

# G W A T E

G A T E W A Y  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE



P A R E N T I N G I N T O T H E T E E N Y E A R S  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA—CHAMPAIGN COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Issue 4

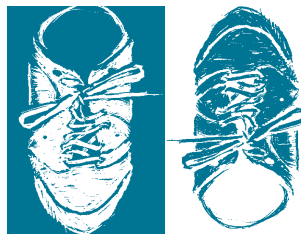
## Are all parent-teen relationships rocky?

Adolescence... a time of seemingly more freedom, junior high to high school, football games, dances, parties, going out for pizza, dating, driving, a later curfew, going to the mall, and talking on the phone almost nonstop. You may rarely see your child anymore—what with all the time he or she spends with friends. It may seem as if the major issues you discuss are bedtimes, clothing, and keeping bedrooms clean. Your adolescent is growing up. It may seem as if he or she needs you less and less. But you're still needed, just in a different way.

Many societal messages give us the idea that adolescents have strained relationships with their parents. So it may be hard to accept that most adolescents truly desire strong ties with their families. Teens face many decisions that they don't want to make alone. Although the issues they face may be stressful and scary, this doesn't mean that the period of adolescence itself must be turbulent. You, as a parent, can provide the foundation of support and encouragement to counteract (rather than cause) these stresses.

Years ago, psychologists thought that teens must distance themselves from their parents to become healthy adults. Many people saw the distant, rebellious teen as the norm. In many ways, our society still embraces that notion. Just turn on the television: Many shows and movies involving teens and their parents are quite negative. As the parent of a child nearing the teen years, you may wonder if the child you know now will suddenly disappear and be replaced by a distant, rebellious teen.





## Independence

**"Where were you?"**

**"Out."**

**"Who were you with?"**

**"A friend."**

**"What did you do?"**

**"Nothing."**

To parents of teens, exchanges like this may sound all too familiar. Many parents are bewildered when their child, who once told them everything, becomes less open. What does it mean? You may ask, "Am I losing my child?"

Conversations like the one above may signal to you that your teen is trying to become more independent. Not telling you everything is part of the move toward independence.

Parents often mistake growth toward independence as rebelliousness. After all, your teen suddenly may question all that you stand for. However, your home is a safe place for your teen to begin the move toward independence. Challenging parents who love you is less threatening than challenging the people you meet in the larger world.

### What can I expect as my teen tries to become more independent?

Parents of children in their early teens can expect an increase in the number of arguments with their children. At this time, your teen is trying to establish him- or herself as an independent person in the household. Once you and your family begin to acknowledge this change, the number of arguments between parents and teens usually declines. This decline usually occurs around the eighth or ninth grade.

In recent years, psychologists have revised their idea of healthy parent-teen relationships. They have found that most teens have warm, close relationships with their parents. They care about their parents' opinion of them and hold their parents' opinions in high regard. Many teens who do not have good rapport with their parents have had difficulties with them for years. This is good news for most parents with children nearing the teen years. They can look forward to continuing good relationships with their children. If your relationship with your child has always been strained, there are ways to relate more positively.

Despite the fact that most parent-teen relationships are warm and caring, issues of independence and increasing conflict emerge during the teen years. These two connected issues may cause you concern as you try to figure out how to handle them.



## How should I react to my teen's move toward independence?

— Don't be offended by your teen's push toward independence.

No matter how well you're doing as a parent or what kind of relationship you have with your child, your teen will reject your advice at times. Try to keep in mind that he or she must do this to gain a sense of independence from you. Your teen isn't intentionally trying to hurt you by behaving this way.

— Allow teens to make their own decisions—within limits. As we suggested in the previous issue of *Gateway*, your teen can learn how to make good decisions only by practicing. Try to think about "low-risk" areas where you can allow your teen to gain this practice. For instance, how your teen dresses or decorates the bedroom likely has no long-term effects on anyone's health or future. Why not let him or her start deciding about these issues? As your teen shows that he or she is capable of making responsible decisions in low-risk areas, let him or her take more responsibility for decisions such as determining a bedtime or spending allowance money. If these decisions are handled well, allow him or her to continue to do so. If problems arise, you might need to make decisions in these areas for a while longer.

