

# Parenteen

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## What Teenagers Want Their Parents to Know

Parents are always full of advice for their kids. But what kind of advice do our teenagers have for us? At one of our regular meetings last year, the Coalition invited a group of teenagers from high schools around the Bay Area to offer tips on effective parenting. Here's what they said:

What would you like your parents to know that would make your lives easier? What don't parents understand?

- Parents should let kids make their own decisions on lots of things, and let them make their own mistakes. You learn from your mistakes; you know when something has a bad effect on you, and you probably won't do it again. You need to see it for yourself.
- I wish my parents would stop comparing me to other kids. It's not fair, because we're all so different. Also, parents shouldn't compare my life to theirs. That's even more different!
- Parents put so much stress on grades. It's so hard for them even if I get a B+. Kids really work hard, but parents really stress getting all A's, and it's not realistic. There's already so much competition between friends over grades, and when parents add a lot more pressure, kids just can't take it. There are always problems at school, trying to fit in socially and have friends, then when you get home and they start in with the A's — we don't need that.
- I don't think parents understand how difficult the transition from middle school to high school is. They expect everything to be good and perfect, and it's not. The high school social scene is so different. It's really hard to keep your head on straight and keep things balanced.

What's effective parenting, from your perspective? What works?

- Don't put too much pressure on your kid to be totally perfect. Parents need to know that kids make mistakes and learn from them,



**Parents need to be involved in their kids' lives, but not too involved.**

and they deserve a second chance. People can change.

- Kids want to be able to trust their parents — so when they are honest and tell you something, don't use it against them.
- Parents should make it clear what they expect about things. But they should also be willing to just deal with things as they come up.
- Parents need to be involved in their kids' lives, but not too involved. Don't try to force information out of kids; they have to want to tell you things. Never interrogate them, because that just makes them not want to talk.
- Kids need some



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breathing room when they get home from school. The last thing I want to do is talk about why my day was tiring or why it was a bad day.

- Don't tell your kids who to hang out with. They know who their friends are.

How do you know when your parents understand you?

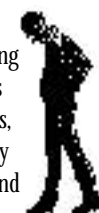
- When they expand the rules, give you more freedom.
- When they don't ask a series of questions, one after the other.
- When they start letting you go to parties when they know there are no

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## The Hidden Logic of Teenagers: Views from a Counselor with Uncommon Sense

By Sue Adams  
Parent, Lick-Wilmerding

As their children enter adolescence and begin to develop lives that seem private, baffling and even frightening, parents can make two major mistakes, says Mike Riera, a veteran Bay Area high school counselor and



author of several acclaimed books on teenagers.

The first mistake is to continue trying to control their teens' lives, to hang onto the managerial role that worked so well for so long. Alternatively, the second mistake is to take their teens' apparent rejection to heart and back away altogether, essentially abandoning them.



What parents need to do, Riera said, is to realize that when your children become teenagers, your role needs to shift from manager to consultant. Your teens will fire you as their manager, and you should accept this gracefully. Your job now is to get rehired as a consultant.

Riera, currently dean of students at

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### The Student View (continued from page 1)

parents there. Eventually, parents have to start trusting that they raised you right and that you'll make the right decisions.

What should parents know about drinking and drugs?

- It's important for parents to know that if kids want to drink, they're going to. Alcohol is there, and if kids want it, they can get it. Everything is so easy to get.
- Asking kids not to go to parties is not the answer — it's like parents are trying to hide things that are impossible to hide. Parties might make drinking more convenient, but it's not the situation that leads to drinking, it's the kid.
- Sometimes reverse psychology works. If my parents give me more freedom, I'll feel guiltier if I do something I know they don't approve of.

Can parents be too trusting?

- Kids do need to have rules, and parents need to enforce them. If you don't have any rules, it's like your parents don't care about you. It's embarrassing.
- Parents need to know their own kids well enough to know when they're heading toward trouble and set the rules accordingly.

Any final thoughts?

- I want my parents to be there for me, but I don't want them hanging over my shoulder. It's really frustrating to have your parents tell you that you can't do something when you feel you're at the right age for it.
- Parents should be realistic, and not push for impossible perfection, but don't let your kids go entirely, either. They need to strike a balance.
- Kids are going to get into difficult situations, but that's OK — that's life. There are some things that kids just have to experience. ♡

### Hidden Logic (continued from page 1)

Marin Academy, is the author of *Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers* and the new *Surviving High School*. In a wide-ranging talk before several hundred parents at a Coalition event in San Francisco last spring, he shared his years of experience with teenagers and offered empathy and guidance to parents eager for assistance as their teens navigate the choppy waters of adolescence.

