

'Parenting a teenager can be down to tone of voice'

A LEADING expert in the mental health of teens urges parents not to 'catastrophise' life as the parent of a teenager.

Dr Hayley van Zwanenberg, adolescent psychiatrist at the Priory's Wellbeing Centre in Oxford, said that often parents dread the teenage years before they even start 'because of the associated stereotypes with challenging behaviour, sharing their worst fears with friends and family, saying; 'Oh no, he'll/she'll soon be a teenager, how will I cope with the terrible teens?'

She said: "What they forget is the fact that children, by hearing those comments, can end up simply fulfilling those expectations.

"One way of keeping channels of communication open is to ensure your teenager has time to engage in activities they really enjoy and for you as parents to take a supportive interest in those activities too.

"Unsurprisingly, teenagers with a strong bond with their parents find it easier to open up about how they are feeling."

She continued: "What is critical is that when they talk to you about anything, listen to them, put your phone down, turn the ring tone off, or shut your screen away, and show them that what they say is important to you – even if they don't replicate that behaviour in return. Validate them as much as possible."

Dr van Zwanenberg said her most important advice for parents is to keep the channels of communication open at all times.

She explained: "Talking is vital but



Dr Hayley van Zwanenberg
Adolescent psychiatrist at the Priory's Wellbeing Centre in Oxford

this can be so much easier if you already have a strong relationship with your child. Teenagers, going through many brain and other biological changes, navigate many complex scenarios and emotions and if they don't have the resources,

maybe because you have intervened too often and not enabled them to resolve some of their primary school issues themselves, or not listened to them closely enough before, the situation can become challenging for parents too because you are excluded or the target of their frustration."

Recent research shows that parents who struggle to talk to their teens are not alone. Sometimes it can be as simple as tone of voice.

A study carried out at Cardiff University in September among 1,000 14- to 15-year-olds, focusing on parental 'tone of voice', showed that mothers wanting to persuade teenagers to co-operate got better results when they sounded 'supportive' rather than when they applied pressure. A 'controlling tone of voice' was more likely to start an argument than get a positive response.

Dr van Zwanenberg said: "Developing a strong bond and open communication channels with your child early on can make talking about difficult topics, such as concerns about mental health issues, much easier down the line."

She added: "Parents may find it helpful to discuss real-life situations with their teenager, such as family friends that have suffered from mental health issues in the past but have since received help and recovered. This can help young people to see that things can get better and that situations change.

The important message to get across is that mental health issues are common but treatable."

What should a parent do if their child won't open up?

"Let them know that there are other ways to communicate with you, such as text or email. If they still don't want to talk to you, encourage them to speak with an adult they trust.

"If you continue to feel worried about them, make sure they're aware of confidential helplines they can use to speak to someone who may be better equipped to offer help and guidance to their problems.

"Make sure that you stay calm. Choose a time to talk to them when you are calm, not tired, and free to talk. Talk when you are walking somewhere or have a 'sideways' conversation when you are in the car."

She continued: "Remember that it can be normal for a teenager to not listen to you and sometimes they have to learn from their own mistakes. But you can still listen to them and this in itself will be productive.

"Comments such as 'I can understand why you felt that way, or I see why you reacted that way' do not mean you approve but do make them feel understood. You can then go on to say, 'if it happens again you could consider...' and give examples of other options.

"Remember that young people tend to live up to expectations, if they are told 'I knew you wouldn't work hard enough', they probably won't."

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Harry Enfield playing his infamous comic creation Kevin The Teenager. But what is it really like raising a teen? Picture: PA Photo/Handout