

Understanding Your Teenager

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS



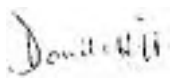
Introduction

We are pleased to offer you this handbook to help with the important and sometimes challenging times you may come across with your teenager.

The teenage years can be an emotional assault course for everyone involved but it can also be an enjoyable time. Parents/carers have one of the hardest jobs, but studies show that most teenagers actually like their parents/carers and feel that they get on well with them.

This handbook gives information and advice on many issues that you may come across with your teenager and some contacts that you can access if you need some help.

I hope you find this handbook useful and that by understanding your unique young person a little better and giving them time to develop, you will build a closer and ultimately more rewarding relationship.




David Hill
Chairperson of Merton Safeguarding
Children Board and Director of Children,
Schools & Families

Throughout this handbook the term parents and carers has been used as shorthand to include mothers, fathers, carers and other adults with responsibility for caring for a child or young person, for example those with responsibility for looked after children and young offenders.

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*I was dreading the teen years
and, yes, I have to shout at all the
usual things, like doing homework,
but what I didn't expect was my son
to turn out so interesting.*

Adolescent behaviour

YOUR TEENAGER IS JUST GROWING UP

- Teenagers can be fun and rewarding
- Mood swings are a normal part of behaviour
- Listening is the key to a good relationship
- Your teenager craves independence - but still needs you!

The teenage years are often seen as a period of tension and broken family relationships as children turn into unrecognisable creatures who either barely leave their room or are never home. They're averse to the most simple question about school or how their evening went and are totally unpredictable.

Yes, that is normal adolescent behaviour. But also normal is discovering that you have a remarkable young person living with you who is bright, interesting and funny.

The most obvious cause for the mood swings of adolescence is raging hormones. At the onset of puberty, hormones are triggering physical changes and emotional feelings that are not only hard to deal with, but hard to talk about.

Your teenager is also forming deeper and more complex relationships; any worries or arguments, for instance peer pressure to do things they may not feel comfortable with, can deeply affect their sense of well-being and confidence. They will also be experiencing new sexual feelings which they may find difficult to handle and concerns about their appearance may lead to a lack of self-esteem.

They will also be trying to work out an identity for themselves. Your child is learning about views, opinions and beliefs that may be different to those they have grown up with. On top of all this, they also have to cope with school or college work, which can make them anxious and stressed.

And teenagers will take it out on those closest to them - you!

Supporting your teen

How you handle your teen can make the difference between a close, rewarding relationship and a difficult one.

Untidiness, doing homework, letting you know where they are and helping around the house are common conflict points. Offering choices or a compromise work better than making demands: 'If you tidy your room, I'll put this wash on for you'.

Encouraging your teenager to talk about what's going on in their lives will help you to understand them, give them the help they need and, in turn, build up their confidence. Your child will appreciate it if they are listened to, their opinions asked, their thoughts and feelings acknowledged, their privacy respected and they are met with flexibility rather than orders. Be open-minded and non-judgemental and your teenager will feel they can turn to you when they need to.

The adolescent years can be tough and your teenager needs to know they have your support. It's common for them to argue or even reject you at times, because they know that, on the whole, you will take the bad moods with the good. But however they may upset you, don't forget a lot of it is just bravado and that when things go wrong, the person they'll eventually turn to for comfort is you.



Mood swings, arguments, talking back, an obsessive interest in hygiene - or a complete lack of it, difficulty in expressing themselves calmly and increased untidiness are all warning signs that your child has become a teen!



Being able to recognise what your child is going through, emotionally and physically, will help you to understand, listen and talk to your teen. One of the best things you can give your child is the knowledge that you are there for them.



Teenagers can be witty, interesting and thoughtful as well as opinionated, sarcastic and sullen. Bring out the best in them by talking things through rather than arguing. Let your teen know you are there for them, whatever the problem.



Remember you are the adult! All too often you may find yourself having temper tantrums at your teenager's behaviour. Try to understand what they are going through, so you can use diversion tactics to head off potential problems. Flexibility and compromise work better than rules and demands.



• Youth Justice Board for England & Wales 020 7271 3033

• www.raisingkids.co.uk

• www.ukparentslounge.com


• www.e-parents.org

• Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk

• The Institute of Family Therapy
020 7391 9150

www.instituteoffamilytherapy.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



I love my son, but I just don't understand why he's always getting into trouble. I need help to get him back on the right track.

Anti-social behaviour

WHEN EVERY DAY IS A DIFFICULT DAY

- Positive parenting can help your child's behaviour
- Prevention is better than cure
- Peer pressure and boredom are reasons given by teens for offending
- Your local council can help you tackle problems

While you love your teenager, you may not always like their behaviour. Unfortunately, adolescence is often when trouble starts.

Girls begin offending, on average, at age 14, with boys starting six months earlier.* Causing criminal damage, shoplifting, buying stolen goods and fighting are common offences, and are often linked to taking drugs and alcohol.

There can be many causes as to why teenagers behave anti-socially. An unstable family life due to domestic abuse or divorce may be a factor. Living in a deprived area with few facilities to keep them occupied could be another. Peer pressure can be enormously influential, with mates encouraging them to join in. Problems at school or bullying may also contribute.

Research shows that factors preventing anti-social behaviour in young people are:

- A stable and supportive family home.
- Consistent parenting.
- Regular school, training or work attendance.

Research also shows that the two key deterrents to offending are the fear of parental reaction and the fear of being caught.

While it is a parent's responsibility to provide the best care and support they can for their teenager to help prevent them getting into trouble, this does not mean you have to cope alone. There are many schemes and organisations available to help families with teenagers to prevent a slide into irresponsible or criminal behaviour.

The Youth Justice System in England and Wales has been developed to improve the outlook for young offenders and potential offenders, involving the Police, Probation & Prison Services, local councils and courts. Its aim is to prevent young people offending, while also holding them responsible for their actions and supporting them to choose a future on the right side of the law.

Under the Youth Justice System, every local authority has a Youth Justice Service (YJS). Each YJS is made up of police officers, social workers, victim liaison workers, health & drugs advisors and housing support officers. Together they can assess and respond to the needs of a young offender, giving advice and support to stop them re-offending and pointing them in the direction of useful programmes such as the Positive Activities and Positive Futures schemes.

Prevention is better than cure. Providing a supportive home environment will help encourage your child in every area of their life. And if you need assistance to guide them, a system is in place to help you.

*Source: Home Office statistics



Truancy or being in trouble at school, stealing, having unexplained amounts of money, mixing with a negatively influential crowd, using drugs and/or alcohol, abusiveness towards you or others are all signs of anti-social behaviour that need to be dealt with as soon as possible.



Talk to your teenager about their behaviour, the possible causes behind it and what action can be taken to prevent it. Do not feel you are alone in coping - there are schemes in place to help encourage your child to aim towards education, training or employment rather than delinquency.



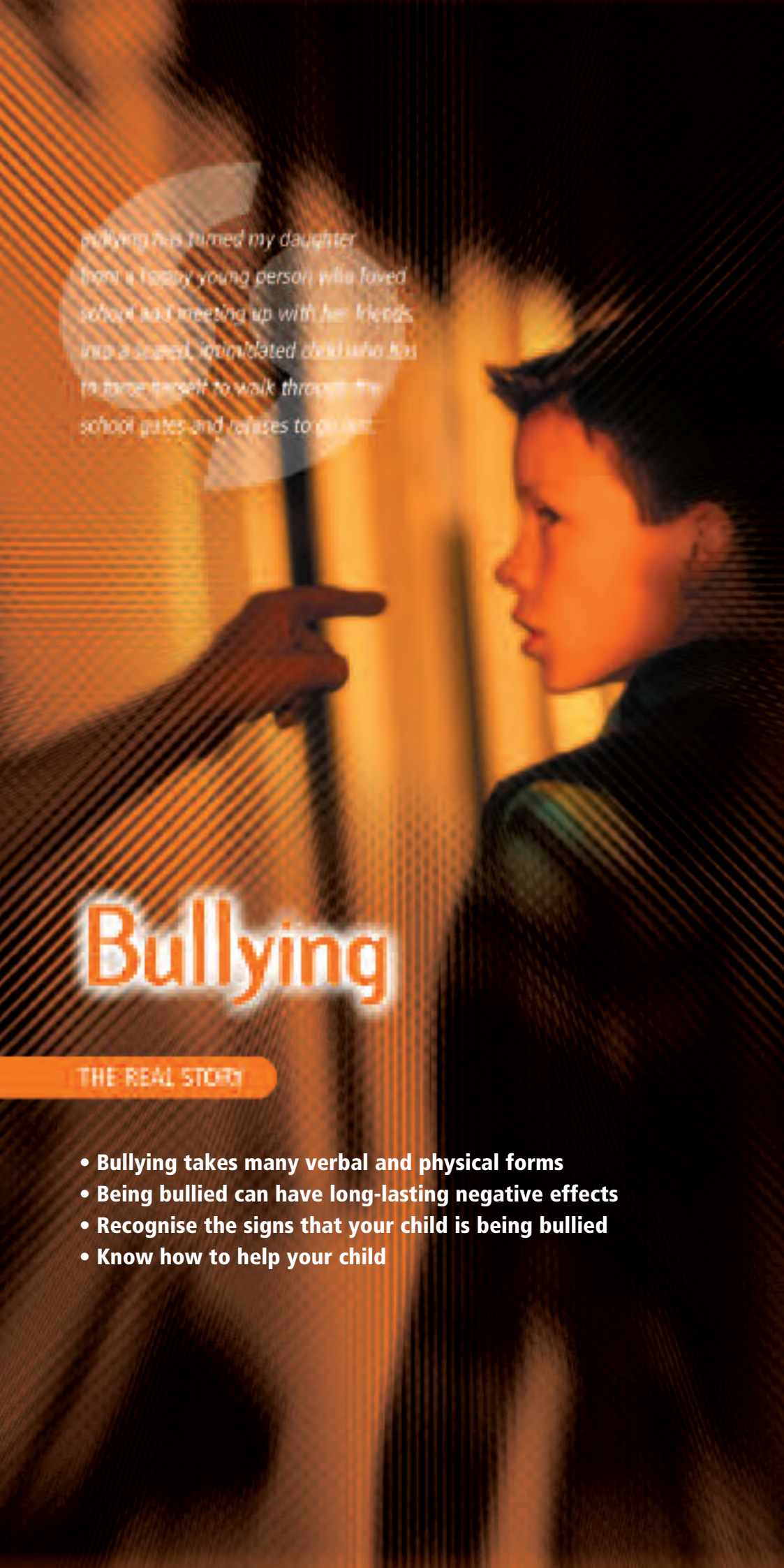
Try not to be judgmental, but explain that you want to help prevent this behaviour and you need to work together, possibly also with outside guidance, to steer him or her back onto the right path. Explain where this behaviour could lead unless it is stopped now.



