



Living with your Teenager

University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension

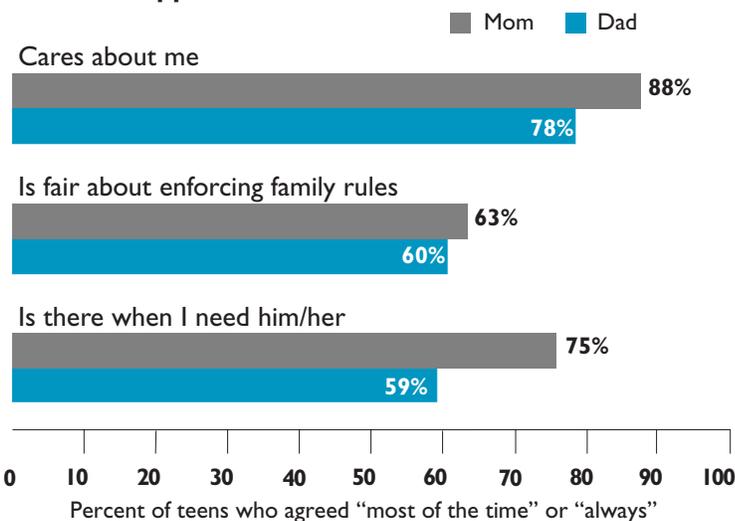
The changing parent-child relationship

Holding their newborn infant for the first time, many parents are overwhelmed by the child-rearing responsibilities that lie ahead.

Many parents believe they are solely responsible for how their children “turn out.” Parents are often led to think that if they do things “right,” they will raise “perfect” adults. With this kind of expectation and pressure, it’s little wonder that the normal struggles between parents and teens take on such enormous importance.

Teenage fads — teens’ taste in clothing or music, which is often strange to parents — may strike concerned parents as evidence they failed to raise their children properly. Whether it’s baggy clothes, long hair, punk rock or body piercing, these fads are all part of teens’ efforts to set themselves apart from their parents.

Parental support



Struggles between parents and teens are normal.

As the parent of a teenager or pre-teen, you may find it helps to realize that these normal struggles occur in every family. Once you know that, you can relax more and worry less about how your children are “turning out.” Chances are they will “turn out” just fine. And the rebellious teen now living in your home will grow up to be a responsible adult — just like you did.

In the early years of your children’s lives, you as parents are the most important figures in their world. **Your support** — in the form of assurances of love and caring — is critical to your child. Consequently, much of what your child does and says is aimed at maintaining that love and approval. As your children get older, they have more contact with other people who also influence their behavior and attitudes.

Still, parents remain central figures for most teens. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for teens as they grow to adulthood is establishing independence while maintaining a loving relationship with one’s parent(s). This struggle for **independence** only becomes a problem when teens or parents view this as a struggle for **control**.

In general, teens maintain close relationships with their parents throughout adolescence. University of Wisconsin-Madison and UW-Extension researchers surveyed more than 50,000 teens in 40 Wisconsin counties. According to 1989-94 Teen Assessment Project (TAP) data, the majority of adolescents perceived their parents as supportive and loving. And despite typical teen objections to family rules, most teens surveyed said they believed that their parents enforced family rules fairly.

N = 50,000 Wisconsin teens, 1989-94 Teen Assessment Project

Young children need parents to guide and control many aspects of their lives. As children grow, they need to gain a sense of mastery through independence. During adolescence, the need for independence intensifies. Teens assert their desires to try new experiences and make choices on their own.

Friendships also become particularly important for adolescents. As teens spend more time with friends and less time with parents, the importance of the family may seem to diminish. Parents may feel rejected or hurt by the behavior of their once obedient child, who may now challenge parental authority.

For adolescents, the struggle for **autonomy** — being able to think and act independently — can be quite stressful. While teens may behave in ways to assert their autonomy from the family, they still depend on parents for emotional support and stability.

It might help parents to know that teens worry about the parent-child relationship perhaps as much as parents do. According to TAP surveys, **one in three** teens (34 percent) report that they worry “quite a bit” or “very much” about their relationship with their parents.

Younger teens tend to worry more than older teens about how well they are getting along with their parents. This is not surprising, given that the tension between autonomy and parental control is greatest during early adolescence.

A matter of timing: Life changes for teens and parents alike.

Among professionals who work with parents and teens, there’s a growing belief that the stresses and problems of mid-life parents influence the quality of the parent-teen relationship. As one father put it, the parent-teen relationship comes “at a most inconvenient time.” This father was all too aware that the parent of a teenage child is likely to be entering the middle-age years. These years are often accompanied by extreme unrest, discontent, change and self-evaluation.

Upon entering middle age, many adults start asking themselves what they have done so far and what they want to do next. Some may be depressed by a sense that they have not achieved all they had hoped to, either personally or professionally. Others may be anxious about the fact that their children are growing up and leaving home, and they face the question “Now what?”

The parent-teen relationship comes “at a most inconvenient time.”