— Don't be surprised if your teen makes some bad decisions. Because they lack experience in decision making, teens may make some mistakes. Your daughter may stay up late watching television on a Friday night and then sleep through a special activity she had planned with her friends. Or your son may spend all afternoon at the arcade playing video games and then realize he's spent the money he was planning to use going to the movies with his friends. Don't be too critical in these cases, but don't always protect your teen from the consequences of these decisions. Living with the outcome of a bad choice can help move

your teen toward more responsible behavior. You can help your teen think through future decisions using the steps we outlined in the previous issue of *Gateway*.

— Remember that teens still need limits set for their behavior.

Even though you want to encourage your teen's decision-making skills, there are some issues where you need to set the limits. Any activity that potentially hurts your teen is an area where parents should set limits. Teens whose parents don't set limits often turn to their peers for advice. In setting limits with your teen, it's a good idea to explain why you made the rule rather than simply handing it down.



## Conflict



**?** *Will my teen and I fight all the time?* Talk to the parent of a teenager, and most will tell you they have more arguments with their teens than when their children were younger. Besides using arguments as a means to establish independence, your teen is a better arguer—thanks to changes in thinking skills that occur during puberty! Your teen can find faults in your reasoning and argue with you about an issue. Your teen also may like to practice these new skills by disagreeing with you. This increase in arguments usually occurs around puberty. Parents and teens have, on average, about two arguments a week.

**?** *Will my teen and I argue about all the values that I have taught him or her?* In general, parents and teens argue about less important issues than values and morals. Parents and kids spend much more time arguing about walking the dog, setting curfews, cleaning up bedrooms, and other day-to-day issues than arguing about morals and values. In fact, most teens and their parents agree about values. That's probably a relief to hear. But arguing with your teen about the daily chores still can be quite irritating!

**?** *When should I be concerned about arguments with my teen?* Although arguments between parents and teens are normal, sometimes they may indicate problems that require professional help. Be concerned if you and your teen are constantly fighting, if you find yourself physically hitting your teen, or if your teen is involved in behaviors such as running away from home, drug use, truancy, or delinquency. If you experience any of these situations with your teen, seek help from a qualified professional. Members of the clergy, school social workers, and physicians can help you get in touch with these professionals.



## Authoritative Parenting

Many parents probably ask themselves "How can I be the best parent possible for my children?" or "Am I a good parent?" These questions may have as many answers as there are parents. But, as we noted in earlier issues of the newsletter, certain types of parenting seem to have the most positive effects on children and adolescents.

Especially during your child's adolescence, you may be more apt to question your parenting practices. You know that your child needs to move toward taking on adult responsibilities. Yet you may wonder how quickly to move in that direction. Your teen's more frequent questioning of your authority may make you more aware of your parenting practices.

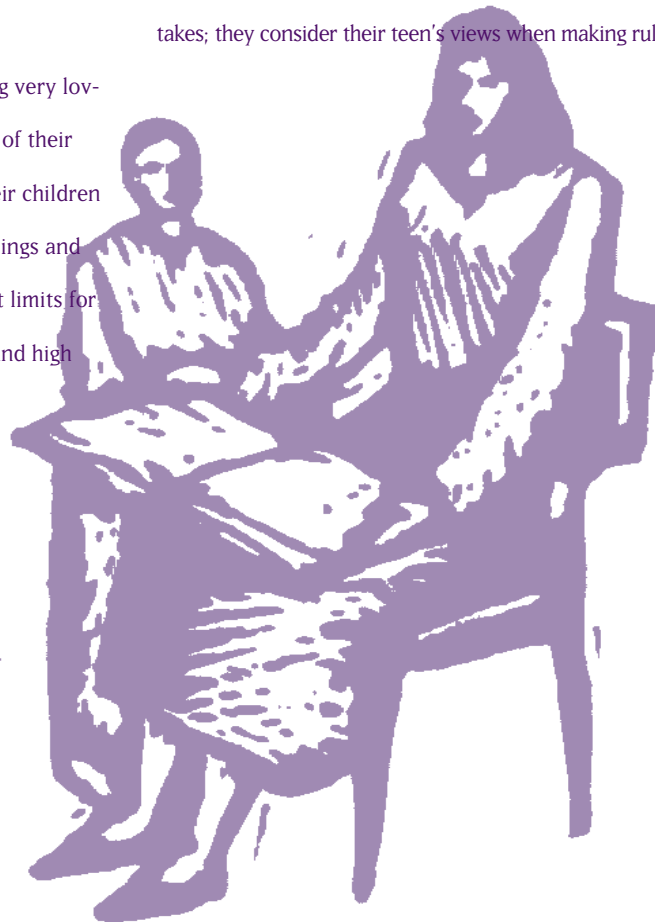
In an earlier newsletter, we discussed some differences between parenting styles. The style we would like to follow up on, the one most helpful to adolescents, is the *authoritative* parent.