Maintaining an open relationship with good communication will help your teenager, as research shows young people from supportive family homes are less likely to offend. Take an interest in school work and encourage after-school activities such as sports, art programmes or courses.



- The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU) 020 8274 5973
 - Youth Justice Board For England & Wales 020 7271 3033
 - Connexions Direct 080 800 13 2 19 www.connexions-direct.com
 - www.parentscentre.gov.uk
- For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

A young girl with dark hair is shown in profile, looking down with a sad expression. A hand from the left is pointing towards her. The background is a warm, orange-toned, slightly blurred image of a hallway or school entrance.

Bullying has turned my daughter from a happy young person who loved school and meeting up with her friends into a scared, intimidated child who has to force herself to walk through the school gates and refuses to go out.

Bullying

THE REAL STORY

- Bullying takes many verbal and physical forms
- Being bullied can have long-lasting negative effects
- Recognise the signs that your child is being bullied
- Know how to help your child

Bullying happens when people either deliberately hurt or intimidate another person, either verbally or physically.

Bullying can include: teasing or name calling; hitting, kicking, pushing or pinching; stealing another's possessions or damaging them; spreading rumours; ignoring or isolating another person; abusive text or email messages; being targeted because of race, religion, sexuality, disability or just seeming different.

Being bullied breaks down a person's self-confidence, leaving them feeling isolated, vulnerable and powerless. School or other venues are seen as places to fear rather than enjoy. Being bullied affects schoolwork due to anxiety, skipped lessons, lack of concentration and time off school for physical complaints caused by stress. For a small percentage, it may lead to thoughts - or attempts - of suicide.

Look out for signs, as your child may not be able to express what is happening to them, or want to, for fear of your reaction and things being made worse:

- Genuine physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches, caused by stress and anxiety.
- Being more bad tempered or emotional than usual or over-reacting and taking their frustrations out on another sibling.
- Missing or damaged belongings.
- A deterioration in the level of their schoolwork.
- Anxiety about going to school in the morning, a change in routine with friends.

What you can do

If your child tells you they are being bullied, don't dismiss or belittle their claims. Listen to what they are saying and try to discuss tactics to sort the problem out for themselves.

If this doesn't work, suggest your child keeps a diary of incidents and talk to their teacher or Headteacher and put any concerns down in writing. By law, every school must have an anti-bullying policy. If you feel the school is not responding adequately, write to the Board of Governors and the Local Education Authority.

Build up your child's confidence by encouraging friends they can rely on and suggest activities or clubs where they can build up new friendships. Let them know they can talk to you and reassure them of their self-worth.

If your child is a bully

When someone bullies it tends to be because of their own insecurities and because it makes them feel powerful or popular. It can be distressing to realise your child is a bully, but you need to understand why they feel the need to do it. Conflict at home, divorce, peer pressure or being bullied themselves may all be triggers. Without being judgmental, let them know that what they are doing is hurtful and damaging and discuss ways they can change their behaviour, asking the school for guidance, if necessary.



A change in behaviour, such as becoming more introverted or aggressive; regular headaches or stomach aches; anxiety; change of routine, such as the route to school, or not wanting to go out with friends; deteriorating school work; damaged belongings, missing money; unexplained injuries.



Encourage your child to talk to you, a teacher, or to contact helpful organisations. Discuss bullying with the school and find out how they handle situations. Don't ignore any signs of bullying.



Talk about ways that they can deal with bullying themselves, to help build up their self confidence. If this fails, talk to the teacher or Headteacher about what can be done. Encourage your child to always tell someone if they are being bullied. Back up complaints to the school in writing.



Help your child by spending time with them and listening to any concerns they have, showing an interest in their activities, supporting them with school work and encouraging friends and socialising. This will help them to build up the self-confidence to deal with what life throws at them.



- Parentline Plus 0800 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- ChildLine 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk
- Kidscape 08451 205 204
www.kidscape.org.uk
- www.parentscentre.gov.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

*It took me a long time to accept
it when my son told me he was gay.
I still don't like it, but if that's the way
he is, then I want him to know I'm
here for him.*



Coming out

IS YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER GAY?

- **'Coming out' is a big step for young people**
- **Accept your own emotions**
- **Discuss your concerns**
- **Your child needs your support**

However much you love - and think you know - your child, you may find yourself feeling a range of emotions when finding out that they are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

You may feel overwhelmed, shocked, worried, ashamed or horrified. Even if you had an idea they may be gay, it can still be difficult to accept the reality.

Many young people start to become aware of their feelings at age 11 or 12, but may take years to admit it to themselves or anyone else, possibly feeling isolated and scared for much of that time. However enlightened we feel in today's society, there is still discrimination and prejudice. It will have taken a lot of courage for your child to reveal their sexuality to you and now is the time they need your understanding and support.

Your concerns

It is normal as a parent to have concerns. You may feel you no longer know your child - that they are not the person you believed them to be. You may also have to give up the expectation of grandchildren. There is still the very real danger of HIV and AIDS, especially for men. You may worry about the prejudice they may have to face throughout their lives. You may also feel embarrassed or ashamed to tell family, friends and neighbours. All these concerns are natural.

Common misconceptions

There are many common misconceptions about homosexuality. One is that it's 'just a phase'. While many young people experiment with their own sex, if your child tells you they are gay, accept it, as they won't have said it lightly. Another is that homosexuality is an illness that can be cured. It's not - it's the way your child is and while there is increasing evidence that genetics play a role, there is as yet no proof. Some parents also believe their child has been 'turned' by mixing with gay friends, but it is unlikely your teenager would go through the trauma of 'coming out' unless they were absolutely sure about how they felt. Some parents also worry needlessly that it is something they have done - maybe being an over-caring mother or absent father - that has made their child gay.

Giving support

It may take some time for you to accept that your teenager is gay or lesbian, especially if it goes against your culture or religion. But your child still needs your support. Let them know you are there for them, as they may want to discuss issues or problems they are facing. You may find it easier to understand and support your child if you contact one of the help groups aimed at parents of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people. Whatever sexuality your child chooses to be, encourage safer sex. Encourage them to find social situations to meet a partner, rather than secretive ones, and to always use condoms to protect against sexually transmitted infections (see Contacts). The more you find out about homosexuality, the more you will understand your child's lifestyle and be able to support them.



Younger teenagers may not yet be aware of their sexuality. Older teens may feel confused about their feelings for their own sex and try to deny them and their behaviour may change as they try to come to terms with their sexuality. Others may try to give you signs that they are lesbian or gay without having to tell you outright.



If you believe your child is gay and having difficulty either coming to terms with this or telling you, start up conversations that will give them an opportunity to broach the subject naturally.



It may be hard to accept your child is lesbian or gay, but their sexual preferences don't change the person you have brought up and loved. Let them know you will be there for them and support them as they find their way.

