



Talking to your son or
daughter about mental
health and well-being.

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The National Centre for Youth Mental Health

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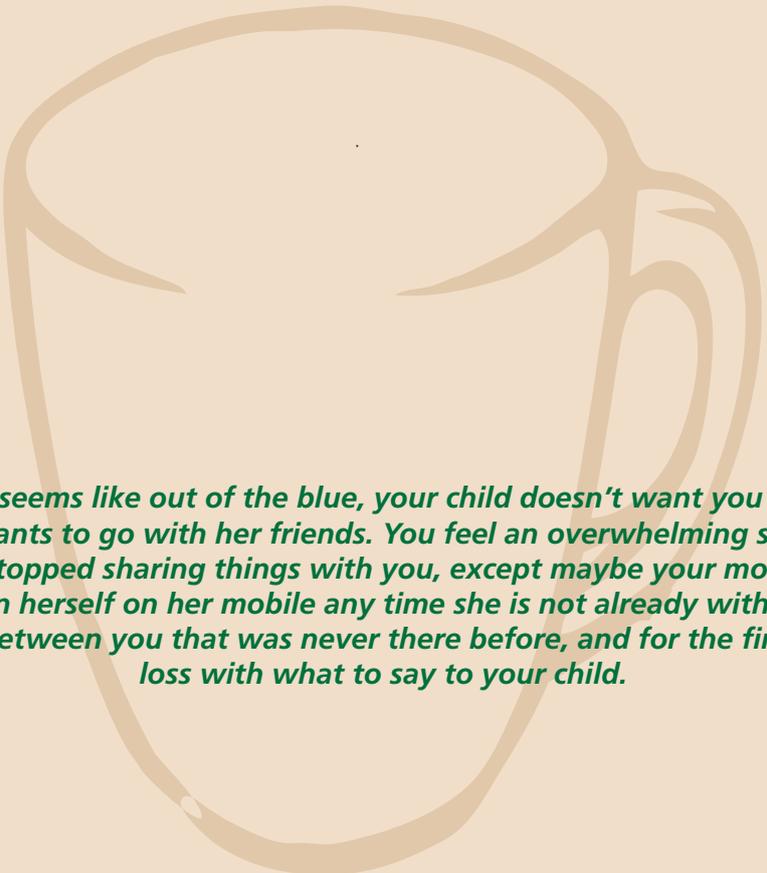
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Growing up – and away!

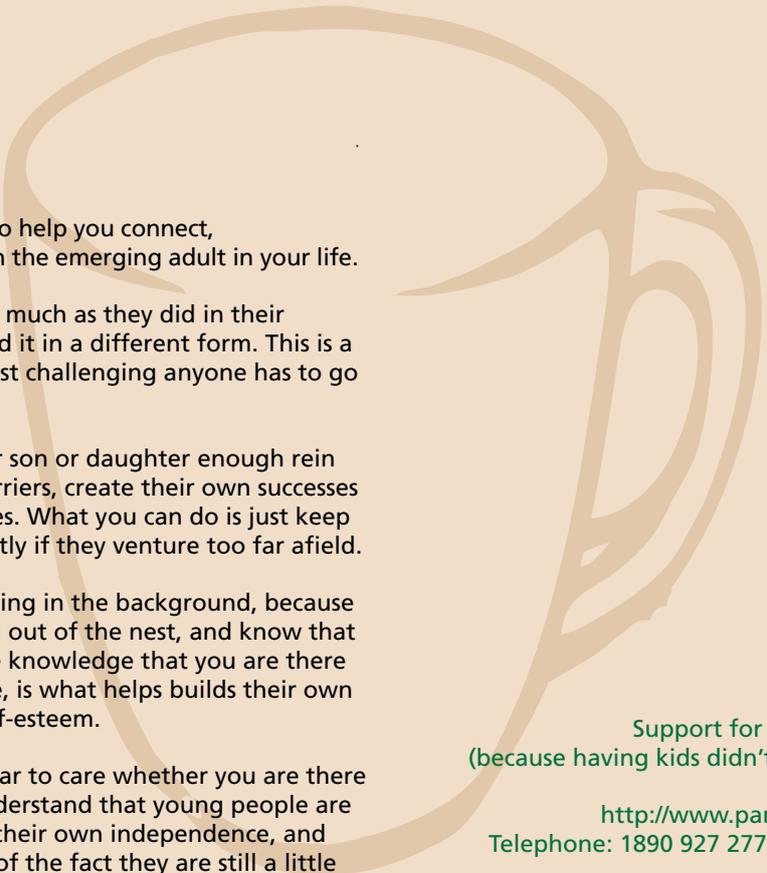


One day, from what seems like out of the blue, your child doesn't want you to go shopping with her anymore, she wants to go with her friends. You feel an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss because she's stopped sharing things with you, except maybe your money, which she uses to constantly position herself on her mobile any time she is not already with her friends. You feel a sense of distance between you that was never there before, and for the first time, you feel at a loss with what to say to your child.