His first piece of advice, ironically, was a caveat: "Nobody can tell you how to parent your son or daughter. Filter all advice through your own values."

The issues teens are grappling with today, Riera said, range from peer acceptance, identity and independence to academics, drugs and alcohol, sex and driving. (Driving, he said, "is as significant a change as learning to



**The strongest organizer of adolescent behavior is avoidance of loneliness.**

walk. A car is basically a teenager's first apartment.")

As the issues get more serious, kids are less and less likely to talk willingly to their parents about them, Riera said. It's only when parents assume the role of consultant — listening, asking ques-

tions, trying to get teens to think about an issue in a new way, then backing off and letting them make their own decisions — that dialogue can continue.

"Teens can't tell you in any consistent way why they do what they do — if they can, they're by definition not a teenager any more," Riera said. "But if they see that you're not trying to take over their decisions, they'll tell you more and more."

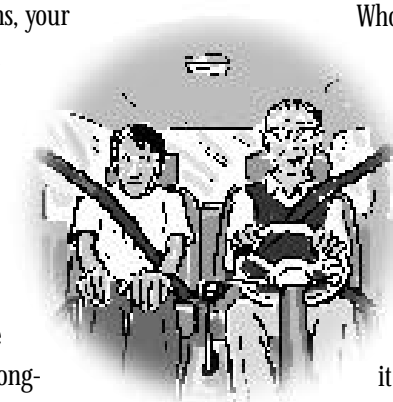
One way to gain insight into teens is to think about how fast things are changing for them:

### Physical Changes

Physically, their bodies are changing, often in ways they tend to find fault with, and they're on a different clock than adults. Noting most teens' tendency to stay up very late even on school nights, he cited new research showing that students lose one point off their functional IQ for every hour of

## Mike Riera's Tips for Parents

- A great place to have serious conversations with your teen is in the car. It feels much safer and less threatening to talk side by side than face to face.
- When your kids become teens, your job is to be a consultant, not a manager. Stay curious; don't always try to be the expert.
- Grounding is only a good punishment if it's very short-term. It's not effective unless the parents are home as well — and how many parents are willing to ground themselves long-term?
- Teachers are a great source of information about your teens. Give your child's favorite teacher a call and ask what he's like at school.
- Write notes to your child, telling her how you feel about certain things. It's a good way to communicate and exercise your influence quietly. Who knows — your child might write back.
- It can be very hard for teens to stand up to peer pressure on their own — sometimes they need you to be the bad guy.
- Unless your teenager asks for advice on a particular issue three times, he doesn't really want it — he just wants validation and acknowledgment.
- Don't sweat the small stuff — save your chips for the major issues, like drinking and driving.
- Trust your intuition and be as consistent as possible.



sleep they lack per night — and the effect is cumulative until they catch up. Intellectually, Riera said, it's useful to think of teenagers as a combination of emerging adult and repressed child. Their thinking is more abstract, yet they can feel cripplingly self-conscious. Often teens show the emerging adult side at school and save their repressed child for home, where that behavior feels safer.

### The Social Scene

Socially, teens are dealing with tumultuous issues. Peer acceptance is

key — “the strongest organizer of adolescent behavior is avoidance of loneliness,” Riera said. While some teens seem to need just a few friends, others are intoxicated with the social scene and need to be on the phone all the time, checking out their relationships. But by the junior year of high school, he noted, many teens find old friendships suddenly in turmoil. “Kids want to transfer to new schools; they say they feel like they can't be themselves at their old school anymore.” Still, their fear of loneliness may keep them hanging out with friends with whom they no longer have anything in common.

### Identity Issues

At about the same time — the end of the sophomore year for girls, the beginning of the junior year for boys — many teens begin to deal seriously with issues of identity, Riera said, wondering who they are. The search for identity can play itself out in many ways — and “sometimes what they ask for is not what they want — like advice,” Riera said. “Kids are experts at giving you their problems,” he said. But in our new role as consultants, “We need to give it back to them and let them wrestle with it.”