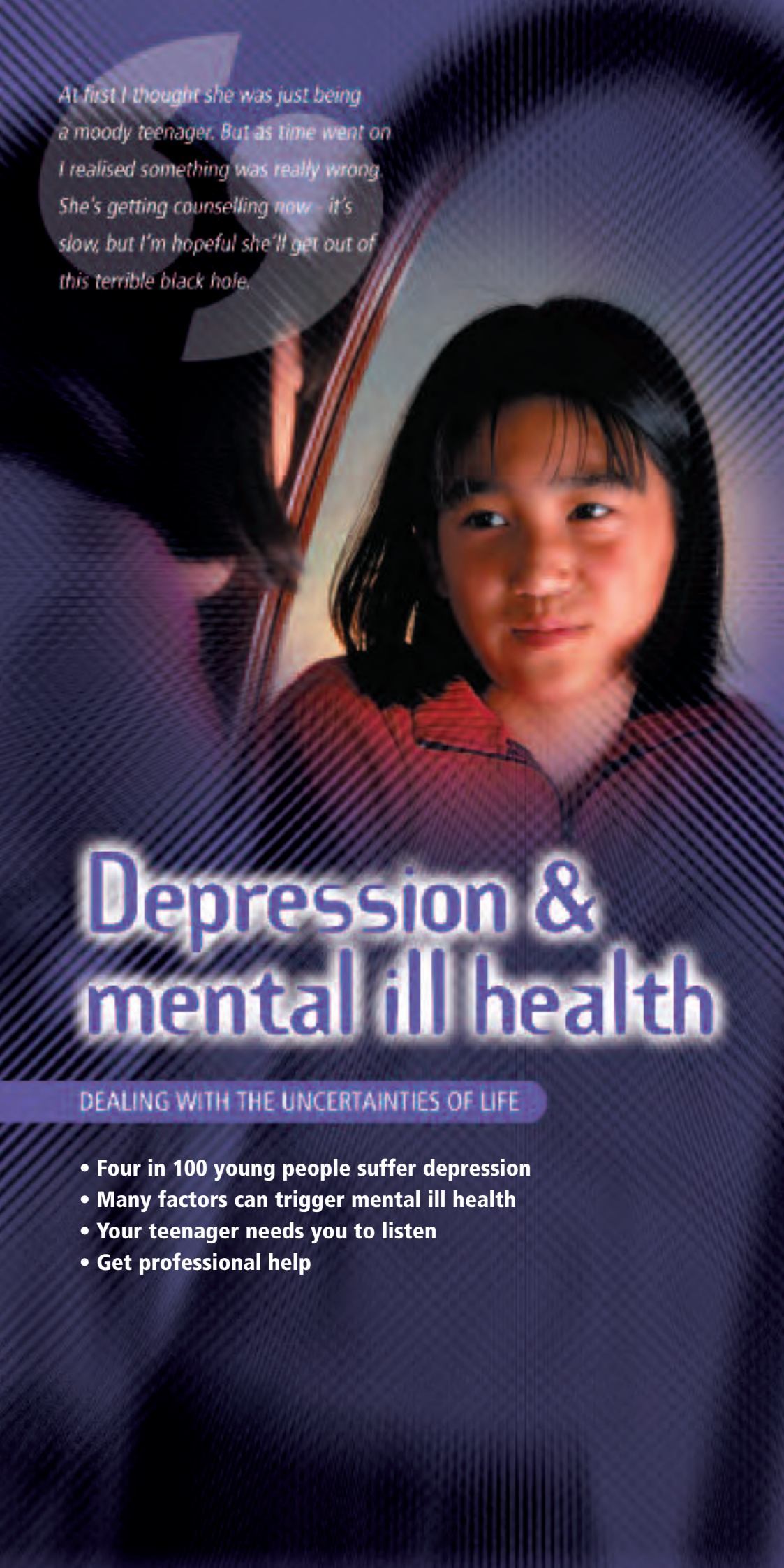


There is nothing you can do or should do to try and prevent your child from being what they naturally are. Repressing feelings can only do long-term damage to their self-confidence. Encourage your child to be who they are and to be proud.



- FFLAG (Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) Helpline 0845 652 0311 www.fflag.org.uk
- PACE (Family Therapy Service) 020 7700 1323 www.pacehealth.org.uk
- www.outproud.org/brochure_for_parents.html
- Gay/Lesbian Switchboard 020 7837 7324

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



At first I thought she was just being a moody teenager. But as time went on I realised something was really wrong. She's getting counselling now - it's slow, but I'm hopeful she'll get out of this terrible black hole.

Depression & mental ill health

DEALING WITH THE UNCERTAINTIES OF LIFE

- **Four in 100 young people suffer depression**
- **Many factors can trigger mental ill health**
- **Your teenager needs you to listen**
- **Get professional help**

Adolescence is a difficult time and young people have a lot to contend with physically, mentally and emotionally. While every young person experiences highs and lows, for some - about four or five in every 100 - this turns into depression.

Young people are more vulnerable and sensitive to what is happening to them and are less experienced at being able to deal with problems and anxieties.

Depression can be triggered by a number of things, such as parental divorce or separation; feeling neglected, unloved, or not listened to; losing friends, changing school or moving home; worries about their appearance, sexuality, health, or exams; or because of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

What may seem minor problems or anxieties to an adult can seem overwhelming to a young person. Boys are more prone to depression than girls and are more likely to experience more serious mental ill health, such as schizophrenia.

What are the signs?

While young people are at times moody and uncommunicative, you may feel that this is more than just a phase and that your teenager seems in despair. Signs may include insomnia (unable to sleep), eating too much or too little, irritability, staying in their bedroom all day, giving up interests and hobbies, crying, avoiding talking to or seeing friends and family, finding it hard to concentrate, letting schoolwork deteriorate, not caring about their appearance, lacking self-esteem. They may talk about death or have suicidal thoughts.

To escape from their feelings, or let them out in the only way they know how, young people may start taking drugs or drinking, truant from school, become more aggressive or carry out crimes such as shoplifting.

How to help

If your teenager is suffering from depression, they need help. Don't dismiss anxieties or talk of suicide - you need to listen, try to understand what they are going through, and get professional help, if necessary. Encourage them to talk about worries. If they don't feel they can talk to you, there are a number of helplines they can contact. Talk to your GP, who can discuss treatment such as counselling, or if necessary, medication may help.



Insomnia, irritability, eating disorders, neglecting their appearance, dropping friends and hobbies, staying in their room, crying, failing at school, finding it hard to concentrate, being self-critical.



If you think your child is depressed, talk to them and find out if there is any way you can help. Be patient and understanding - what may seem like minor problems to you can be overwhelming for a young person. Talk to your GP and discuss what treatment, such as counselling, may be appropriate.



Listen and talk to your teenager. Help and encourage them to get their lives together without being demanding or judgmental. Depression can't just be switched off, it takes time and understanding to overcome it. Encourage them to contact useful organisations they can talk to confidentially.




A supportive and understanding family means your child may feel more able to talk to you about any problems, rather than bottling them up. Chat about their interests, hobbies, friends and schoolwork, so they feel you understand the different parts of their lives.



- YoungMinds Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138 www.youngminds.org.uk
- Careline Confidential (counselling line) 020 8514 1177
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222 www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- GP
- NHS Direct 0845 4647 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



I don't think he really means to hurt me... he just can't help himself. He doesn't do it in front of the kids, but I know they can hear and I try to keep quiet.

Domestic abuse

IT COULD BE HAPPENING AT HOME

- 500,000 cases of domestic abuse are reported each year
- In 90% of cases, children are in the same or next room during violence
- Domestic abuse causes long-term damage for children
- Get advice, support and aid to change your situation

D

omestic abuse - or violence - is the physical, emotional or sexual abuse by one person against another in the home.

Physical abuse includes hurting someone by kicking, pushing, or hitting them. Emotional abuse includes constantly putting someone down, saying things to make them fearful, or lack self-confidence. Sexual abuse is forcing or encouraging someone to take part in sexual behaviour they don't want or are not happy with. Abusive behaviour may be triggered by any number of factors. These may be stress, financial difficulties, alcohol or drugs, or may be a continuance of an abuse suffered by the parent when they were a child.

More than half a million cases of domestic abuse are reported in England and Wales each year, with most victims being women. It is hard to build up the courage to take action against domestic violence. But if you are a victim, your children become victims too.

According to the children's charity, ChildLine, in nine out of ten incidents, children are in the same or next room when violence is going on. And in half of all reported domestic violence cases, children get hurt, too.

Whether they are being abused themselves or not, the damage done to children and young people in a home with domestic abuse is wide-ranging. Physically, they are always in danger of getting hurt themselves. Emotionally, they will be deeply distressed by what is going on in their family. If parents pretend nothing is wrong, this makes it worse as they try to make sense of the situation. They may also feel forced to take sides, even though they love both parents. They are more likely to be neglected as the parents deal with the problems in their own lives, leaving them feeling unloved and unsupported. This in turn will erode their self-confidence.

There can be serious knock-on effects. Children and young people may get angry, blaming one parent (not necessarily the aggressor) - or even themselves - causing the situation at home to become worse. They may become more violent or abusive themselves. They may experiment with drugs or alcohol as a way of escaping. School work will suffer as they find it hard to concentrate.

How to get help

Building up the courage to change the situation is hard, but it can be done and victims of domestic violence are protected by the law. Contact the police and your local council's social services department for advice on what steps you can take. There are also a number of organisations that can give advice and support (see Contacts).



It may take time to acknowledge that you are a victim of physical, emotional or sexual abuse - often the abuse is subtle rather than outwardly aggressive. Once you have recognised this, you can take action.



Contact your local council or one of the help organisations for advice on what to do next. Most organisations offer 24-hour helplines, giving support and encouragement as well as practical advice.



Children cope with difficult situations better when they understand what is going on. Even if they are not in the room when violence occurs, they will know it is happening. You are not protecting them by saying nothing - this only leaves them confused, so explain what is going on and what steps are being taken to change the situation.