It is common knowledge that the transition period from adolescence through to adulthood can often be a bumpy one. The emotional experiences that teenagers can go through can affect their well-being in ways that can require a lot of support. Working to understand these emotions and their chosen ways of coping can help move you out of the firing line and into a more effective supportive role. If adolescence is new territory for you as a parent, then being prepared to learn and grow alongside your son or daughter will be half the battle!

What follows are some scenarios to help parents understand what their teenager might be going through, along with some helpful tips and advice on supporting them in this rollercoaster phase...

The opening paragraph is a glib but familiar glimpse into the experiences of some parents whose children are moving into adulthood. It is totally natural for a young adolescent to begin to tentatively cast his or her net further afield to see what lies beyond the cosy confines of the haven you have built for them. This can leave you, the parent, feeling rejected and isolated from a world in which you were involved from day one. It can take some time to adjust into this new scenario, but above all, just know you are not the first to feel like this, and you will certainly not be the last.



What follows are some tips to help you connect, understand and identify with the emerging adult in your life.

- They need your support as much as they did in their younger years, but they need it in a different form. This is a period that is one of the most challenging anyone has to go through in their lives.
- It is important to give your son or daughter enough rein to explore, hit their own barriers, create their own successes and make their own mistakes. What you can do is just keep enough of a grip to tug gently if they venture too far afield.
- Keep a steady presence going in the background, because they will need to pop in and out of the nest, and know that it is acceptable to do so. The knowledge that you are there for them, come rain or shine, is what helps build their own confidence, courage and self-esteem.
- They may not always appear to care whether you are there or not, but parents must understand that young people are just beginning to carve out their own independence, and don't want to be reminded of the fact they are still a little dependent on you.

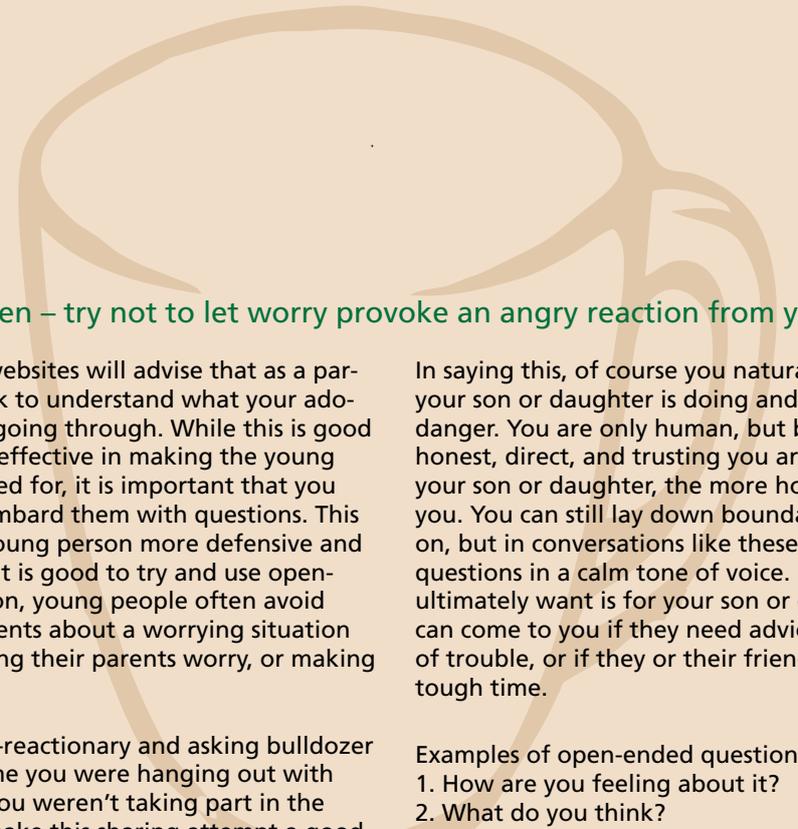
Support for Parents
(because having kids didn't come with a manual)

<http://www.parentline.ie/>
Telephone: 1890 927 277 - info@parentline.ie

Take some time to connect

Resilience is an important protective factor for a young person's well-being and it is something that has been written about a lot. It has been found that the most powerful resilience-promoting factor is the attitude and behaviour of parents - trying to keep the child at the centre of your parenting, (*a parenting style that takes into account the thoughts and feelings of your child*).