The key for parents here is to get kids thinking about solutions, not dwelling on the problem, and to remind them that they're up to the challenge, whatever it is. “As parents, you're the historians for their success,” Riera said. “Your job is to remember the times they've handled things successfully. Give them access to their creativity.”

### The Family

Riera quoted mystery writer Sue Grafton, who defined the dysfunctional family as “any family with more than one person in it.” “There are no perfect families out there, but there are plenty that are good enough,” he said. “You just need to hang in there and stick to your values, even when they're not popular. Don't worry about being friends with your teenager now — that'll come later. Now, they need to you act like parents.”

When teens break the rules, he added, “they need to do penance.” “They need some consequences to help things get back on an even keel. It's the consequences that invite a change in behavior, not simply feeling sorry for something they've done.” “Parenting a teenager is a very difficult job,” Riera said in conclusion. “One of the best things we can do to help our kids is to deal with our own issues responsibly, to model this behavior for them.”

## San Francisco is Kid-Friendly

By Marsha Torkelson, MFCC  
Parent of two sons in college

Crime and kids are what Ken Moses knows about. As a San Francisco police inspector and a parent of adolescents, his surprising information about the city's low crime rate reassured parents at a Coalition forum, “Keeping Your Kids Safe in S.F.”

In terms of safe cities in the United States, he said, San Francisco ranks near the top. Parents are scared, claims Moses, because of newspaper headlines and television news. These stories often lack perspective and heighten general parental anxiety. With kids, he advises, “don't nurture fear — instead nurture strength and familiarity.”

Parents can't keep kids safe, he said, but they can encourage their teens to get out and learn about the city. This experience can make their kids feel safe. Exposing kids to different neighborhoods, cultures and economic levels gives them a perspective from which to make good decisions.

He offered these specific suggestions:

- Encourage your teens to do community service in order to have contact with diversity and those affected by adversity, so they don't think homeless

people are criminals, for example.

- “Push them onto Muni” so they know their way around and thus exude confidence.
- Trust them. Unless kids are overly fearful or aggressive, abusing drugs or

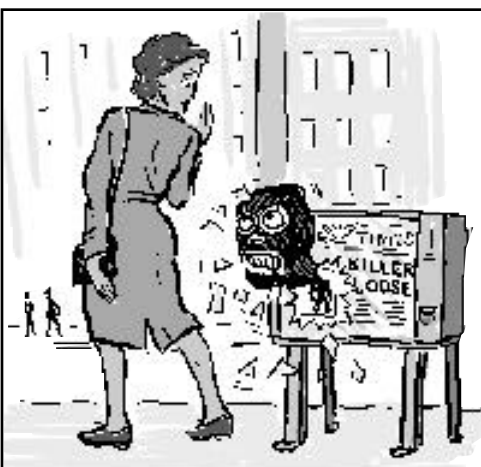
you know where you are going. Take long strides, avoid eye-contact. Don't wear clothes that either tempt or threaten people, such as fancy jackets or clothes in gang colors. Don't flash green bills. Self-defense classes also give kids confidence.

Particularly if you are the parent of a daughter, Moses said, explain the principles of baiting: i.e., a con artist who says, “Oh, you don't want to talk with me because I'm (less fortunate).” Because kids are very conscientious socially, they will have a hard time resisting such a ploy, so it helps if they are made aware of it ahead of time.

Statistically, Moses noted, by far the biggest danger to teens is not being out on the streets but being in a car, as a passenger or a driver. Good driving training is a must.

Muni is fairly safe at night, he said. During the day, however, conflict between kids tends to arise at certain transfer points. “Swarming” is when kids are deliberately jostled by a group, making it easier to steal from them.

Ken Moses ended his enlightening talk by passing out “KIDS RIDE SAFE ON MUNI” cards with some concrete suggestions. These are available from Muni or at Coalition events and forums.



**News stories often lack perspective and heighten general parental anxiety.**

rebelling in the extreme (or hanging out with kids who are), they are generally not at risk. Vulnerability increases if they behave like “rams or lambs,” Moses said.

Body language is the key. Parents can offer tips: Keep your head up like



### The Parenteen Index

Back issues of *Parenteen* are available for \$1.25 per copy. Call (415) 389-9441.

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- Drugs & Alcohol — Spring '97
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## BOOK REVIEW

### What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids

By Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., Judy Galbraith, M.A., and Pamela Espeland

Review by Cynthia Ostroff  
Parent, Town School

What Kids Need to Succeed (Free Spirit, 1994) offers hundreds of powerful ideas for helping teens through adolescence.