In these situations, a rebellious teen undoubtedly adds to the parents’ feelings of uncertainty about themselves. Parents may view problems with their children as another indication of failure in their own lives. After all, they think, a “good” parent would not be having this struggle with his or her child.

Getting along with parents: Teens who worry “quite a bit” or “very much”



0 10 20 30 40 50 Percent N = 50,000 Wisconsin teens, 1989-94 Teen Assessment Project

For some middle-aged parents, the fact that their children are soon-to-be adults may be an unpleasant reminder that they, too, are aging. These middle-aged parents, then, may try to keep their children “child-like” despite the fact that their children are getting older and more independent. For some parents, what they will do with their lives after the children have left the nest looms as a major uncertainty.

Are you listening?

A common complaint from teens is that parents “want me to be the way **they** want me to be.” In other words, many parents have in mind a certain career, a certain appearance, or a special college or training for their child. They envision a certain young adult that they expect their teen to become.

The farmer whose son wants to sell insurance rather than taking over the farm, the lawyer whose child hopes to be a carpenter instead of joining the firm, the mother whose daughter is more interested in marine biology than in boyfriends — these parents feel varying amounts of disappointment, and sometimes anger, because their children fail to live up to their expectations.

Listening to teens can help them feel that their opinions and aspirations matter. It’s common for teens to be unsure of what career or educational path they might take. Support from parents can help teens sort through these tough decisions.

Fortunately, many teens talk with their parents about their plans for the future. According to the Wisconsin TAP data, half (50 percent) of teens surveyed reported they frequently discuss job or education plans with their mothers. A little more than one in three (38 percent) do this with their fathers.

And teens tell us they would like to talk more. One in five teens said they would like to discuss their education or career plans **more frequently** with a parent (22 percent with their father and 20 percent with their mother).

Accepting teens as **individuals** — who will have to make their own decisions about how to be an adult in the world — can be extremely trying for parents. But the healthy teen will grow up and do just that. Parents who reject their child for failing to follow their plans for that child — or parents who reject their child’s life choices — may find themselves painfully alienated from this person they care so much for.

Easing the transition to adulthood

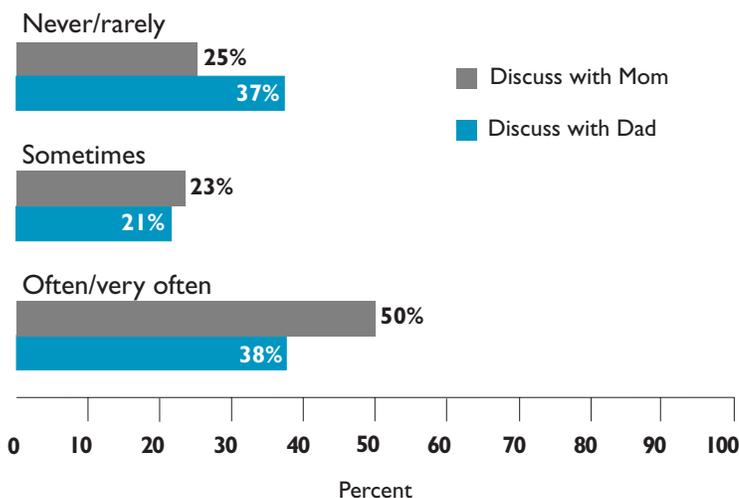
How can you as a parent maintain a healthy and loving relationship with your teen?

First, it helps if you recognize that teenagers **must** become independent in order to become adults — just as they had to learn to walk and talk to grow from infancy to childhood. The first toddling steps away from the parent and the first “No, I won’t” are the beginnings of **growth toward independence** — the task of every healthy child. This task can be completed only when the child learns to function independently from parents.

If becoming independent is the child’s task, then the parents’ task must be to help their children reach independence by allowing them to:

- ✍ Walk (and fall).
- ✍ Make choices (and make mistakes).
- ✍ Take charge of their own lives, gradually.

Teens who discuss job or education plans



Parents can help their children learn to become responsible, independent adults by giving them opportunities to make decisions.

Children who have a close relationship with parents and are allowed to make decisions with parental guidance learn how to make wise choices and judgments about their behavior — even when adults are not present. **By including teens in appropriate decision making**, parents can help their children learn how to make reasoned decisions, and thus become responsible and independent adults.

For example, allow your child to choose his or her own clothes — within boundaries you both decide are acceptable. What your teen chooses to wear might not be your preference, but it is an important part of independent self-expression and learning to make decisions.

Compared with older teens, younger teens need more guidance in decision making. They are less capable of understanding and foreseeing how their behaviors can affect themselves and others. Consequently, younger teens need parental guidance when it comes to such things as curfew, dating rules, or where and with whom they socialize.

Older teens are better able to weigh and understand the possible consequences of their behaviors, and so are better able to make decisions that can affect their life and future.