Sometimes families need to slow down just a little and start to listen to each other again. This is not always easy in a society as fast paced as ours, but it is important to try to connect with each other every now and then. If families learn to speak to each other about thoughts and feelings early on, it will make it that bit easier for young people to speak to their parents about these issues when they get older. This is especially true if they feel you are a reasonable listener, e.g. don't fly off the handle (albeit with worry) any time they confide in you about something difficult to hear as a parent such as alcohol or drugs issues.



Listen – try not to let worry provoke an angry reaction from you!

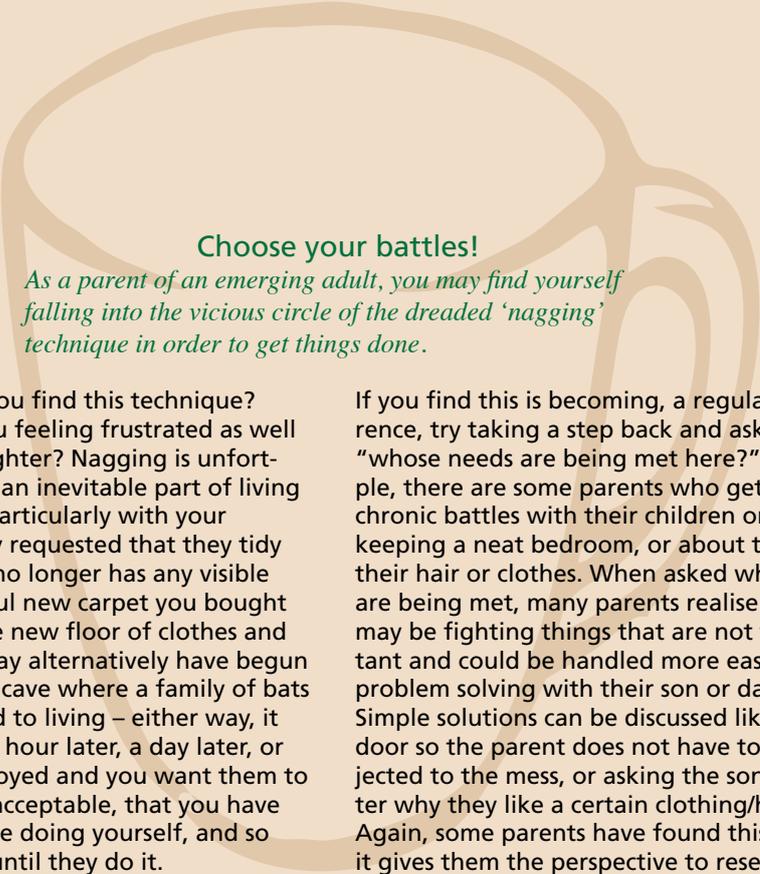
Lots of professionals and websites will advise that as a parent you should try and seek to understand what your adolescent is both saying and going through. While this is good advice, and indeed can be effective in making the young person feel valued and cared for, it is important that you don't steam-roll in and bombard them with questions. This might serve to make the young person more defensive and reserved in what they say. It is good to try and use open-ended questions. In addition, young people often avoid talking openly to their parents about a worrying situation in their lives to avoid causing their parents worry, or making them angry or anxious.

Getting over-anxious, over-reactionary and asking bulldozer questions like "Don't tell me you were hanging out with him?", or "Please tell me you weren't taking part in the ditch-drinking?" will not make this sharing attempt a good experience for the young person and will only ensure they will think twice about opening up to you again.

