

# Strengthening Attachment to Allow Teens Choice and Responsibility without Dangerous Behavior



Adolescence marks an exciting time full of growth and change in a child's life, but even with their growing desire for independence, they still need support and guidance from their parents. We know that the adolescent brain continues developing well into the mid-20's, with the parts of the brain that help with things like risk assessment, impulse control, and decision-making being the last to develop (Casey et al., 2008). On the other hand, the emotional, sensory, and reward-seeking parts develop first (Casey et al., 2008), making it natural for teens to have a strong urge to seek out new and exciting experiences without always thinking through the consequences (Konrad et al., 2013).

As a result of this brain development, some parenting strategies that work for younger children no longer work for teens (Yeager et al., 2018). Even though parents may not want to let go, attempting to manipulate or control their teens will push them away and undermine their need for closeness and

autonomy (Scharf & Goldner, 2018). Luckily, teens who have secure emotional attachments with their parents are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors and have better social skills and coping strategies (Moretti & Peled, 2004). No matter your teen's age, it's not too late to implement some strategies for improving your parenting skills and relationships. Start to strengthen attachment with your teens today with the following tips:

1. **Set firm limits and rules:** Being emotionally close with your teen does not mean you can't have rules and boundaries. In fact, children will feel safer in a relationship when they know there are high expectations, as well as love and trust (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). Don't be afraid to let them know what types of behaviors you do not approve of, but help them feel that they can feel safe asking for help if they mess up.
2. **Show your teen the same respect you expect:** When teens sense a threat to their growing autonomy through adults' attempts to control them, they tend to shut down and refuse to cooperate (Divecha, 2017). Make sure to talk openly with your teens, listen to their perspective, and respect their opinions and budding personality.
3. **Support them in safe exploration:** You can support your teens in activities that give them the thrilling experiences they seek with activities like rock climbing, mountain biking, amusement park rides, or other pro-social activities that utilize their talents while pushing them a little outside their comfort zone. Safe exploration can benefit youth by increasing their confidence and helping them develop independence (Kelley et al., 2006).
4. **Don't take their choices personally:** When your teen opts to make choices that you wouldn't make yourself, it can cause a lot of emotions, ranging from hurt to frustration to outright anger. However, being able to

regulate your own emotions will not only preserve your relationship with your teen, but also set a good example for them on the importance of coping with emotions (Hajal & Paley, 2020).

As you look for resources to be the best parent you can be, remember that you don't have to do it alone. If you are concerned about your teen's safety, looking for help from school administrators, teachers, counselors, family members, or other community resources can be helpful. Healthy relationships with strong attachments to positive role models is key. These healthy attachments provide teens with positive examples, safety, encouragement, access to resources, and new experiences that focus on safely gaining independence and responsibility (Davis & McQuillin, 2021). Start strengthening attachments with teens today with these tips and the following resources.

### **Additional Resources:**

- For free research-based workshops from Utah State University Extension, visit Healthy Relationships Utah: <https://extension.usu.edu/hru/>
- For more research-backed resources for parents/guardians and other relationships, visit Utah State University Extension's Relationships website: <https://extension.usu.edu/relationships/>
- For information on the EveryDay Strong program that focuses on patience and love in parent/teen relationships, visit: <https://unitedwayuc.org/our-work/everyday-strong/>

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