware of what's going on around them, even if they don't show it. That means that your caring, kind and consistent manner will, over time, have an impact.

Stay patient, try to look at troubles as learning opportunities, and give yourself credit for the small successes like an unexpected smile from your child, or some encouraging comments from a teacher.

And be kind to yourself! If you take care of your own health and wellbeing, you'll be less likely to get stressed and burn out. Make time to do things you enjoy. And keep connected with friends and other carers who know what you're going through and will support you.



USEFUL TIP **Look after yourself**

The work you are doing is emotionally and physically demanding. Take a break from time to time, and ask for help when you need it.



TIPS FOR:

TEENAGE PRIVACY

Teens need their own personal space, and their own mental space, too. Privacy gives them the room they need to forge a sense of identity and develop their independence. But they're not on their own yet! Your teen may be pushing for independence, but you know they still need your guidance. Here are some ideas about how to show your teen that you trust and respect them, while also keeping them supported and protected.

KEEP TALKING AND LISTENING. Be around. Be attentive. Be interested in what your child has to say. If the conversations keep flowing, then you'll have a good sense of what's going on in your teen's life and how they're feeling, without ever having to pry. If your teen starts a conversation with you, stop what you're doing and give them your full attention. Your child wants to know that what they say matters to you.

RESPECT PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES. Get in the habit of knocking before you enter your child's room, and checking with them before you look for something in their school bag or borrow their phone or computer.

BE UPFRONT ABOUT WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW. Tell your teen there are things you need to know so you can be sure they're safe, and that you expect them to share that information with you. For example, you need to know where they are when they go out, who they're with and how they're going to get there and back.

RELAX ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW. There are things about your teen's life that you may want to know, but you don't really *need* to know. For example, you probably don't need to know who your teen has a crush on or why they fell out with a friend. If communication is good between the two of you, you can certainly ask those questions – but don't take it personally if your teen doesn't want to answer.

STAY INVOLVED IN YOUNGER TEENS' ONLINE LIVES. In the early years, it's smart to be very actively involved in what your child is doing online. Talk about how to use the internet safely, insist that devices are used in public areas of the house, and perhaps consider using settings or software that limit what your child can do online.

DON'T SPY ON OLDER TEENS. As your teen gets older, keep up the conversations about what they're doing online, but think long and hard before undermining their privacy by demanding passwords, logging on to their devices or using software to track their activity. It's better to make it clear what your expectations are, and ensure that your teen knows they can always come to you with any worries around what they encounter online.

LOOK DEEPER. If the teen in your care repeatedly breaks your trust and shows no signs of being sorry, or if their behaviour is getting risky or self-destructive, it could be a sign that they are struggling to deal with the trauma and disruption in their past. Talk to your caseworker; it might be time to get help from a counsellor or psychologist.

TAKE ACTION. If you have urgent concerns for your child, or if you don't know where they are, call your caseworker or the 24-hour Child Protection Hotline on 132 111. If you believe your child is in immediate danger, contact the police straight away.



TIPS FOR:

BETTER NEGOTIATING

When you negotiate with your teen, you're supporting their growing independence but also teaching them how to look ahead, think about other people, consider consequences, learn from mistakes and make good decisions. You're also avoiding stress and conflict by setting up situations that both of you can feel good about.



THINK FIRST. If your teen surprises you with a demand, don't feel like you have to respond immediately. Let them know it's something the two of you will have to talk about, and set aside a time for that conversation. Remember to follow through with the conversation as soon as possible so your teen knows you aren't just putting them off, and that you're serious about sharing the decision-making.

LISTEN FIRST. Let your teen start the conversation and listen closely, without interruption. Try to focus on what they're saying instead of thinking ahead to what you're going to say next. Your teen might tell you something that completely challenges your assumptions about what's going on.

CHECK THAT YOU HAVE UNDERSTOOD. Show you are making a genuine effort to understand your teen's point of view by telling them in your own words what you have heard. You could say something like, *Okay, so what I'm hearing is... Is that right?*

STICK TO THE FACTS. When you're negotiating, try to avoid judgmental language. Focus on the facts without letting your opinions take over the conversation. For example, don't say, *I can't believe you want to wear that trashy outfit*; instead say, *You want to wear that skirt, but I don't think it's appropriate.*

USE YOUR AUTHORITY WISELY. Your teen is growing up, but you are still responsible for their safety and wellbeing. Stand firm on things you know will put them at risk of harm, but make it clear that, within those boundaries, you'll support them to do what they want to do.

PROBLEM-SOLVE TOGETHER. If you haven't found common ground yet, ask your teen some more questions about what they want and why. For example, if you have asked your teen not to use social media during the school week and they refuse, you might say, *What I'm worried about is that it's distracting you from getting your homework done. How much time do you think you need for social media, and then how much time do you need for your homework?* Use your teen's answers to push on with negotiations.

TAKE A BREAK. If things are getting heated, it's a good idea to take a break. Let your teen know that you need to cool down for a moment and agree on a good time to restart the conversation.

DON'T SUGAR-COAT IT. It could be that the final decision is very different from what your teen was originally asking for. Stay as neutral as you can. Don't try to convince them that the agreed course of action will be better for them or that they'll appreciate it later. Give your teen space to come to terms with it in their own time, and make their own conclusions.