In saying this, of course you naturally need to find out what your son or daughter is doing and that they are not in any danger. You are only human, but be aware that the more honest, direct, and trusting you are when speaking with your son or daughter, the more honestly they will talk to you. You can still lay down boundaries, time-limits and so on, but in conversations like these, try to use open-ended questions in a calm tone of voice. Be aware that what you ultimately want is for your son or daughter to feel that they can come to you if they need advice, if they are in some sort of trouble, or if they or their friends are going through a tough time.

Examples of open-ended questions are:

1. How are you feeling about it?
2. What do you think?
3. What do you think would make it better?
4. What do you think we can do here?



Choose your battles!

As a parent of an emerging adult, you may find yourself falling into the vicious circle of the dreaded 'nagging' technique in order to get things done.

How effective do you find this technique? Does it result in you feeling frustrated as well as your son or daughter? Nagging is unfortunately sometimes an inevitable part of living with anyone, but particularly with your children. You nicely requested that they tidy their room, which no longer has any visible part of the beautiful new carpet you bought for it, thanks to the new floor of clothes and CDs all over it. It may alternatively have begun to resemble a dark cave where a family of bats may be more suited to living – either way, it is still not tidied an hour later, a day later, or more... you're annoyed and you want them to know that it's not acceptable, that you have enough things to be doing yourself, and so you keep at them until they do it.

If you find this is becoming, a regular occurrence, try taking a step back and ask yourself "whose needs are being met here?". For example, there are some parents who get locked into chronic battles with their children on issues like keeping a neat bedroom, or about the style of their hair or clothes. When asked whose needs are being met, many parents realise that they may be fighting things that are not that important and could be handled more easily through problem solving with their son or daughter. Simple solutions can be discussed like closing the door so the parent does not have to be subjected to the mess, or asking the son or daughter why they like a certain clothing/hair-style. Again, some parents have found this freeing and it gives them the perspective to reserve the "big guns" for the real issues.

Challenges that every young person faces...

A young person growing up might start to worry that their face looks funny, and become slightly obsessed with the fact that they think their nose is too big, or their eyes are too close together, or spots start to form on what they now believe used to be perfect skin.

As an adult, it is easy to forget just how stressful these issues are when you are in the midst of your development and your self-image swings like a pendulum. Young people are assaulted with images in the media that document the so-called 'beautiful people', listing the clothes they wear and the make-up they use, suggesting to the vulnerable reader that you too can look like Angelina Jolie with a dab of this lip-liner or David Beckham with this hair gel. Wrapped up in that however is the implicit suggestion that it is not ok to be yourself, to look like yourself, and to act like yourself. Of course it is quite usual that young people might rebel against what is considered as 'conformity' to these ideals, and turn their hair blue instead. Either way, it is important to allow your son or daughter some freedom of expression around developing their own individuality, but be careful to monitor any excessive anxiety and attention about body-image and appearance.

Bodywhys (The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland)

Helpline: 1890 200 444

Email: alex@bodywhys.ie

<http://www.bodywhys.ie>

A Guide to Adolescent Mental Health

This helpful guide can be found on the following site:
<http://www.mentalhealthcare.org.uk/>



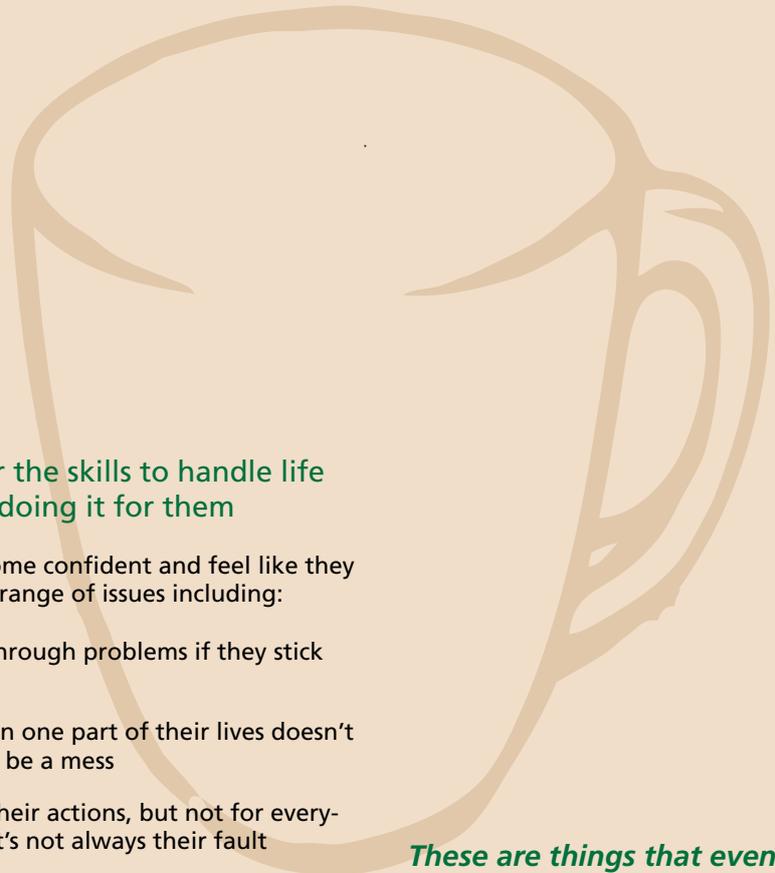
What is Self-esteem?

