



Teenagers AND

Stress

When we talk about stress, most people think about how we react to problems that are hard to deal with. Sometimes these problems are major events that are sudden or unexpected, such as going through a divorce. Other problems are more common, day-to-day difficulties or strains. Studies with adolescents have found that

- A pileup of many life events over a short time is harder for teens than coping with just one event.
- Ongoing, day-to-day stresses and strains have a bigger impact on teens than major life events. If a major event (such as divorce) affects teens, it is often because it changes day-to-day aspects of their lives.



What are the most common problems for early adolescents?

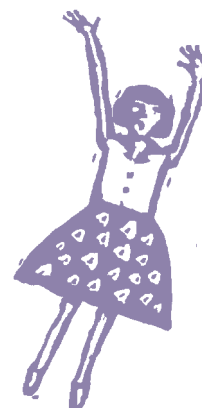
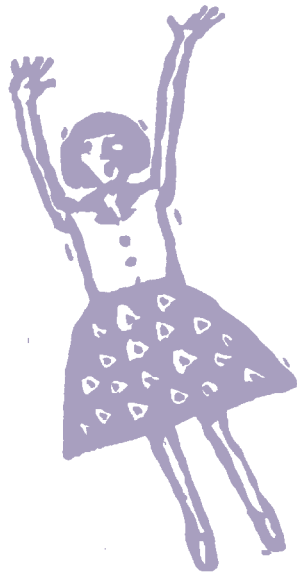
- Problems with peers, including romances
- Family issues or problems relating to parents
- School-related problems or issues
- Dealing with their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors

How do teens cope with stress?

Teens react to difficulties much as adults do. Some common emotional reactions include excitement, fear, worry, anxiety, sadness, and anger. Compared to younger children, teens use more sophisticated coping strategies. As teens get older, they turn more to peers and have greater access to other adults in the community for support. They also have greater access to drugs and alcohol—which are often used by adults to cope with stress. Each teen tries to cope with stress in his or her own way, but there are some general coping patterns.

— **Problem solving.** One way to deal with stress is trying to deal with the problem directly, by getting rid of it or changing the situation. Acting to solve problems often requires planning and, sometimes, learning new skills. For instance, coping with doing poorly in school might require learning study skills and planning how much time to spend on homework. Coping with feeling left out might require learning social skills.

— **Managing emotions.** Managing emotions can be very helpful when dealing with an uncontrollable problem or in the early stages of coping. For instance, blowing off steam, avoidance, and distraction can be important ways of getting ready to cope more directly with difficulties. The most common way young teens cope with stress is by listening to music or by watching TV.



What can I do to help my teen cope with stress?

Provide help, encouragement, and support.

— Encourage your teen to talk about what he or she is going through. Listen carefully. Ask questions so you can understand. Don't jump to the conclusion that you know what is going on and give advice. Depending on the situation, your child may not want advice. He or she may just want to be understood. If you're not sure that your teen wants your advice, ask.

— Offer reassurance, encouragement, and support. Be willing to provide verbal or physical comfort, but don't be discouraged if your teen rejects your efforts or is irritable. These are normal reactions to stress. Be patient. Make it clear that you are there if your child needs you.

— Provide a structured, stable, and predictable home base. Within reason, the same rules, roles, and routines should be kept in your home.

— Encourage your teen to take part in activities that he or she normally enjoys.

— Encourage your child to talk with others to get help, advice, or support. You might suggest other adults whom he or she is close to or respects.

Help your child develop coping skills.

— Model effective coping. Talk about how you deal with your problems. Avoid the use of drugs or alcohol to cope with troubles.

— Help your teen learn and practice problem-solving skills. Work with your teen to figure out problems, and suggest how he or she might cope with difficulties. Make it clear to your teen that he or she has options.

You can also teach your teen specific skills for solving problems.

— Help your teen learn and practice ways to manage emotions. Teach that there are safe ways to blow off steam. Provide opportunities for your teen to become involved in activities that are fun and enjoyable. Teach your teen how to see the positive side of things.

If you need help, seek it. Helping teens can sometimes be a discouraging or frustrating task. Be sure to monitor your own levels of stress and take care of yourself. Be willing to seek support from others. The school counselor or social worker, a member of the clergy, or your health-care provider can give information or advice on who might help you.



Substance Abuse

In the United States, most adults and the majority of adolescents have used alcohol and experimented with cigarette smoking at some time. Although the consequences for most persons are not severe, within the United States there are at least 18 million heavy drinkers, aged 18 and over, whose lives are seriously affected by their drinking. Researchers suggest that adolescents who smoke are more likely to drink, that those who drink are more likely to smoke. The ones who smoke and drink are more likely to smoke marijuana. Those who use marijuana are more likely to use other illicit drugs (for instance, cocaine or heroin).

Why do teens try drugs?

The most common reason that teens give for trying drugs is wanting to fit in—peer acceptance. Another reason they give for trying drugs is loneliness or boredom. A third reason is wanting to feel grown-up.