You can't necessarily prevent a partner from being abusive towards you, but you can try to prevent the adverse effect on your children. If you feel you can't cope alone, contact a help organisation or your local council for advice.



- National Domestic Violence (24 hours) Helpline 0808 2000 247 www.womensaid.org.uk and www.refuge.org.uk
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222 www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- Police 999
- Bhavan Refugee for Asian Women 020 8540 8819
- Police Vulnerable Persons Unit 020 8649 3065

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



She keeps hinting that she's tried drugs once or twice. I'm trying to keep cool about it, but I am worried that she'll end up trying something addictive.

Drug & alcohol misuse

SPOTTING THE SIGNS

- It's natural for young people to experiment
- Being informed leads to safer choices
- Recognise the signs that there's a problem
- Be supportive not judgmental

It's natural for young people to be out more often, to have friends you don't get to know, and go to places you know little about. It is also very likely that they will be exposed to drugs and alcohol.

While most young people will experiment, how well they handle the drugs and alcohol scene is up to the individual. Research shows that those who are well informed about sensible use and the potential dangers are less likely to develop a serious problem.

Studies by the charity Alcohol Concern show that drinking, particularly binge drinking, is on the increase among young people. In one study, 47% of 15-year-olds had drunk alcohol in the previous week. Research also shows that one in three 14-year-olds have tried drugs and by the age of 16, four out of 10 young people will have tried at least one type of drug. It is also a known fact that young people are more likely to have risky sex (e.g. without contraception, with lots of different partners and unintended sex) when under the influence of alcohol. As many as one in fourteen 15-16 year olds said they'd had unprotected sex after drinking. Up to 40% of sexually active 13-14 year olds were 'drunk or stoned' at first intercourse.

Should you be worried?

While excessive drinking and drug taking is serious, for most young people, it is a phase they go through and grow out of with maturity. While it may be an issue for you, teenagers may not see drinking or occasionally taking drugs as a problem. This is a natural age to want to try out new things, test boundaries and be part of the 'in-crowd'.

However, there may be signs that your teenager's drinking or drug-taking is more than experimenting. They may become more secretive, steal, find it hard to concentrate on school work or truant from school. Their behaviour may change, becoming more agitated, apathetic or aggressive.

Being supportive

You can help your teenager by making sure they are knowledgeable about the use and dangers of drugs and alcoholic drinks.

Building up a good relationship with your teenager means they are more likely to talk to you about any problems they have, which also means they are less likely to turn to drugs or alcohol as a way of escaping problems.

If you think your teenager does have a problem, choose a quiet time to talk. Don't over-react, accuse or threaten, but encourage them to talk about what's happening. If they find it hard to talk to you, try to find another adult, such as a family friend or teacher they can open up to. Talk to your GP if you feel your child needs professional help. There are also many organisations that offer information and advice to help you and your teenager - see Contacts.



Changes in behaviour, such as stealing, truanting from school, aggressiveness, agitation or apathy and secretiveness can all be signs that your teen is taking drugs or drinking.



Encourage your teenager to talk to you about their activities, without prying. If you think that there is a serious problem, discuss the issue without being judgmental, as your child will need your help and understanding.



A good relationship between you provides a good basis for your teenager to make informed choices. Make sure they know about the different drugs they may come across and their dangers. The more informed you are, the more you will be able to help them.



Research shows that being educated about drugs and their dangers from an early age before the teenage years, means it's less likely experimenting will lead to a serious drug or alcohol problem. It's also sensible to lead by example - if your children see you getting drunk or using drugs, it increases the chances of them doing the same.



- ADFAM 020 7928 8898
www.adfam.org.uk
- Drinkline National Alcohol Helpline
0800 917 8287 www.wrecked.co.uk
- FRANK
0800 77 66 00
www.talktofrank.com

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

I can't bear to see what my daughter is doing to herself. I wish I could turn the clock back and could have helped her before anorexia took over her life.

Eating disorders

THE TELL-TALE SIGNS

- Young people are particularly vulnerable to eating disorders
- Controlling food is a way of controlling their lives
- Recognise underlying problems that trigger disorders
- Get support - your teenager needs help



Food is an important part of everybody's lives. But for some - particularly young people - how much or how little food one eats becomes an obsession.

Eating disorders develop when food is used as a way of dealing with personal problems. How much is eaten, when and where can sometimes seem like the only thing they can control in their lives.

Recognising the signs

There are two main eating disorders: Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. Anorexia sufferers or Anorexics, weigh at least 15% less than their expected body weight. Anorexia is a serious condition, which if not addressed, can cause life-long problems, and can in rare cases, be fatal.

Bulimics tend to maintain their body weight by secret binge eating. The main warning signs for both disorders are listed on the right.

Who is affected - and why?

The vast majority of those suffering from eating disorders are women, and young women aged 14-25 are the most vulnerable. There are many reasons why people get eating disorders and if your teenager has a problem, you will need to try to understand what triggered it in the first place. For many, controlling food is the only feeling of control they feel they have in their lives. Triggers may include:

- Abuse - physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Bullying
- Family problems
- High expectations of parents and/or school - anorexics are often high achievers
- An inability to express feelings
- Lack of self-esteem, feelings of self-loathing, guilt
- Wanting to look like women in magazines and on TV
- Wanting to be popular - believing being slim will make them more popular

How to help

People with an eating disorder are usually the last ones to recognise they have a problem. But if you believe your teenager is suffering from anorexia or bulimia, then they need your help. Encourage them to eat sensibly, but just as importantly, try to find out about the underlying problems. If they don't feel they can talk to you, encourage them to talk to a friend, relative, teacher or youth or social worker. You should also talk to their GP, to discuss any further treatment. Counselling, self-help groups and psychotherapy are all beneficial. In extreme cases, hospitalisation may be necessary.



Anorexics: excessive weight loss, avoiding food while obsessing about it, pretending to have eaten elsewhere, hiding body shape, loss of periods, feeling cold, sleep problems, moodiness, physical under-development, downy hair growth and dental problems due to vomiting. Bulimics: binge-eating, sore throat and related infections, dental problems from vomiting, missed periods, disappearing after meals, puffy skin, dehydration and using laxatives.



You can't make somebody eat, but you can give your teenager the opportunity to talk about their problems. Let them know that you are there to support them, no matter what.



Encourage them to talk about any under-lying problems that may be triggering the eating disorder. If they feel they can't talk to you, encourage them to talk to a friend, relative, teacher or social worker.

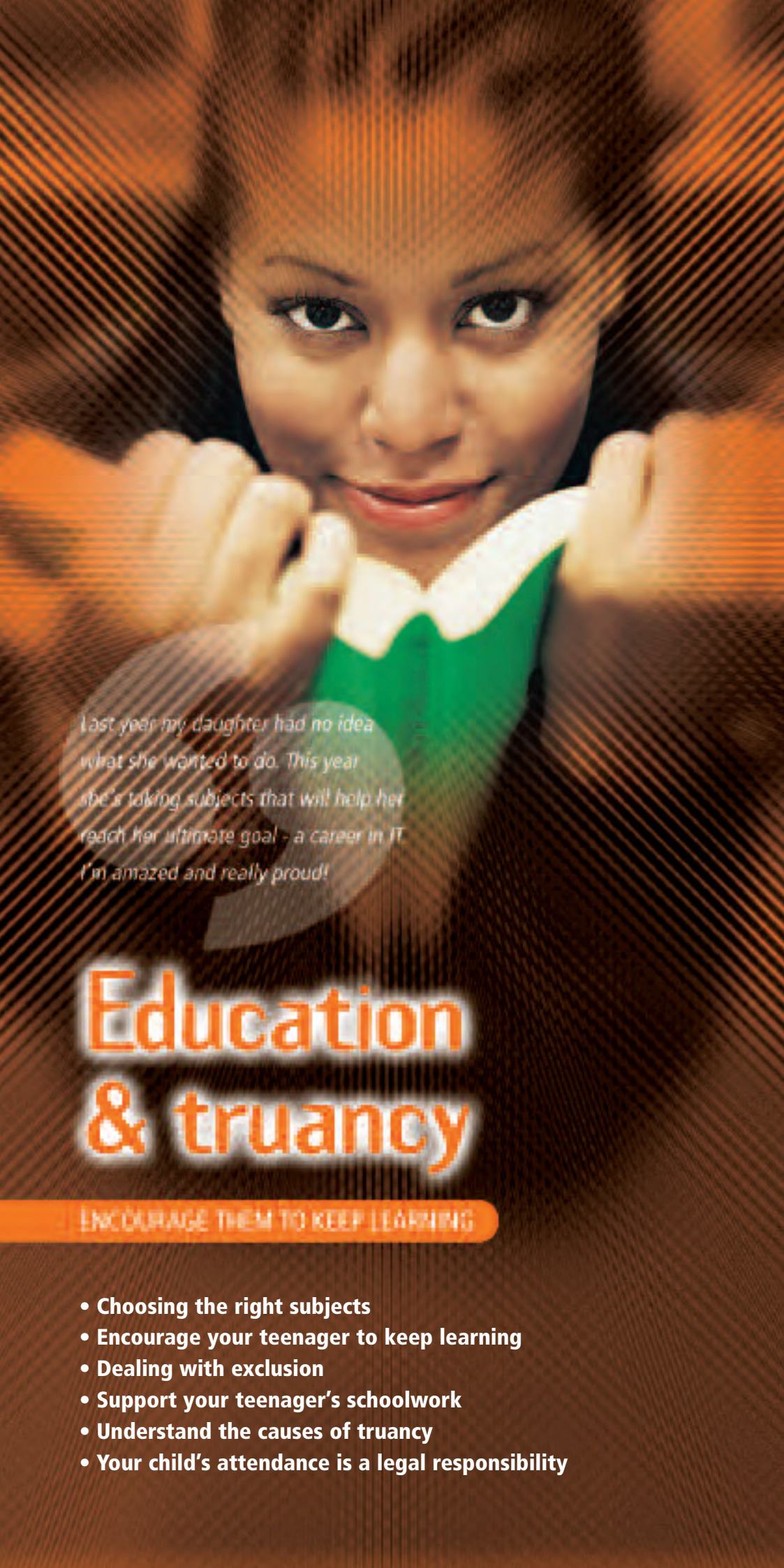


Girls are particularly susceptible to eating disorders during their teenage years. If your child knows she can talk to you about any issues troubling her, she is less likely to use food as a way of dealing with her problems.