Self-esteem is the way we feel about ourselves. Young people who feel good about themselves are usually healthier, have good social skills, are able to develop positive relationships and generally deal well with some of the challenges that occur during adolescent development. Self-esteem grows when young people feel valued by the people around them, particularly their parents, teachers and friends.

More than anything else, young people want to be listened to, trusted and respected. Sound familiar? It's not that big an ask and it's something we all look for.

We acquire the beliefs and attitudes we have about ourselves early in life, but our need to feel good about ourselves is with us forever. Fostering healthy self-esteem in our young people is probably the most important task as parents. To grow up feeling 'good about yourself' is probably one of the best buffers against the adversities that life throws at us.





Give your teenager the skills to handle life rather than doing it for them

Young people need to become confident and feel like they themselves can deal with a range of issues including:

- Knowing they can work through problems if they stick with it
- Knowing that a problem in one part of their lives doesn't mean their whole life will be a mess
- Taking responsibility for their actions, but not for everything that goes wrong – it's not always their fault
- Remembering to take responsibility for what goes right

These are things that even adults sometimes need to be reminded about...



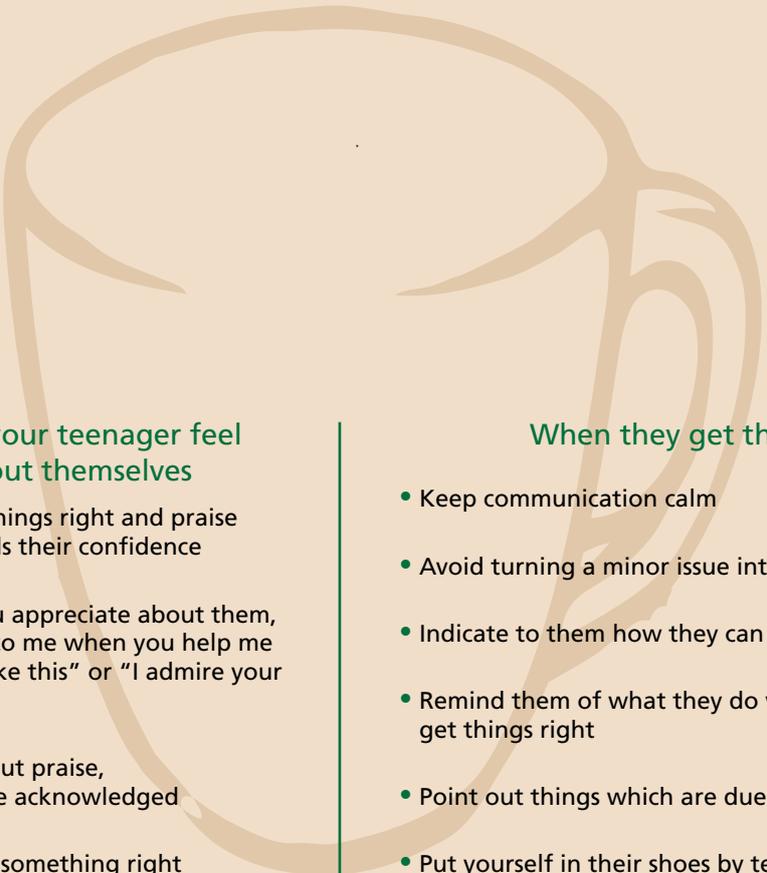
Acknowledge their Achievements and Accentuate the Positives

Young people are frequently bombarded by negative images and portrayals of themselves in the media, in school and sometimes at home. In building the confidence and self-esteem of young people, it's critical to acknowledge their strengths and achievements.