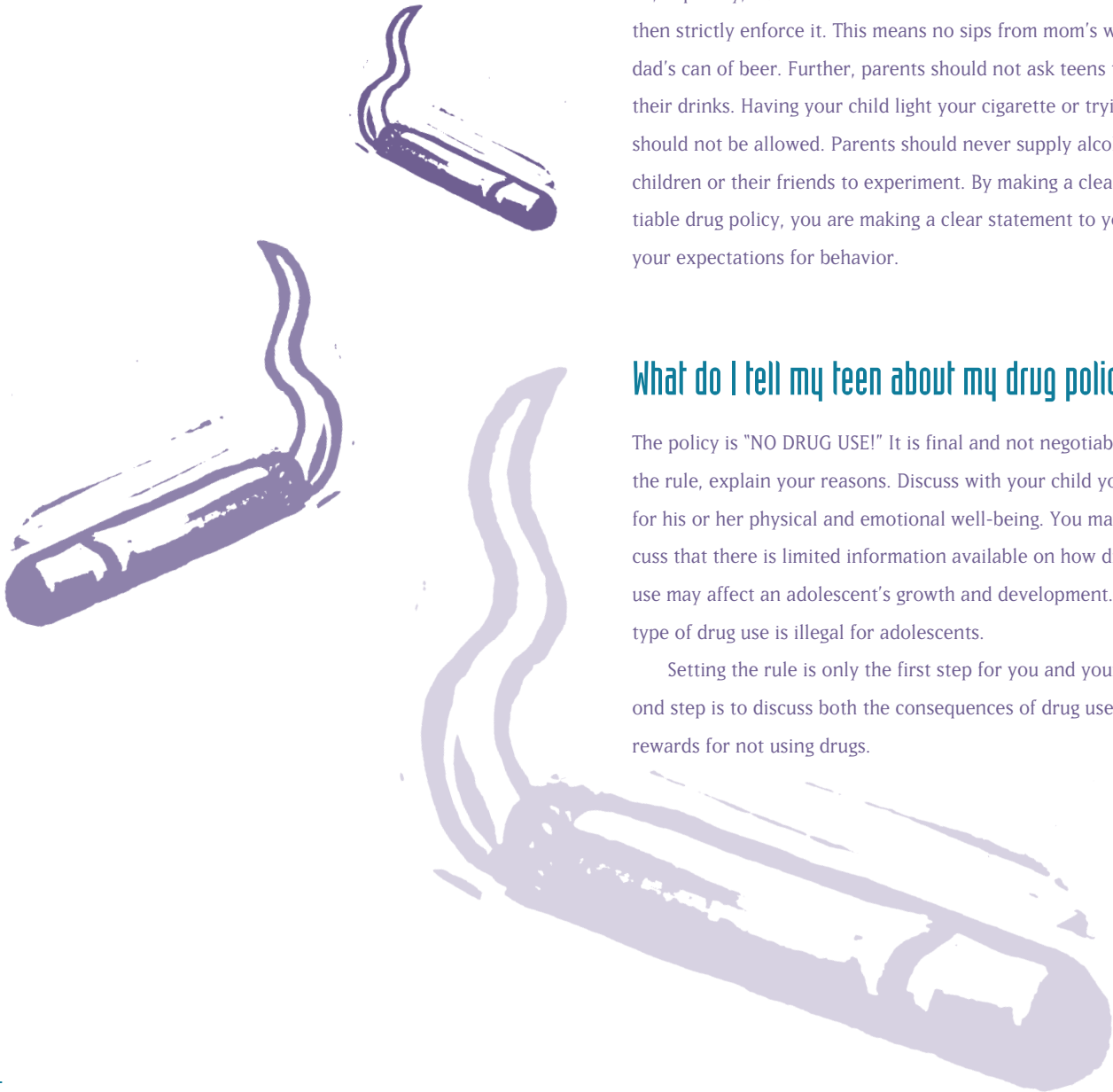
What should my drug policy be?

A parent's policy for drug use (including cigarettes and alcohol) should be, explicitly, "NO DRUG USE!" Parents must make this rule clear and then strictly enforce it. This means no sips from mom's wine glass or dad's can of beer. Further, parents should not ask teens to mix or serve their drinks. Having your child light your cigarette or trying a puff also should not be allowed. Parents should never supply alcohol for their children or their friends to experiment. By making a clear, nonnegotiable drug policy, you are making a clear statement to your teen about your expectations for behavior.

What do I tell my teen about my drug policy?

The policy is "NO DRUG USE!" It is final and not negotiable. After stating the rule, explain your reasons. Discuss with your child your concerns for his or her physical and emotional well-being. You may want to discuss that there is limited information available on how drug and alcohol use may affect an adolescent's growth and development. Further, any type of drug use is illegal for adolescents.

Setting the rule is only the first step for you and your teen. The second step is to discuss both the consequences of drug use and the rewards for not using drugs.



and Teenagers

What do I tell my teenager if I drink or smoke?

