

HOW TO *reach* TEEN BOYS

Raising teens can be tricky, and teen boys even trickier – perhaps specially so for single mothers. Psychologist and parenting expert Megan de Beyer (and mother of two lovely grown-up sons!) gives us a few pointers (specifically about boys, but there are plenty of insights into teen girls, too).

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By **Megan de Beyer**

**D**uring therapy sessions, I've often encountered sulky, withdrawn teens, and seen the frustrated or embarrassed reaction of the parents. But I was recently on holiday with a group of families, and it was interesting to see these interactions 'in the wild'. (No wonder people are wary of being around psychologists!)

One of the families had a son who yo-yoed between positive social behaviour and total withdrawal behind headphones or shut doors. He was surly, rude and blind to anyone else's needs. Then suddenly he'd engage in a really fun way and be very kind to his parents, who were exasperated, frustrated or grateful, depending on his mood.

A divorced dad, desperate to please his son, seldom set boundaries or insisted on good manners, leaving other adults to be 'bad cop'.

The other set of parents were very clear about boundaries, expecting decent behaviour from their sons.

These various behaviours underlined what I always tell my patients: if parents aren't comfortable in their own skins and are unclear about their roles, they resort to being the cool mum or dad in a desperate effort to get the teen to like them. My question is, at what cost? Seeking approval from your teen tips the power balance. Teens subconsciously (and sometimes consciously) sense the lack of clarity in a weak parent, and claim their 'power' over the parent very easily. The problem with this is that although they instantly feel big and bold, they haven't had to go through the struggle to find their own competency. And this very struggle against hierarchies is essential for real maturing to happen. Earning respect and status – as opposed to being handed it on a plate by a floppy parent – is what helps teens discover their place in the world.

## It's also about you...

By the time our sons reach adolescence, we need to be adults ourselves, otherwise we'll be crushed by the stampeding teen. By midlife, we should have the self-awareness, clarity and moral compass of a mature adult. Yet, judging by my holiday experiences, too many parents are still full of teen ego and arrogance themselves, or are too insecure to parent appropriately – or are too strict.

We don't stand a chance of reaching our sons and raising them into maturity unless we are very clear about our own values. We need to have reflected on some of the big questions about what constitutes a good and meaningful life. That doesn't mean we have all the answers, but we should at least have some of them. And values are 'caught', not 'taught'. We need to be a clear example of the type of person we'd like our sons to be. Parents who try to teach

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consideration, responsibility and gratitude with lectures but don't demonstrate these qualities themselves won't pass on these values, which are critical in the development of a moral compass.

Intrinsic values are those we act on and believe in because that is who we are, and extrinsic values are those we act on to fit in and to please others. We need to be honest about our internal drivers. Are we doing something because we believe in it, or because we're trying to please others?

Our values and style of parenting will have been deeply influenced by our own upbringing and the era we were born into, so we need to be aware of our personal dynamics. There's no such thing as the perfect home, the ideal mother or the perfect teen. We need to be who we are. An empowered mother remains open and loving to her son – and engaged with her own life. Your own talents and interests are important, because when a son admires his parent, the process becomes easier. Plus, the more confident we are of ourselves and our own personal and family values, the more capable we are of allowing our sons to experiment with their own.

## Embrace the change!

Although it may appear to be all about moods and contrived sulkiness, adolescence is the time of greatest change in the human lifespan. Testosterone peaks, catapulting your son's body into dynamic physical and neurological change as it surges towards manhood. This impacts on him psychologically, socially and emotionally, urging him to assert control over his own life. His entire worldview, identity and personality shift. At no other time will a boy feel so vulnerable and confused, yet so powerful and confident. His desire for independence and space is unleashed, but with no manual on how to get it. The goal is to become a successful adult, but he doesn't have the benefit of experience. He needs to explore the options and discover, by trial and error, his place among men and women.

Boys want independence. If we encourage this, we're going with the tide, not against it. He needs reassurance and guidance, but we need to offer this within a two-way conversation, not through top-down instructions. Be firm but fair. Many of us think we know what's best and that



Megan with her sons, Jo (left) and James Bailes.

all our sons have to do is listen. We forget the first step: to build a good relationship – one that's respectful and curious about his process, that sees things through his eyes and discovers what's meaningful to him.

Expect to be challenged and criticised; expect bad moods and backchat. But there doesn't have to be constant conflict. If a boy is raised in an environment where topics are discussed in a non-judgemental way, and he's allowed to ask questions, have an opinion, share feelings (even anger, in a healthy way), he'll feel safe to show who he is. There's always room for you to 'pull rank' when he is disrespectful. Teens need clear boundaries, but they'll respond quickly and accept lessons if you approach them with openness and respect, and collaborate and negotiate with them.