This could simply be praising the talents they have in a sport or at music, or recognising if they did well in a school class exam. It doesn't always have to be something big, in fact being recognised for their small achievements will build their confidence and encourage them to continue making an effort and take on bigger challenges in the future.

Most parents want to reassure their teenager that they love them. However, many teenagers with low self-esteem need to know they are worthy of love and have done something worthwhile. Sometimes we unintentionally block or think we are 'protecting' young people from the challenges or opportunities that enable them to show what they can do or cope with.

Everyone feels better when they know they have something to contribute. Encourage your teenager to make more of their own decisions. Give them challenges, the freedom to make choices, the opportunity to experience independence and the chance to savour small successes that add up to big ones. These will need to be based on what's appropriate for your teenager's age and level of maturity.



How to help your teenager feel better about themselves

- Tell them when they get things right and praise them accordingly – it builds their confidence
- Be specific about what you appreciate about them, e.g. “It really means a lot to me when you help me out with the housework like this” or “I admire your determination”
- Don’t make a big deal about praise, but ensure good things are acknowledged
- When your teenager does something right don’t take the credit away from them

When they get things wrong...

- Keep communication calm
- Avoid turning a minor issue into a major disaster
- Indicate to them how they can make amends
- Remind them of what they do well and when they get things right
- Point out things which are due to no fault of their own
- Put yourself in their shoes by telling them about when you ‘messed up’ and how you dealt with it



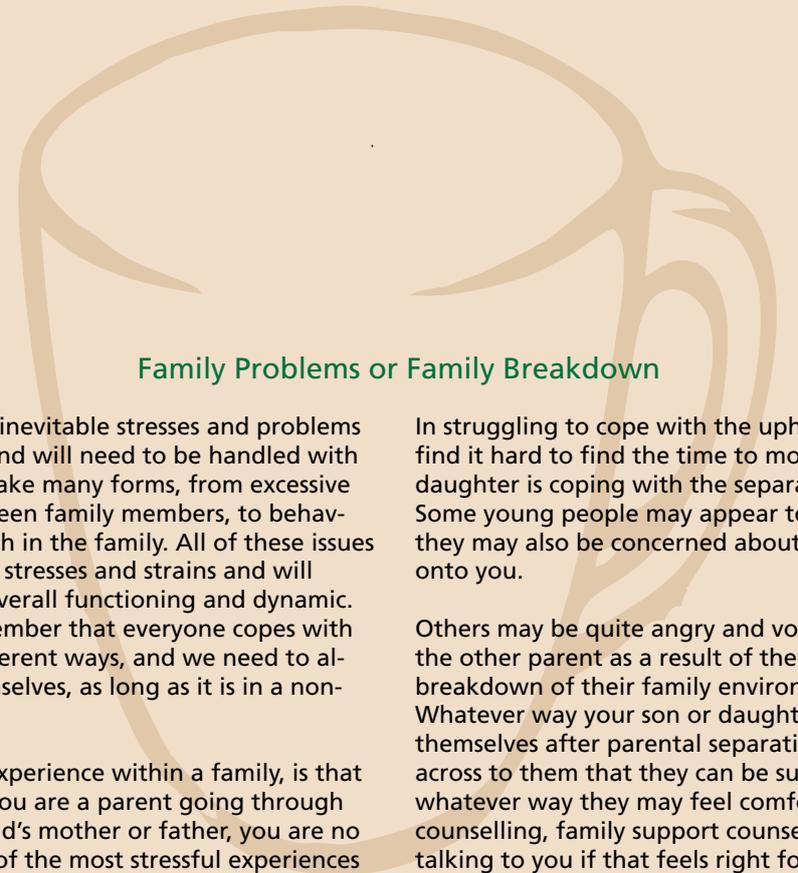
Some basic do's and don'ts...