- Beating Eating Disorders
0845 634 1414 www.b-eat.co.uk
- YoungMinds Parents' Information Service
0800 018 2138
www.youngminds.org.uk
- NHS Direct 0845 4647
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



Last year my daughter had no idea what she wanted to do. This year she's taking subjects that will help her reach her ultimate goal - a career in IT. I'm amazed and really proud!

Education & truancy

ENCOURAGE THEM TO KEEP LEARNING

- **Choosing the right subjects**
- **Encourage your teenager to keep learning**
- **Dealing with exclusion**
- **Support your teenager's schoolwork**
- **Understand the causes of truancy**
- **Your child's attendance is a legal responsibility**

M

Modern secondary schools offer a wide range of learning choices for young people, encouraging them to continue their education for longer.

Schools now have frameworks in place to give young people the support they need to make choices about their future education. This will help them to choose subjects and skills that will keep them interested in their education until they are 18, work through difficulties they will come across during that time and to aim for longer-term learning and career objectives.

Connexions Service will encourage your child to continue their education past the age of 16, whether at school, 6th form college or other colleges of further education, for instance, in art and design, or by combining work and education, such as work related learning or an apprenticeship, thereby improving their future career prospects.

While the choice of subjects and skills taken is up to your teenager, there is much you can do to encourage their interest in education. Investing time in your teenager's education will give them the support they need to make informed judgements about learning and help them to realise their career aspirations. Find out what their school's education plan is and how you can help support your child. Take an interest in the subjects they have decided to take and help with homework, when you can. As it is probably some while since you were in school yourself, ask your school for advice or take advantage of the many websites which contain education pages (see Contacts) following the curriculum.

If your child is excluded

If your teenager is getting into trouble at school and has lost interest in learning, talk to them and their teacher at the earliest opportunity to try and discuss ways of improving behaviour before it gets to a point when exclusion is a possibility. If your child is excluded but you disagree with the decision, you have a right to a meeting with the school's Governing Body.

How to prevent truancy

If truancy is a problem, you need to find out why your child wants to miss school. They may find school intimidating or boring, lack self-confidence, feel they are failing or are being bullied. The school will help you get your child back into regular attendance with the help of Local Education Authority (LEA) professionals, such as Education Welfare Officers.

Reinforce the importance that education and regular school attendance has on their future. Take an interest in what happens during their school day and with homework. Praise their achievements and listen to any concerns they may have, such as bullying. Talk to teachers about their progress and any problem areas.



If your teenager is getting into trouble at school, discuss ways of getting them interested again in their education. Persistent negative behaviour can lead to exclusion, so make sure they are aware the consequences their actions will have on their future educational and job prospects.



Find out about the subjects your teenager is taking and take an active interest in their school and homework. Use course material and educational websites to help you. Encourage independent thinking and allow them to express their ideas.



Encourage your child's education at every opportunity. Talk to the school about their education and career choices and how you can best support your teenager.




It is your responsibility to ensure your child regularly attends school. Always take an interest in their school life and activities, so your child knows they can talk to you about any problems before they get out of perspective.



- www.raisingkids.co.uk
- www.qca.org.uk
- www.dcsf.gov.uk
- www.bbc.co.uk/schools
- ACE (The Advisory Centre for Education)
020 7704 9822 www.ace-ed.org.uk
- National Grid for Learning
www.ngfl.gov.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



I don't agree with my son leaving school at 16, but he's proved to me that he's serious about getting training on the job while also earning money to give him independence.

Employment

BRIGHT FUTURE, BRIGHT PROSPECTS

- **Work-related training means better job prospects**
- **Apprenticeships offer work and qualifications**
- **Prepare your child for interview**
- **Work opportunities while still at school**

The longer your child spends in full-time education, the better their job prospects are for the future. The less qualifications a young person has, the more limited their choice of employment, but this doesn't mean your teenager won't find a job they find interesting and rewarding.

Your teenager may be eager to leave the constraints of school at 16 and get out into the adult world to earn money. They may leave school on the last Friday in June in the academic year they are sixteen. Young people cannot leave school at Easter. If they are determined to make this choice, encourage them to apply for a job which also has opportunities to train and gain a qualification.

For instance, apprenticeships offer work-based training for young people so that they can learn while on the job, building up skills and qualifications as well as earning money.

Help prepare your child

There are many ways you can help your teenager to apply for a job that's right for them. Sit down and talk about what their interests and hobbies are and whether they would like to take these further through work. You, their school or local job centre can help them to prepare a curriculum vitae (CV) which will give an account of their experience and qualifications.

Before any job interview they should find out as much as they can about their potential employer so they can ask relevant questions, plan what they would like to say about themselves, explain why they are interested in the job and find out if they are expected to take any test. Make sure they have appropriate clothes for the interview, that they know where they are going and who is to interview them and to leave plenty of time to get to their destination.

Work experience

Most schools encourage children in Year 10 or 11 to do up to two weeks work experience, preferably in a job related to their interests. Although unpaid, it gives young people a chance to be treated as an adult, to learn responsibilities, follow instructions and to utilise their key skills.

Another way of gaining experience - and earning money - is to have a part time job. This may be before or after school, such as a newspaper round, at the weekend, or during the school holidays.

Young people must have a work permit that allows them to work; applications can be made through the Education Welfare Service. It is illegal to employ someone without a work permit - this includes parents providing work for children, whether the work is paid or voluntary.



If your child tells you they want to leave school at 16, make sure they know how much this is going to restrict their choice of jobs for the future. Employers prefer candidates with skills and qualifications.



If your teenager is determined to leave school, encourage them to choose a job that offers training or opportunities to gain qualifications, improving their long-term career prospects.



If you can, try to persuade your child to stay on in further or higher education and ask their school for advice. Discuss job alternatives, such as an apprenticeship or work-related education.