The authors surveyed 273,000 teens in 600 communities. Their research confirmed that teens experiencing a positive, healthy journey through adolescence possessed what the authors termed “developmental assets.” The authors identified 30 such assets that every young person needs to succeed.

Sixteen assets are in the external realm. These give support and nurture, set boundaries and, with guidance by caring, principled adults, help structure their use of time. Among the external assets were family support, parents as social resources, and parental monitoring.

Topping the list was family support. Yet only 57 percent of the teens surveyed said they felt loved and supported in their families. The authors suggest giving teens more hugs and verbal reinforcement — ask your teens which feels more comfortable for them. Set



**Be open to ideas and share your child's interests.**

aside one evening per week for family time. Be open to ideas and share your child's interests. The authors also provide tips to help teens build their own assets.

The authors identified 14 crucial internal assets. These are attitudes, values and competencies, such as achievement motivation, global concern, sexual restraint and decision-making skills,



### Very Important Dates

Parents' Coalition meetings  
The Coalition meets on the second Monday of each month, September–June, from 7:30 - 9:30 p.m. at San Francisco Day School, 350 Masonic Ave. (at Golden Gate Avenue). All parents are welcome.

Sept. 8 Forum: Jay Skelton, Ph.D., practicing psychologist in Marin County, will discuss emotional I.Q. Business meeting will follow.

Special Coalition Event  
Nov. 3 (Monday), 7:30 - 9:30 p.m.

in the auditorium at the UCSF Laurel Heights campus, 3333 California St. An evening with nationally-renowned comic and child advocate, Michael Pritchard. For both parents and students.

which should be ingrained in the soul of every teen.

Sixty-nine percent of the teens surveyed said they know how to make decisions and believe they are good at making them. But parents can help them improve this skill by including teens in family decisions that affect them.

Give teens a chance to talk. Listen respectfully to their feelings and opinions. Reinforce the fact that not making a decision has consequences as well; it gives someone else the power to determine what happens next. Allow for mistakes and help kids learn from them. Don't protect them from the consequences of poor decisions.

Of the 30 assets the authors identified, how many does the average teen possess? From grades six through 12, the survey showed, the average was 16 — a good beginning. According to the authors, 24 assets indicated a gateway to success or a realistic goal to strive for.

The book also includes separate questionnaires for teens and parents so they can evaluate their own assets. Compar-

ing perceptions can be revealing, and it can help create a new awareness and approach for the parent as a teen progresses through adolescence. It can also serve as an opportunity for more in-depth communication with your teen. Some surprising findings in the book: Just 31 percent reported being in a caring, encouraging and safe school environment. Only 27 percent of teens surveyed are involved in band, orchestra, choir or are taking music lessons and practicing one hour per week. Fifty-seven percent reported involvement with a faith community. Fifty-one percent said they did not have three or more adults in addition to their parents who they could turn to for advice and support.

More than 500 ideas were presented in *What Kids Need to Succeed*. Although not every idea will work for each young person, keep this in mind: the more assets a teenager has, the less likely he or she is to develop the problem behaviors of adolescence.

### More Useful Info

An article by UCSF psychologist Nancy Adler in the summer '97 issue of *Parenteen* referred to an interesting report on adolescent sexuality.

To obtain a copy of the report, entitled “Facing Facts: Sexual Health for America's Adolescents,” call or write to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 130 W. 42nd St. #350, New York, NY 10036, (212) 819-9770 ext. 304.

For information on laws and legal issues affecting children, call the State Bar of California, (415) 561-8357, for their new booklet, *Kids and the Law: An A-to-Z Guide for Parents*.

Parents' Coalition Mission  
To support and inspire parents of adolescents through education and communication in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.

Representatives are selected by the parent associations of their schools. If you or your school would like to be involved or if you have comments or questions, please call Roger Torkelson at (415) 389-9411.

- Coalition Representatives
- |  |  |
|--|--|
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| Ginny Gertler<br>Convent of the Sacred Heart             | Marilyn Straka<br>Godfrey Tencer<br>Marin Academy            |
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Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves. Call (415) 566-6511 for more information. To learn more about the Parents' Coalition, check out our web site: <http://www.pbahs.org>