Your teenagers self-esteem isn't being helped by:

- Being compared to their siblings, other relatives, other kids or you as a teenager
- Constant nagging, lecturing or moralising
- Being put down (negative statements about poor academic performance etc.)
- Being flippantly dismissed or ignored

Foster your teenagers self-esteem by:

- Listening to them
- Trusting them
- Respecting them
- Well timed words and actions which say:
"You are a capable and competent person:
your assets and strengths show"



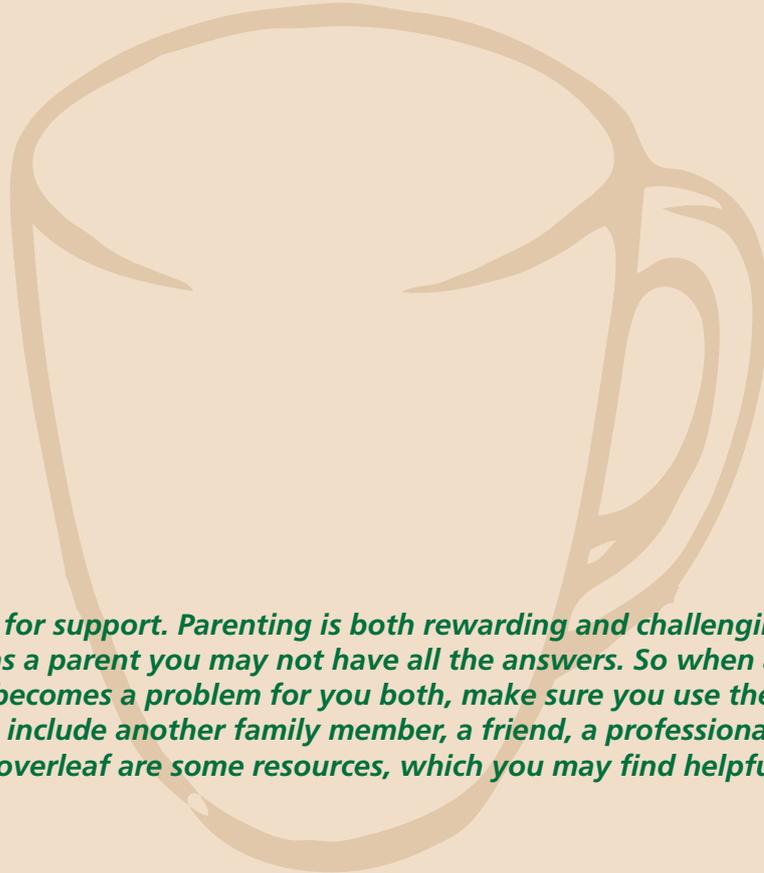
Family Problems or Family Breakdown

For every family, there are inevitable stresses and problems that will be encountered and will need to be handled with care. These problems can take many forms, from excessive arguing in the house between family members, to behaviour problems, or to a death in the family. All of these issues bring with them their own stresses and strains and will impact upon the family's overall functioning and dynamic. Sometimes it helps to remember that everyone copes with problems or stresses in different ways, and we need to allow others to express themselves, as long as it is in a non-destructive way.

One difficult and painful experience within a family, is that of parental separation. If you are a parent going through a separation from your child's mother or father, you are no doubt going through one of the most stressful experiences of your life.

In struggling to cope with the upheaval yourself, you might find it hard to find the time to monitor how your son or daughter is coping with the separation of their parents. Some young people may appear to be dealing with it but they may also be concerned about off-loading their stresses onto you.

Others may be quite angry and volatile towards you or the other parent as a result of the sadness they feel at the breakdown of their family environment as they knew it. Whatever way your son or daughter may be expressing themselves after parental separation, it is important to get across to them that they can be supported through this in whatever way they may feel comfortable with, i.e. individual counselling, family support counselling, or simply just talking to you if that feels right for them.



Don't be afraid to ask for support. Parenting is both rewarding and challenging. It's important to acknowledge that as a parent you may not have all the answers. So when an issue between you and your teenager becomes a problem for you both, make sure you use the support networks out there. This may include another family member, a friend, a professional or a website. Listed overleaf are some resources, which you may find helpful.

Where to find support around family problems

Clanwilliam Institute
Family counselling
office@clanwilliam.ie
+353 (0)1 6761363

The National Counselling Institute of Ireland
The National Counselling Institute provides a Find a Counsellor service that allows you to search a database for a suitably qualified Counsellor in your area.

www.ncii.ie
061 216288

The Irish Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy

The IACP act as a link between those who are looking for counselling and those who provide counselling.

www.irish-counseling.ie
01 2723427

Parentline
www.parentline.ie
1890 927 277
info@parentline.ie



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www.headstrong.ie