### What is authoritative parenting all about?

As we mentioned earlier, authoritative parents combine being very loving toward their children with making appropriate demands of their teen's behavior. These parents enjoy spending time with their children and take the time to try and understand their children's feelings and needs. While warm and loving with their teens, they also set limits for behavior. These parents set and consistently enforce rules and high standards for their teens.

In addition to being both loving and demanding of their teens, authoritative parents try to reason with their teens. Instead of setting rules with little or no explanation, these parents try to explain why they want their teen to abide by certain rules. For instance, authoritative parents are more likely to explain to teens, "I don't want you to walk home alone after the party because it's not safe." In contrast, other parents may let their teens do whatever they want. They say, "You figure out how to get home from the party on your own." Or they may just give rules with no explanation: "Don't walk home alone after the party." By explaining rules, you help your teen see that your rules are not arbitrary, but based on concern for his or her welfare. This makes it more likely your teen will follow your rules.

Authoritative parents also allow their teens the freedom to debate or discuss rules with them. These parents realize that they can make mistakes; they consider their teen's views when making rules.





# Steps To Bring You and Your Teen Closer

## How can I show my teen I care?

Here are several things that teen experts Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine suggest you can do to help bring you and your teen closer.

— **Spend time together.** Don't confuse your teen's increasing interest in friends with a lack of interest in you. Most teens want to spend time with their parents. Take time to turn off the television or clear your schedule. Then go to lunch with your teen, work on a project at home together, or go on an outing together.

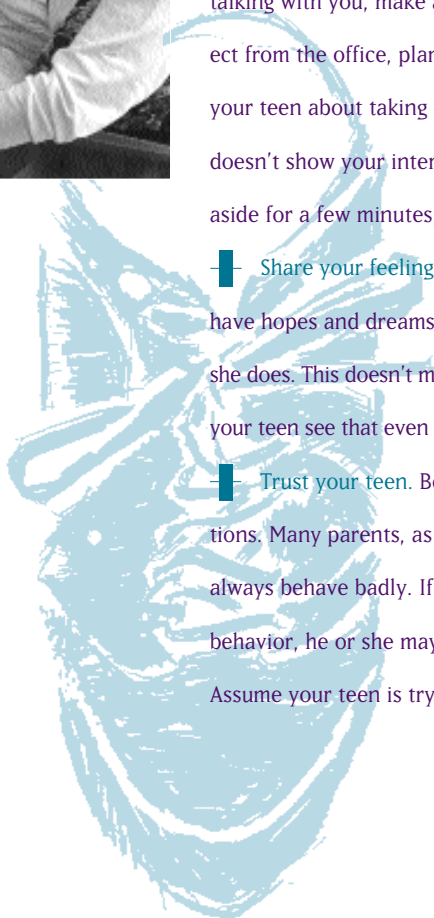
— **Spend time alone together.** To get to know your teen, make a point of spending time alone with him or her. When other family members are around, you don't have the opportunity to talk with your teen in the same way you can when you are alone together. Spending time alone together will give your teen a chance to let you know who he or she really is.