You have the right to prohibit your child from these activities. There are many adult activities that are not open to adolescents. Explain your own use of alcohol and cigarettes. For instance, you may want to explain that you enjoy drinking, but it is illegal for adolescents to drink. It may be helpful for you to discuss with your teen the situations in which you drink and why. If you find that you always must drink at parties or to relax, or if you drink and drive, you may want to consider the kind of message that this behavior sends to your teen. By drinking in moderation, you can also set an example of appropriate and responsible alcohol use for your teen.

If you are a smoker, you could discuss how you started smoking and why you wish you had never started. Also, if you have tried to quit, you may want to explain how hard it is to quit smoking.

How do I know if my teen is abusing drugs?

There are several signs that **may** indicate your teen is abusing drugs:

- Any dramatic change for the worse in behavior, appearance, school performance, friends, or sleeping and eating patterns
- Pupil dilation, bloodshot eyes, runny nose, coughing, or vomiting that is not related to illness
- Repeated incidents of lying, stealing, or criminal behavior
- Increased secretiveness, preoccupation, withdrawal, and avoidance
- General loss of interest in prior activities
- Increased use of breath and air fresheners (or such odor maskers as heavy perfumes and incense)
- Possession of drug-related items (for instance, flasks, cigarette papers, rollers, plastic baggies, scales, pill bottles, coke spoons, razor blades, needles, atomizer bottles, butane minitorches)





Teenagers

Adolescents and young adults are far more likely to be involved in delinquent behavior than any other age group. The term "delinquency" refers to violating the law and sometimes includes behaviors such as breaking school rules (for instance, cheating). When asked, nine of ten adolescents admit to some form of delinquency in the last year (for instance, shoplifting, vandalizing, or cheating). However, for most adolescents, these behaviors are infrequent, spontaneous, and not violent. Parents should not ignore these behaviors; take them seriously. Most delinquent behavior, though, is experimental and does not mean that your teen is headed toward a life of delinquency. However, misbehavior that is ignored can quickly lead to further acts of delinquency.

When should I be concerned about delinquent behavior?

If your child is regularly in trouble either in school or with the law, you should be concerned. Violent behavior (for instance, fighting, intentional harming of someone else, angry outbursts that may result in the damage of property, holding someone at knifepoint or gunpoint) should be taken as a sign of a serious problem. Behavior that is non-violent and illegal (like selling drugs or destroying property) should also be considered serious. Also, teenagers who violate the law when they are not with friends (for instance, shoplifting or vandalism when alone) are also signaling that they are headed for trouble.

What warning signs should I look for?

Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine, in their book *You & Your Adolescent*, describe the following warning signs. Some of the behaviors are normal, while others may signal a more serious problem.

"Normal" misbehavior.

Many teenagers engage in some misbehavior at some point during the teen years. Although virtually all teenagers engage in these behaviors, they still deserve your attention. Your teen should get the message from you that these behaviors are not appropriate.

- One or two minor, nonviolent violations of the law or school regulations
- Occasional arguing with parents and other adults
- Sexual activity in the context of love
- Leaving home for a day, or running away to a familiar home, once
- Skipping school or cutting class once
- Experimenting with alcohol or drugs



and Delinquency

Trouble signs.

These behaviors indicate that your teen has more serious problems. You should respond at once to these activities. Teenagers who engage in these behaviors may benefit from contact with a professional who works with teenagers on a regular basis.

- Repeated or premeditated violations of the law or school regulations, however petty
- Aggressive outbursts; contrariness for the sake of being contrary
- Sexual provocativeness
- Running away more than once in 3 months
- Skipping school more than once in 3 months
- Regular use of drugs or alcohol

Problem behavior.

Teenagers involved in these behaviors clearly need professional help.

- Any violent act or crime; solitary delinquent acts
- Arguments that lead to violence at home, suspension from school, getting fired from work, or contact with law enforcement agencies
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away to the streets
- Chronic absenteeism from school
- Drug dealing or addiction

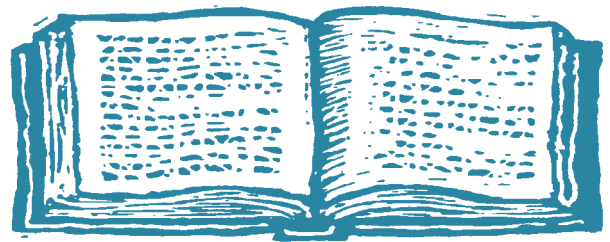
What can I do if my child is involved in problem behavior?

Communication is the key to dealing with acts that fall in the category of normal misbehavior. If you have not set clear standards with your adolescent, sit down and explain the standards and what you expect, along with the consequences for not meeting these standards. (Issue 10 of *Gateway* offers suggestions on building responsibility in teenagers.)

Misconduct that falls in the category of problem behavior calls for sensitive but swift attention. If talking with your adolescent is not enough in this case, professional help is your best option.

Suggested readings:

- Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*, by J. G. Dryfoos, (1990); New York: Oxford University Press.
- Your child's emotional health*, by the Philadelphia Child Guidance Center and Jack Maguire (1993); New York: Macmillan.



G A T E

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