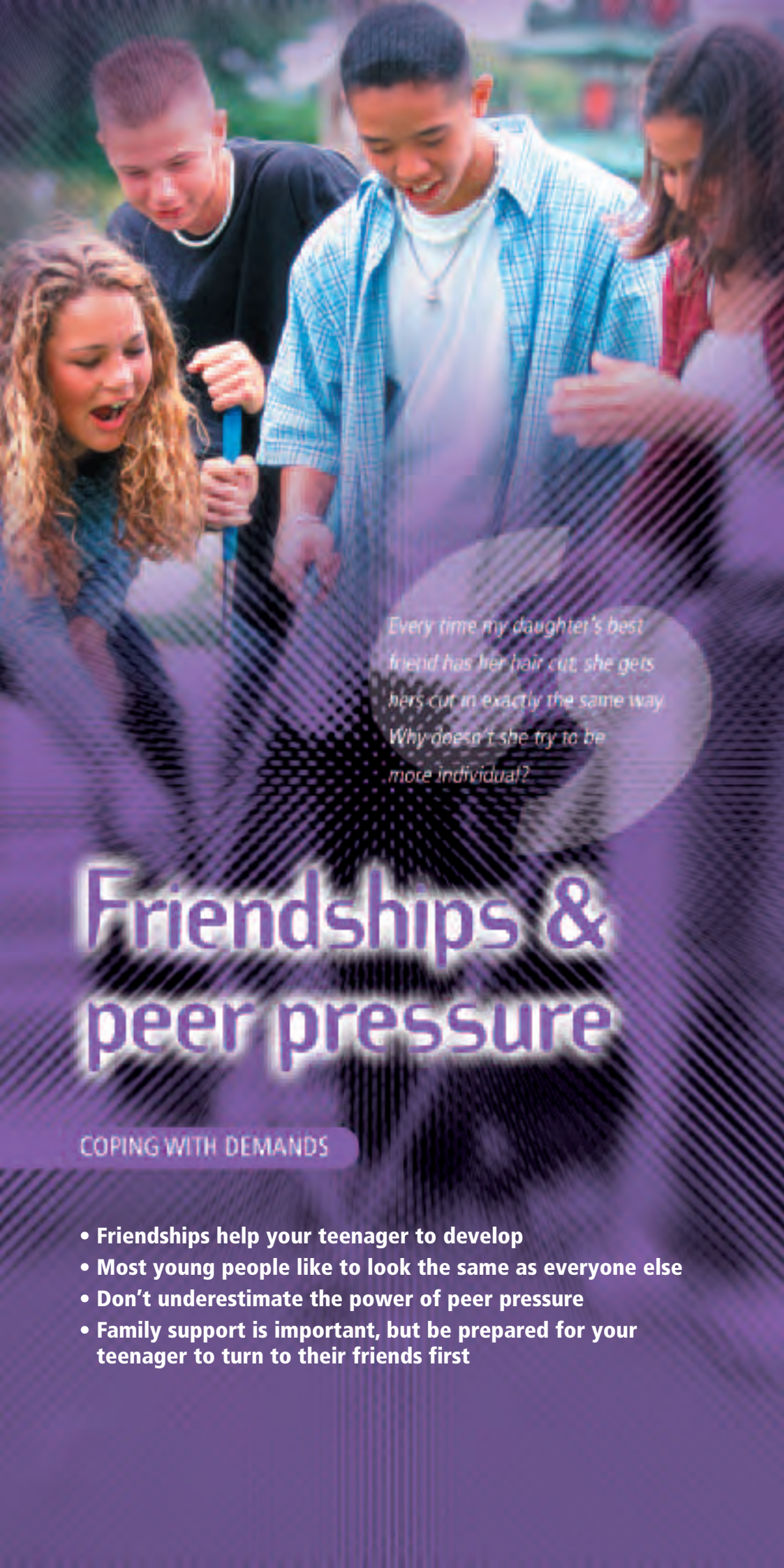


You can do much to encourage your child's interest in their education before they reach 16. By choosing the right subjects at 14, they are less likely to want to leave at the first opportunity and by continuing their education will gain valuable knowledge and qualifications.



- LinkLocal (Train Learn Work) 0800 0641 481
- www.worktrain.gov.uk
- www.connexions-direct.com
- www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk
- www.parentscentre.gov.uk
- www.apprenticeships.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



Every time my daughter's best friend has her hair cut, she gets hers cut in exactly the same way. Why doesn't she try to be more individual?

Friendships & peer pressure

COPING WITH DEMANDS

- Friendships help your teenager to develop
- Most young people like to look the same as everyone else
- Don't underestimate the power of peer pressure
- Family support is important, but be prepared for your teenager to turn to their friends first

Friendships are vitally important to teenagers. Having a close friend or group of friends and belonging to a peer group helps boost their confidence, widens their social skills, helps them to develop their own identity and to learn about the values and opinions of others.

The meaning of friendship

Girls tend to have smaller, more close-knit, but changeable groups of friends. Fitting in with a peer group and sharing secrets is very important, with how you look, what band you like, and the length of your hair all needing to be 'right'.

Friendships are important to boys, but they tend to form larger, looser groups of friends, playing sports with some mates, or just hanging out with others. Boys want to look good, but they don't discuss fashion in the same depth as girls. Worries about who's 'doing it' and who's not are of more importance.

Peer groups

Peer groups often form in school or at after school clubs and activities and belonging to a group is extremely important. It may be the group that likes pop or rock, or is into sports. Young people may want to be part of that group because their friends are, even if they don't really like the bands everyone else seems to. As they get into their later teens, though, they are more likely to speak out on their likes and dislikes rather than going with the crowd.

Putting on the pressure

Many teenagers feel under pressure to do things they are not happy about, because they don't want to stick out from the crowd by saying no. This might be wearing certain clothes or shopping in the right places, but on a more serious level, this might involve truanting from school, experimenting with alcohol and/or drugs, shoplifting, or going further with a boyfriend or girlfriend than they feel ready to.

Worried about friends

You may feel worried about the influence certain friends are having on your teenager, or they themselves may be worried about things they are doing and not know how to talk to you about it. Support your child by letting them know they can talk to you and that you will help without being judgmental. You will be helping your teenager to rely on their own instincts and values, building up an emotional resilience that will help them into adulthood.



If your child is unusually quiet or seems depressed, there may be friendship problems. Unexplained money or new clothes, unusual behaviour which you think may be caused by drink or drugs and avoiding talking to you about their activities are all signs that your teenager may be getting into trouble - and it's unlikely that they're doing it alone.



Find out if your teenager is having any problems at school or socially. Ask if there is anything you can do to help and let them know you are always there for them. If the problem persists, talk to the school or a social worker.



Talk to your teenager calmly and try not to be judgmental, as this will only make it less likely that they open up to you and feel they can trust you. Problems or friendship break-ups that may seem minor to you are very important to your teenager.



Even though you may not be the first person your teenager turns to when troubled, you are still an important source of support. Prevent your child from internalising problems by letting them know you are always there for them when needed.



- www.bbc.co.uk/parenting
- www.raisingkids.co.uk
- Parentline Plus
0808 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

My 14-year-old son was spending hours on the computer every evening. As well as worrying that he might become addicted, he was so secretive, I realised I had no idea who he was contacting and what sort of personal information he might be giving out.



Internet abuse & exploitation

NEW TECHNOLOGY, OLD PROBLEM

- The Internet is fun and informative, but guidance is needed
- Family internet rules encourage safer use
- Paedophiles use the internet to contact children
- Understand the internet and help your child



Secretive internet use, changes in behaviour, inappropriate sexual questions, leaving clues such as emails that they are having intimate chats with others, problems at school, not telling you where they are going or who they are meeting.



Set up and stick to your internet-use ground rules. Learn all you can about the internet and how to use it yourself so you can understand what your child is viewing and whether it is appropriate.



Discuss with your child the dangers of chat rooms and viewing inappropriate websites. Make sure they know that any personal information, including their real name, should not be passed on to anyone else. Be open-minded about the teen websites your child may view (refer to back of handbook), but let them know that if they are worried about anything they see or read on the internet they can ask you about it.



Keep the computer in a family room, with the monitor facing outwards, so you can always see what's on screen. Discuss which websites your child is looking at and take a look for yourself. Make sure your child is aware of the dangers.



- www.thinkuknow.co.uk
- www.ceop.gov.uk
- www.childnet-int.org/kia
- www.iwf.gov.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

The internet is a wonderful and quick resource for young people to access information, broaden their knowledge, keep in contact with friends or meet new ones.

Unfortunately, the internet is also an easy tool for child exploitation. Paedophiles, who are experienced in manipulating young people, use chat rooms to become friendly, often by pretending to be the same age. Other risks include people who want to gain personal information for fraudulent use, and the very real addictiveness of constant internet use can lead to an unhealthy lifestyle.

Keep it safe

The best way of keeping an eye on internet use is by keeping the computer in a family room, rather than in a bedroom, so you will naturally see what's going on. Learn how to use a computer, access internet sites and try out a chat room for yourself. Check out which sites your children are visiting to see if they are acceptable.

Ask other parents to recommend chat rooms or websites. Look for sites with full-time moderators (these monitor messages in chat rooms), and which include clear guidelines for use, child-friendly advice, warnings and methods of reporting unwelcome approaches.


You can also buy software filters which block access to websites with a sexual content. While effective, these don't make internet use totally safe so it is still much better for you to take an active interest in the sites your child is browsing.

Set ground rules

- Limit the amount of time your child spends on the internet - and stick to it.
- Discuss the kind of websites they can visit which are appropriate for their age.
- Make it clear that your child must never give out their real name, address, home or mobile phone number, school name, password or bank details or post photos of themselves on the internet.
- They should always let you know if someone is asking questions or wanting details they don't feel happy about, without fear of being rebuked.

It's important that your child understands why there needs to be rules. Explain that people they chat to on the internet may not be who they seem and that paedophiles are experienced in 'grooming' young people on the internet. Remind them that strangers on the internet can be just as dangerous as strangers on the street and should be treated with the same caution.

If your child is secretive when using the computer, if you notice behavioural changes, sleep disturbances, bed wetting or changes in routine, or they are asking about sexual matters, you should look into underlying reasons and encourage them to talk about any anxieties they may have related to internet use.



I'm excited for my son now that he's leaving home, but I also worry about how he's going to cope with paying the rent and bills. He's never had to manage money before.

Living away from home

BEING PREPARED

- **Prepare your teenager**
- **Teach your teenager to budget**
- **Encourage them to stay in touch**
- **Getting support**

When your teenager leaves home to live away from you for the first time, it's a big step for both of you. Whether they are going because further education - such as college or university - is taking them to another city, or because of training or work, it means your relationship is moving on to a different stage. The adjustment may be both exciting and difficult for both of you.

Most young people don't think twice about the fact that their meals are cooked, their clothes are washed and ironed, the phone is always connected and the house is generally kept habitable. When they move out of home it can be a big shock to realise that they've got to organise all these things themselves - and will probably have little idea of the cost of things.

There are many things they need to take into account before setting up on their own and you can help them by chatting about:

- Paying rent: setting up standing orders or a direct debit, signing a contract, rights as a tenant.
- Paying bills: putting money aside for council tax, utilities such as gas, electricity, water and telephone, travel, as well as food bills and socialising.
- Eating healthily: while you can't expect miracles, you can explain what makes up a balanced diet, with a good range of fruit and vegetables. Help them to cook a few simple dishes before they go.
- Living with others: they will need to compromise, take into account others' wishes, share chores and living expenses.