DON'T SAY "I TOLD YOU SO". Sometimes a negotiation leads to a decision that you're not entirely happy with. For example, your teen may end up spending money on something you're sure they won't use much in the future. If it turns out you were right, don't make a big deal about it. Learning from your mistakes as a teenager is part of becoming a good decision-maker as an adult.



TIPS FOR:

SOLVING PROBLEMS



Carers play an important role in helping kids solve problems. Problem-solving skills are something tweens and teens will need to navigate the adult world. Learning how to cope with challenges and solve problems doesn't come easily. At the beginning, you'll need to help your teen work through their problems, using some of the tools and strategies described here. Eventually, you'll be able to pull back and let them work through problems on their own. Being able to sort things out for themselves will be a big confidence-booster.

TAKE THE FEAR OUT OF FAILURE. Sometimes kids with a poor sense of self-worth may take failure very hard, or might be too scared to look for a solution in case they fail. Help your child understand that making mistakes is one of the best ways to learn. Tell them about the times you made mistakes or failed, and talk positively about what you learned and how you feel about it now.

COMFORT THE WORRIER. Reassure your teen that their brain is forever learning new skills and that they will get better at things the more they practise them. Finding answers and solving problems might seem hard now – but it will get easier.

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM. Problems are often wrapped up in a lot of emotion. It helps to put aside the arguments and focus on the facts. So instead of the problem being *Why don't you care more about your school work?* it becomes *What needs to change so that you start getting your school assignments done on time?* Factual problems are easier to solve than emotional ones.

LOOK FOR REASONS. Talk together about why this problem has developed. Listen without interrupting – you might discover something about the situation that you didn't know.

MAKE A LIST OF SOLUTIONS. Write down all the possible solutions that you and your teen can think of. These could be realistic or crazy – it doesn't matter at this stage and the more open you are to ideas, the more comfortable your teen will feel. Don't offer any judgments or opinions while the ideas are being collected.

EVALUATE THE SOLUTIONS. Go through the solutions and make notes about the positives for each one, and then the negatives. Solutions where the negatives really outweigh the positives can be crossed off the list. Then it's a matter of going through the remaining solutions to decide which one is really the best one. It might help to give each solution a mark out of 10 to guide the discussion.

MAKE A PLAN. Once you've decided on a solution, you'll need to work out how to make it happen. Talk with your teen about who needs to do what and when. If the solution requires having a conversation with someone, for example if your teen needs to ask a teacher for more time on a school assignment, then it might help to practise the conversation.

LOOK BACK ON THE SOLUTION. Deciding on a course of action doesn't mean the problem has been solved. Check back in with your teen to see how things are going. If everything has gone well, then it's worth stopping to talk about how problem-solving together helped. If it didn't, then you might need to come up with a better solution.



TIPS FOR:

DEALING WITH ANGER



Reactions that are angry or violent may be deeply instinctive for kids who have been through trauma, either because it's the only kind of conflict resolution they've ever been exposed to, or because they developed those responses as children to keep themselves safe. Being loved and cared for by you will help your child learn better ways of coping. Support your teen by being calm, reassuring and understanding what their triggers might be.

BE CALM IN THE FACE OF THE ANGER. It's very likely you will be the focus of your child's anger at some point. Stay calm, make it clear you're listening, and state your own point of view clearly and simply. If there is a problem, look for a solution both of you can be satisfied with. If a compromise is not possible, try to help your child understand your decisions are based on what is best for them.

NEVER LET IT GET NASTY. As the adult, you must be a role model of good behaviour. Don't mock or ridicule. Don't be sarcastic. Try not to swear. Never be intimidating or threatening. Kids who have experienced trauma are usually highly sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, so your positive role modelling will have a big influence.

BE READY TO APOLOGISE. Nobody's perfect. If you did or said something you shouldn't have, take responsibility for it, apologise, and repair the harm done if you can. The child in your care will feel respected and cared for, and they'll also be seeing you model responsible behaviour.

CARVE OUT CONFLICT-FREE TIME. You might go through patches when it seems like all you ever do is fight with your child. It's important that not every discussion is a negative one, especially for kids in care who can really battle with negative feelings about themselves. Make a point of starting up conversations when you're both feeling relaxed and there's nothing to argue about.

UNDERSTAND WHERE THE ANGER COMES FROM.

For some kids, thoughts and feelings are so big and painful that self-control seems impossible, and anger management becomes a problem. If you're finding it hard to cope with your child's anger, ask your caseworker for some support. Some specialised training, extra help around the house or a short break from caring duties might help you get back on top of things. It may also be valuable to organise some counselling or psychological support for your teen.

BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT DISCIPLINE. Look for consequences that won't trigger bad memories or raise anxiety. Don't punish a socially anxious child by excluding them from an activity; or confiscate a treasured belonging from a child who has suffered neglect. Having your child do some extra work alongside you, such as washing the car or doing the laundry, can be a good alternative.

TAKE ONE CONFLICT AT A TIME. You might be tempted to bring up old arguments, but that's likely to make your child defensive and even less inclined to find a solution. Just focus on the issue at hand.

VIOLENCE IS NEVER OKAY. If your child gets physical, make it clear that violence is not okay and that you will work things out with them later, after they've calmed down. If the threat of violence is ongoing, it's important to let your caseworker know. If you're ever concerned that someone in your house is at immediate risk of harm, call the police.