— **Talk about your teen's interests and concerns.** When your teen is talking with you, make a point of really listening. Thinking about a project from the office, planning the menu for a party, or jumping in to nag your teen about taking out the garbage doesn't show you're listening. It doesn't show your interest. Make a point of putting the other issues aside for a few minutes, and really listen to your teen.

— **Share your feelings and concerns.** Let your teen know that you have hopes and dreams, frustrations and disappointments—just as he or she does. This doesn't mean turning your teen into a confidante, but it lets your teen see that even adults struggle with different issues in their lives.

— **Trust your teen.** Believe in your child and your child's good intentions. Many parents, as a result of what they hear, believe that teens always behave badly. If you have only low expectations for your teen's behavior, he or she may live up (or down!) to these expectations.

Assume your teen is trying to be his or her best.



— **Treat your teen with respect.** Treat your teen as you treat other adults. For example, many parents tell other people stories about things their teenagers have done that are embarrassing or humiliating. Would you want your spouse to tell other people about your embarrassing moments? Think how you would feel. Respect your teen and his or her feelings as you do other adults.

— **Be supportive.** Don't look down on your teen's problems as trivial or insignificant. Even though your teen's problems may seem smaller than yours, to a young person experiencing them for the first time, they may seem enormous. For example, you know that, even though you feel as if you'll die when you first break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, you manage to pull yourself together and meet someone new. Your teen hasn't lived through a breakup and may feel very distressed by it. Support him or her as she tries to deal with those feelings. Saying "I know how much it hurts" can help more than saying "you'll forget about him or her by tomorrow."

— **Don't alienate yourself from your teen of the opposite sex.** Many parents have difficulty relating to their opposite-sex children who start to mature physically. Fathers can't imagine that their daughters who look like grown-up women still want to go out and play catch with them or do a woodworking project together. Likewise, moms may think that their sons no longer want their attention or affection. Remember, you still are the parent. If you pull away because you feel uncomfortable, your teen may feel rejected.

### How do I know if the limits I set are reasonable?

Often the key in determining how your teen responds to your limit setting is whether or not he or she has a voice in making the rules. This acknowledges to your teen that he or she is growing up and demon-

strates that you respect his or her opinion and have considered it in making a decision. Although ultimately you may decide to stand by your original rule, your teen will be less likely to rebel, knowing that you have considered his or her opinion.

There are cases, however, when you need to make a firm and fast rule about behavior. In most cases, this concerns behavior in which a teen potentially may be hurt—such as riding in a car with a driver who has been drinking. If you limit the number of rules that are not negotiable and allow teens to have a say in creating other rules (such as rules about keeping bedrooms clean or setting bedtimes), your teen is more likely to abide by the nonnegotiable rules.

## Putting it all together

It's easy to talk about how people should parent teens, but you know that it isn't always easy to do the actual parenting. Authoritative parenting takes work! When you feel stressed or tired, it may be easier to give in to your teen or just lay down the law. Don't get discouraged. Even if you occasionally use parenting practices that may not be optimal, your teen will benefit from your efforts to use the authoritative style. Keep thinking of ways to show your teen your love and concern. Continue to set and enforce rules consistently. And give your teen an opportunity to voice opinions about rules. The more you can do these three things, the better it will be for your teen's development.

## Suggested reading

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*Raising Good Children: From Birth through the Teenage Years*, by Thomas Lickona (1985); New York: Bantam Books.

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GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 905 South Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801. Phone 217.244.7356. Fax 217.333.9061.

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Project Director  
Assistant Director  
Planning Team

## Contributors

Editor  
Photographer  
Designer  
Consultants

Nina Mounts  
Meridith Foster  
Hazel Andros  
Wendy Griesemer  
Sheri Seibold  
Sandy Shetler  
Judith Taylor  
Nina Mounts  
Kim Scanlan  
Mary Overmier  
David Riecks  
Liz Cosgrove  
Aaron Ebata  
Robert Hughes  
Christine Todd

GATEWAY  
Cooperative Extension Service  
University of Illinois  
905 South Goodwin  
Urbana, IL 61801

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