

Raising Resilient Teens

RESILIENT re-sil-ient adj

: characterized or marked by resilience: as a : capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture b : tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change (source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Ever wonder why some teens seem to sail through the tumultuous teenage years while others buckle under the pressures? Obviously there are many factors, both inside the home and, increasingly, outside your walls, that play into how well teens fare. However, there is one common trait that successful and independent teens seem to share—a healthy dose of resilience.

What makes a resilient teen?

- Resilience is the ability to roll with life’s punches. Some seem to be blessed with more resilience—others need to work harder to develop this ability.
- Resilience is a skill that helps teens weather the high school years and will serve them well throughout their lives. And the good news is that resilience is something you can help your teen develop.
- Resilience is built from navigating life’s daily challenges such as increasingly complex schoolwork or difficulties with friends and family. It can also come from successfully tackling teenage milestones such as securing a part-time job or learning to drive.

Ways to encourage resilience ...in teens

Although they may look grown up, teens still need a lot of positive encouragement and guidance. The trick is finding ways to offer direction and to let them know you love them—without quashing their confidence and their desire to try things their own way. Obviously, each teen is an individual and what motivates one may not work for another. However, there are a few tried and true ways to help nurture your teens’ resilience and, subsequently, their independence. These include:

Allow teens to speak their minds and ask for what they need in non-aggressive ways. During the teen years, kids begin to think more critically—they see issues as gray as opposed to clearly black and white. They are also beginning to understand that their parents are less than perfect. This combination can lead teens to forcefully speak their minds or blame their parents when things don’t go the way they’d like.

Becoming a patient and neutral listener and trying not to buy into power struggles is key. This lets teens know that you value their opinion and the thought that has gone into it, but that you are not willing to communicate in a dramatic or abusive way. A shouting match with your teen will only widen the “generation gap” you both are experiencing. Your good example is one that they (hopefully) will take to heart and practice in their other daily communications.

Encourage teens to problem solve and make decisions. As parents, our first instinct is to protect our children from the less appealing parts of life and keep them from making unwise choices. However, as they get older we have less direct ability to steer teens’ lives. Teens want and need to make more of their decisions. This is how they forge their own identities. And when parents weigh in too heavily on issues that are less important (e.g., hair color, clothing styles) or that teens believe they have under control, conflicts are likely to arise. Allowing them freedom to make choices and mistakes lets them know that you trust in their abilities.

At the same time, you need to make it clear that if they abuse your trust or make unwise or unsafe decisions,

there can be real consequences (e.g., losing the right to drive the family car, loss of a job because he/she shows up late, inability to get into a preferred college because of poor grades). Also, make it clear that you are there to help if they ask or when you feel they are truly in over their heads.

Share real life struggles. A parent may lose a job, a sibling may struggle with disappointment, or friends may face health issues. People have problems; it is part of life. It is not a teen's responsibility to carry the family's burdens, but it is important not to hide those problems either. The example a family sets as it endures hard times is one of the most effective ways to teach a teen to weather a rocky spell.

Continue to set limits and provide supervision. Although it is important for families to find ways to gradually allow teens more freedom and responsibility, it is also important to continue to supervise their comings and goings and set limits (e.g. curfews, rules for Internet and cell phone usage, knowing that parents will chaperone the parties they attend).

The teen brain is a work in progress. Teens tend to act impulsively and take risks because they often lack the ability to understand the possible effects of dangerous or inconsiderate behavior. For this reason, there will be times when you will need to apply the brakes and help your teens see the implications of their decisions through your adult lens.

Let your teens know you love them for the unique people they are. Teens' lives are already filled with opportunities for self-doubt. A poor quiz grade, a lousy sports practice, or failing to get a part in the upcoming school play may seem like personal failure. That person in the mirror may not be the picture of perfection. Friends may turn their backs in a moment of need. In the big picture, such things may not be all that important, but to teens who are experiencing them for the first time, they can shake their self-confidence. In moments like these, teens need to know that their parents accept them for who they are.

Simple things go a long way. Tap into what interests your teens most and express a sincere interest in it. Ask about the movie they saw over the weekend or the songs that top their MP3 playlist. Although video game designer may not be the career you envisioned for your teen and Akon may not be your idea of a musician for the ages, asking teens about what excites them lets them know that you care about and love the unique people they are becoming.

Book and Web Guide

Books

“Out of the Woods: Tales of Resilient Teens” by Stuart T. Hauser, Joseph P. Allen, and Eve Golden. How and why a group of very troubled teenagers were able to turn their lives around as they entered adulthood.

“Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World” by Linda Goldman. Essential tools for parents, teachers, counselors, and others who are concerned about the psyches of children growing up in today's sometimes terrifying world.

“The Identity Trap: Saving Our Teens from Themselves” by Joseph Nowinski. Filled with inspiring real-life stories that get to the heart of why our teens so easily fall prey to their own worst impulses and to the destructive habits of their peers.

“Bouncing Back: Dealing With the Stuff Life Throws at You” by Jami Biles Jones. Brief stories and solutions to some of teens' lighter problems.

“Stressed-out Girls: Helping Them Thrive in the Age of Pressure” by Roni Cohen-Sandler. Anecdotes from 2,300 interviews with girls to help parents understand the unique, intense pressures their daughters face.

Web

Children, Teens, and Resiliency (<http://www.aap.org/stress/stressparent.htm>) The American Association of Pediatrics offers ways to reduce stress and bring balance back into a teen's life.

Helping your child cope with life (<http://www.aap.org/stress/resources.htm>) A listing of resources addressing specific life challenges facing teens.

TheInSite (<http://www.theinsite.org/>) Information, inspiration, and many possible game plans so teens can take positive charge of their lives.

Fostering Resiliency in Children and Youth: Four Basic Steps for Families, Educators, and Other Caring Adults (<http://www.ccsme.org/data/monographs/HendersonResiliencyAdolescents.pdf>) PDF of an article covering practical steps to promoting resiliency

Teen Health (<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=243&np=293&id=2198/>) An Australian health site offering teens common sense advice to build resiliency.

35 awesome stress management tools (<http://www.guidetohealthcareschools.com/tips-and-tools/stress-management>) An extensive list of university, interactive and multimedia, and general resources offering great advice to reduce stress—one of the major obstacles to remaining resilient.