While your teenager will be enjoying their new found independence, encourage them to stay in touch and return home for visits.

Difficulties of being at home

When you're trying to handle someone who's moody and unpredictable, there are constant arguments. You may resent the fact that you are funding their lifestyle and may wish your teenager no longer lived at home. But however they would like to appear, a teenager is still young and vulnerable and the longer they live at home, the more chance they have to build up confidence to deal with the outside world when they finally enter it for good. Even as they are growing up and moving away, they still need your love and support.

If your child wants to leave home against your wishes, put them in touch with their local council. If they are disabled, unemployed or homeless, the Social Housing department may be able to help them.



Tension at home can leave both you and your teenager wishing they lived somewhere else. But try to discuss and resolve problems - the longer your teenager lives at home, the more prepared they will be when they do eventually leave. If your child is keen to leave home, make sure they know exactly what to expect when they have to fend for themselves.



Make sure your teenager is well prepared for living away from home. This will include learning how to budget, how to cook healthy meals for themselves, learning about safety at home and when they are out and learning to live with others.



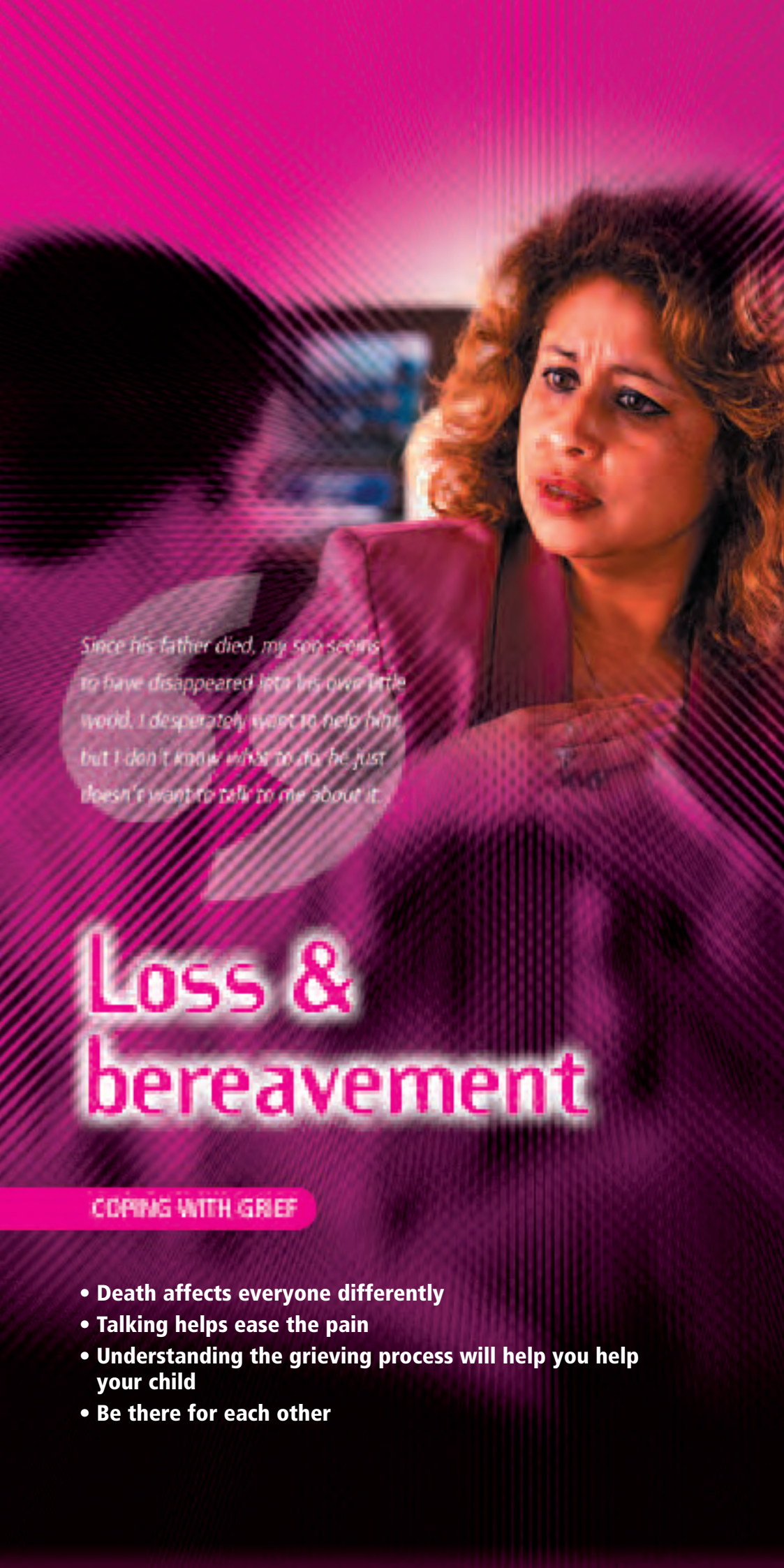
Encourage your teenager to talk about any aspects of living away from home. Remind them that if they get lonely they can always call and return home for visits. They should also be able to talk to their college, university, training or workplace about any issues.



Try to discourage your child from leaving home if you feel they are too young or immature to deal with the complexities of looking after themselves in rented accommodation. Failure to pay rent or bills could lead them to being evicted and made homeless.



- Connexions 0800 800 13 2 19
www.connexions-direct.com
 - www.thesite.org
 - Shelter 0808 800 4444
(24-hour advice line) www.shelter.org.uk
 - www.housemate.org.uk
- For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

A woman with curly hair is shown from the chest up, looking off to the side with a distressed expression. She is holding a pink cushion against her chest. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a living room with a television and some furniture.

Since his father died, my son seems to have disappeared into his own little world. I desperately want to help him, but I don't know what to do, he just doesn't want to talk to me about it.

Loss & bereavement

COPIING WITH GRIEF

- Death affects everyone differently
- Talking helps ease the pain
- Understanding the grieving process will help you help your child
- Be there for each other

Loss or death is difficult for everyone. For young people, not quite being a child anymore but not yet an adult can make it difficult for them to deal with their emotions.

The death of a loved one can seem overwhelming. The death of a pet who has been a part of the family for many years or the loss of a close friend moving away can also be extremely traumatic for young people.

Young people need a lot of patience and understanding to help them work through their grief.

There is no right or wrong way to react and everyone responds in different ways. There will be a range of emotions your teenager is likely to go through:

- Numbness as they try to understand that someone is really not coming back.
- Anger at the person who died, at you, at others or themselves.
- Guilt possibly blaming themselves in some way, or feeling guilty because they don't think they're grieving 'enough'.
- Fear that the world as they know it has changed forever.
- Sadness at never seeing that person again.
- Relief, if the person who died was in pain or suffering.
- Depressed, feeling that life has lost all meaning.

Their behaviour may change as they deal with their emotions and try to come to terms with their loss. They may find it hard to cope with day to day realities. They may take their anger out on you, get into trouble at school, find it hard to concentrate on schoolwork or want to go out with friends more, pushing the boundaries and maybe experimenting with alcohol or drugs, as a way of forgetting.

How you can help

It is for young people to think they are the only ones who have suffered bereavement and that no one else understands, but talking to other people will help ease the process. Talk to your child about what has happened as much as they want to, but they may find this hard, so encourage friends or a teacher to be there for them, too. They may also benefit from talking to a bereavement counsellor.

Make sure the school knows of their loss and that they will need time and understanding as they work through their bereavement. The bereavement organisation, Cruse, also has a website specifically aimed at young people (see right).

If you too are suffering, then it is going to be particularly hard for you to not only deal with your own emotions, but those of your children, too. Try to keep talking to each other, so you can share your grief, rather than each of you grieving alone.



Everyone reacts to death differently and it takes some people longer than others to come to terms with a loss. Give your child as much time and patience as they need, but if you think they are having long-term difficulties, you may want to think about talking to a bereavement counsellor.



Take your cue from your child. You may not be the person they find it easiest to talk to, so encourage others to be there for them. But always let them know that you are there for them if they need you.



Your child may think it's too painful for you to talk about a loved one who has died. Let them know that there are times when you want to talk. Talking about someone who has died helps keep their spirit alive. Remember to let them know it's alright to still laugh or have fun - it doesn't mean you're grieving any less.



Keep the lines of communication open - the more you talk, the easier the healing process will be. As a parent, you can help your child through this difficult time, by talking about your past experiences and how you felt when someone died.



- Cruse 0870 167 1677 (Helpline)
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk
- www.rd4u.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

*I don't mean to keep hitting her,
but she makes me so angry when
she doesn't do what she's told that
I just lash out. Now she won't talk
to me or tell me where she's been.*



Missing from home

AND RUNNING AWAY

- Know where your teenager is
- Give family support - your child is at risk
- Physical and sexual abuse can be factors in running away
- Get help for your family

Y

Young people love being independent and part of that independence is not having to always tell you where they are.

This is fine if you have built up trust between you and can usually rely on them to make sensible decisions and be home within a certain time frame. But difficulties occur if your child often stays out late or even disappears for a night or two, or they refuse to tell you where they have been or who with. If this is the case, unfortunately, the chances are they are more likely to be experimenting with drugs and alcohol, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation or may be getting into trouble with the police.