## The mother 'load'

Testosterone has hit and, as women, that means we're often ill-equipped to guide and direct our son's desire for the male world. During their teens, our sons develop a 'boy code' and a 'buddy system' that help them navigate this world. A code of silence and loyalty are important tools of male bonding. Sometimes their newfound macho behaviour is directed at us, and this can be tricky. As mothers, we often assume that our self-sacrifice and constant giving is what good nurturing is all about, not realising that our son unconsciously experiences this as weakness. He is compelled to follow the pack and the unspoken rules of being a man. Being dependent on you means he's weak (according to the male pack), so he'll often flex his muscles around you in an attempt to prove his independence. If you don't hold him accountable for his behaviour at this stage; if you protect his ego by diminishing yourself or apologising for

your opinions and your needs, you're perpetuating the patriarchal system – raising your son to dominate women. You don't need to be strict and distant, but you should be clear about your values and position in the world.

Single mums sometimes find that as their son grows up, he takes on the role of 'man of the house', and they're initially delighted by this kindness and authority. But the potential problem is enmeshment, where neither the mother nor the son sees any fault in the other. I've heard mothers say, 'He's the perfect man.' Enmeshment hampers your son's development into his sexuality and healthy intimacy: you hold his heart, so there's no room for him to discover the good, bad and ugly of young romantic love for himself. Single mums should look for good male role models and encourage these relationships, because boys learn about the world of men through other men.

Most of us still try to parent our teens the way we did when they were little, and this is at the heart of many of the difficulties we run into. Our teen starts saying, 'You don't understand', 'I'm not a child', 'I can do this', 'Don't treat me like a baby'. My eldest son told me to 'get a life!' when I thought I was being the good mum, following up on his school commitments. Suddenly we're not being asked to help anymore, but we want to, because it gives us a sense of involvement. A mother naturally moves in the direction of her child, but a teen naturally moves away. Your boy's energy is with his friends and his interests... perhaps more towards his dad, but often not towards you. Your son is pushing for a new position with you – one that is more equal and separate. He's trying to make space for his masculinity, and the first step is to push against the feminine that he has cleaved to for so long. In *The Invisible Presence*, Michael Gurian tells us that a mother who doesn't let go, and who needs to be in the prime position in her son's life, hinders his development into a mature male.

Many of us feel the loss of our son acutely as he begins this process of pulling away, and we don't expect that deep feeling of loss. Sometimes we look for ways to be useful, needed, to engage, help, fix and stay connected. It can be hard not to feel rejected and to take it personally. But our sons need to find themselves by moving out of our world. It doesn't mean they love us less. Soon he'll return as a grown-up, and then a true friendship can develop – one that respects differences and another's opinions. You need to accept that you'll continue to have a powerful influence on your son's life whether you are in his presence or not. Choose to make it one of beauty, grace, integrity, maturity and wisdom.

We should also be very aware, at this stage, of our own response to masculinity. If you unconsciously dislike the masculine – you may have had poor male role models or been the victim of male dominance and aggression – you can become fearful or resentful of males. In this case, you

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may be overly critical, or overreact to your son's sudden hypermasculinity by encouraging him to show only his soft side. This is confusing for him. Some mothers run down their son's father, which makes him embarrassed about his own growth into masculinity.

## Don't take it personally

Reaching a teen who's withdrawn is tough. Understand that he isn't intentionally trying to hurt you. He is

assaulted by changing feelings, thoughts and motives that he isn't clear about. Unpleasant for you, but a necessary phase. He's struggling with his ego, his identity and the world around him in an effort to learn how to be mature. Because he's asserting himself and trying to be less dependent on you, clashes increase. Stick to your values and boundaries where appropriate, but don't take it personally.

Reaching out to engage, love, nurture and help is what creates and sustains a relationship. Yet our craving for the happy while avoiding the hurtful, the dark and the painful, detracts from true loving. Although the act of reaching out is not negative in itself, focus on the attitude that accompanies it. Are we reaching out from a place of regard and love, or from a place that is needy and manipulative?

## The last word

If you are open to developing yourself and your own self-confidence, your teen will respect you. Trust that you have laid a solid foundation and let go of your need to teach, enforce rules or hold on. We need to take our eyes off the chores, the duties, tidiness and cleanliness; your own precious values and desired character traits may not be his. Get to know your teen and the world he is in.

Encourage his decision-making skills and enable him to develop his moral compass. If he is doing things only to please adults or friends, he'll never develop intrinsic values. He naturally wants to fit in, and friends become all-important. This doesn't mean the influence of a good home disappears, but the most important aspect is his internal voice.

You aren't going to encourage this through rigid strictness. If you're supportive and encourage his need to make more decisions, and help him solve conflicts, you raise the kind of adult you want him to be. Keep asking questions like, 'What do you think? What would you like to do? Does this make you feel proud? Do you feel good about your actions? Do you think this is the right decision? What do you think the consequences will be, and can you live with them?' In other words, show him that you respect his position, rather than try to enforce your own. ❀

Megan's book on parenting teen boys will be published next year. For more information about the book as well as her parenting courses, go to [megandebeyer.co.uk](http://megandebeyer.co.uk).