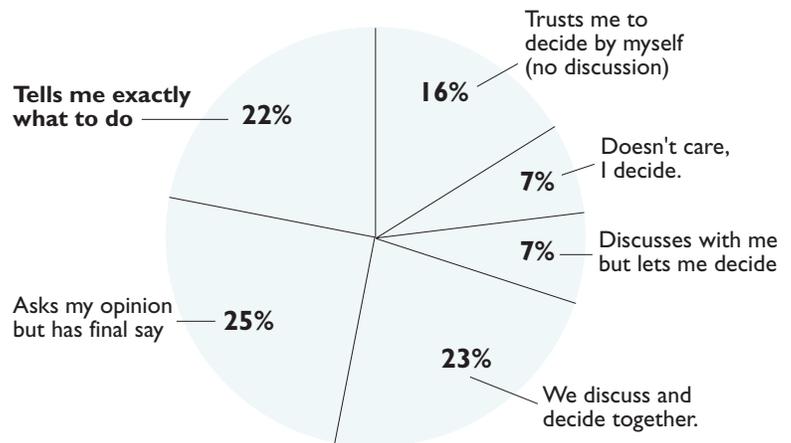
How does your family make decisions?

To find out how many Wisconsin teens are given the opportunity to make decisions with their parents' guidance, we asked them: "In general, how are most important decisions made between you and your mother/father or other adult female/male at home?"

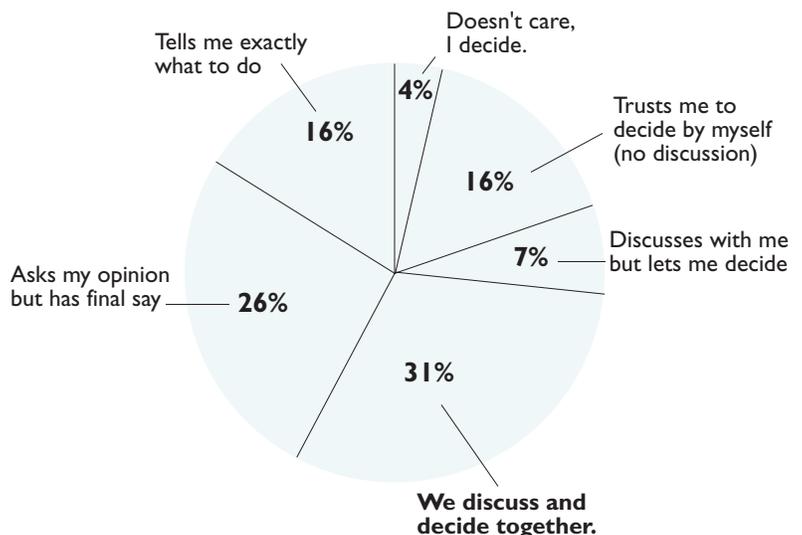
TAP surveys revealed that the majority of Wisconsin teens are involved with their parents in decision making. Greater than half of Wisconsin teens have parents who use a **democratic parenting style**. These parents are inclined to discuss with their adolescents issues that affect their lives, and consider their teens' opinions in the decision making process.

Decision making

Father



Mother



N = 50,000 Wisconsin teenagers, 1989-94
Teen Assessment Project

Teens reported that 55 percent of fathers and 64 percent of mothers solicit their opinions when making important decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lives. Examples include setting rules for dating and curfews. About one in four teens have parents who, in most cases, acknowledge the teenager's opinions but maintain the final say in the decision made.

Wisconsin adolescents tell us that mothers are slightly more likely than fathers to discuss an issue and come to a mutual decision with their teen (31 percent of mothers versus 23 percent of fathers). In contrast, fathers are slightly more likely to take an authoritarian approach to decision making. That is, they are more likely to tell their son or daughter exactly what to do, without discussion (22 percent of fathers versus 16 percent of mothers).

At the other end of the spectrum, a minority of teens reported that they receive little guidance from their parents in making important decisions. Fortunately, teens allowed to "decide on their own" tend to be older (11th and 12th graders). Parents of these adolescents may feel confident in their teen's ability to make sound, important decisions.

Remember, however, that while older teens may not appear to need parental guidance, having parents available to discuss important issues can be reassuring and

comforting. Open communication provides an avenue for sharing parental wisdom and offering support as adolescents pass through the threshold from childhood to adulthood.

The changing parent-child relationship is bound to cause some stresses in all families. Time goes forward, however, and the teenager will grow to adulthood with or without parental approval.

Despite some challenging moments with teens, in most families youngsters grow through adolescence without serious problems to become mature and responsible adults. They "turn out" just fine.

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Living with your teenager

Does your teenager baffle you? These fact sheets are designed to give parents some basic information about changes and pressures during the teen years, and what teens say they worry about. This can help you maintain communication and a tolerant attitude during what might be a turbulent time. Drawn from 1989-96 Teen Assessment Project data, from surveys of more than 50,000 Wisconsin teenagers. Available from your county or area extension office, or the address below.

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