Home sweet home?

If your teenager is spending a lot of time out of the house and obviously does not want to be at home with family, you need to look at why this is. Is there emotional conflict at home or physical abuse? Do family members have trouble communicating and find it hard to talk to each other calmly and constructively? Are you worried about your teenager's friends or where they might be hanging out? Have you established ground rules or boundaries that you ask your children to stick to make home life easier?

Consequences

Whether your child doesn't come home when asked to, stays out late on a regular basis, or at times doesn't come home at all and claims to have been 'staying with mates', the consequences may be serious. If your teenager doesn't want to be at home, it may be because they do not feel they are getting the family support they need or worse, suffering mental, physical or sexual abuse. If they are out at all hours and don't want to tell you where they've been it is more likely they are mixing with people involved in drugs, alcohol, anti-social or even criminal behaviour. They are also more likely to be missing school. You should inform the police if your child goes missing.

Running away

Running away is a desperate option for young people, who are at risk of physical violence, sexual exploitation and drugs when homeless on the streets. Most run away because of arguments or violence within the family, because of pregnancy or physical and sexual abuse. According to the charity, ChildLine, 37% of boys and 63% of girls calling about running away or being homeless also talked about being physically and/or sexually abused. If your child has run away and you want to find them, contact your local council for advice.



Staying out late, refusing to tell you where they've been, not coming home at night, truancy from school are all signs that your teenager could be getting into trouble.



Setting ground rules, such as what time to be in by, will let your child know what is expected of them. Your child may have reasons for not wanting to be at home, such as family conflict or physical or sexual abuse. Let your child know you are there for them if they want to discuss problems.



If your teenager doesn't want to be at home and can't talk to you about what's going on in their life, the lines of communication have broken down between you and you need to re-build them. Choose a time when you can sit quietly together and talk about any issues and how you can re-build your relationship.

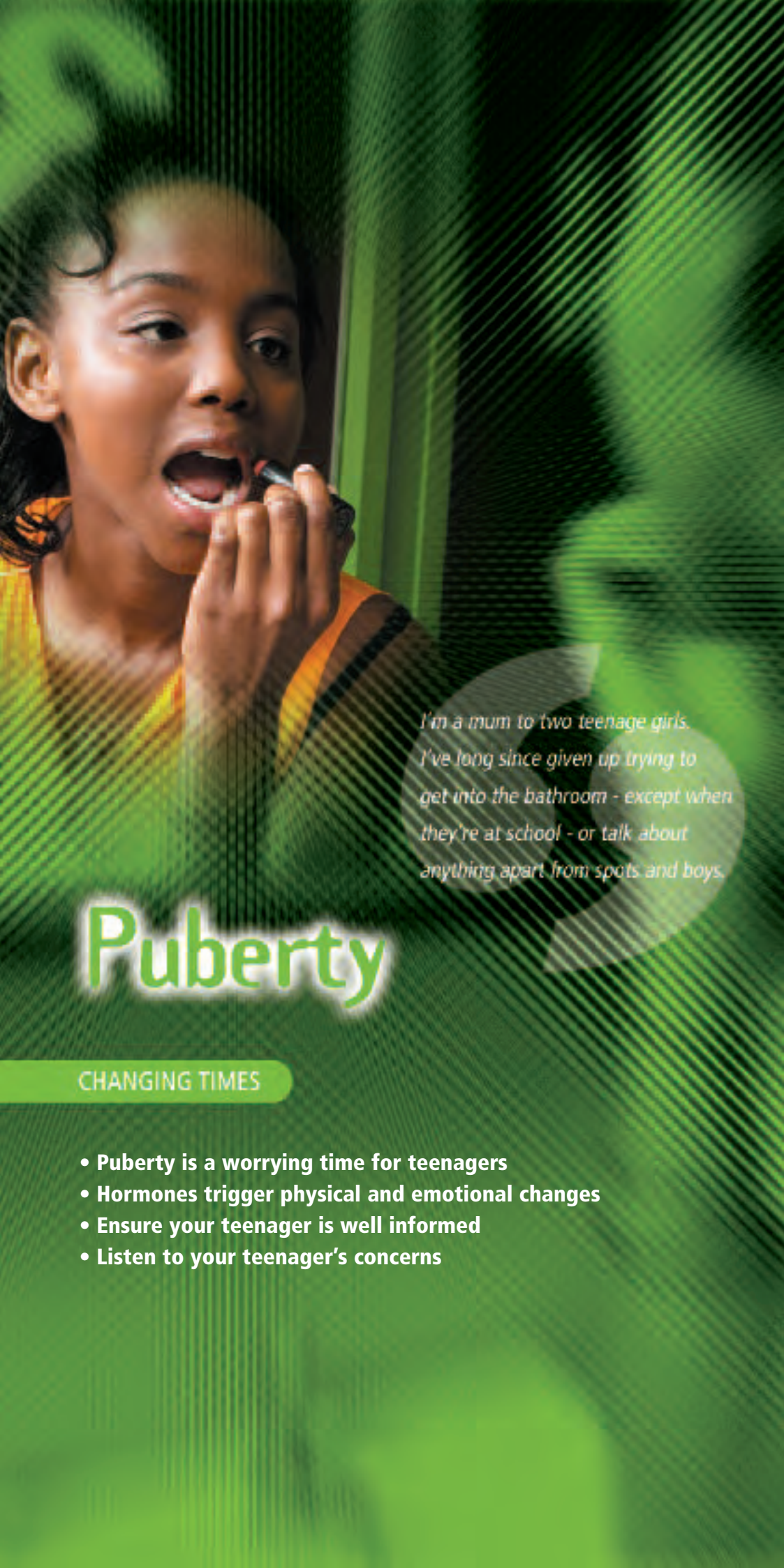


Communicating is the key to a good relationship. If your teenager knows they can talk to you about any problems, they can be dealt with before it gets too late. Your child's safety is your responsibility, so if you have a good relationship with your child they are more likely to tell you where they are going and what they are doing.



- ChildLine 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk
- Shelterline National Helpline
0808 800 4444
www.housemate.org.uk
- Missing Persons Helpline
0500 700 700
www.missingpeople.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



*I'm a mum to two teenage girls.
I've long since given up trying to
get into the bathroom - except when
they're at school - or talk about
anything apart from spots and boys.*

Puberty

CHANGING TIMES

- Puberty is a worrying time for teenagers
- Hormones trigger physical and emotional changes
- Ensure your teenager is well informed
- Listen to your teenager's concerns

Puberty is a time of enormous physical change for teenagers. While they may be excited at certain changes, they may be less happy at others.

Teenagers also develop at different speeds, so realising that her best friend has started her period when your daughter hasn't, or your son notices he's not developing the strong physique of others in his class, can be of real concern.

Puberty in both boys and girls is starting earlier. Hormones - testosterone in boys and oestrogen and progesterone in girls, trigger many changes.

- Boys' bodies may start to change from the age of 10, with sexual development from 13. This will include a deepening voice, developing muscles, hair growth, more active sweat glands and growth spurts. The penis grows larger and regularly becomes erect, often when there are sexual thoughts, but embarrassingly for them, in very normal situations, too. Boys also begin to experience 'wet dreams', when they ejaculate during sleep.
- Puberty in girls can begin from around nine years old. Breasts and nipples swell and the body becomes more curvaceous, body hair appears, sweat glands become more active and periods start. They will also fantasise about boys and relationships.

This is a worrying time for teenagers, who naturally compare what's happening to them with their friends. Girls may worry about starting their period earlier or later than others, or that one of their breasts is bigger than the other, or that their hair is always greasy. Boys may be concerned that they're not as muscular as their mates, or acne seems to have taken over their face, or their penis looks too small. For both sexes, concerns about having a girl/boyfriend and when and how to have sex (30% have sex before the age of 16) will be on their minds.

Make sure they're informed

Misconceptions lead to fear and mistakes, so make sure your child is well informed. If you're not sure how to explain the facts of life or what to expect during puberty, there are many books available and websites aimed at teenagers. Why not sit down together and go through them, so you can discuss any topics of concern? Boys may appreciate doing this with their dad, rather than getting embarrassed with mum.

Under 16 - their rights

Children under the age of 16 legally have the right to confidential advice and treatment from doctors, nurses and other health workers, without your knowledge. This means your child can receive advice on having sex, and, if it is believed your child is mature enough to make the decision, to receive contraception or have an abortion. Although every effort will be made to encourage an under-16 to talk to a parent, the final decision is up to them, unless it is thought their life is threatened in some way.



As well as dealing with emotional changes brought on by hormones, your child will have to deal with obvious physical changes such as pubic hair, developing breasts or a bigger penis, period pain and common problems such as body odour, greasy hair, spots and bad breath.



Be patient. This is a difficult time emotionally and physically for your teenager as they learn to handle their changing appearance and fluctuating emotions. The more a young person understands what's happening to them, the easier they will find it to cope. There are many websites aimed at teenagers, but they could be useful for you too to brush up on some facts (see below).



By their teenage years your child should know the facts of life and be prepared for new experiences such as periods or wet dreams. You will probably have to answer a lot of questions about puberty. Don't be embarrassed and be well prepared with simple and factual answers.

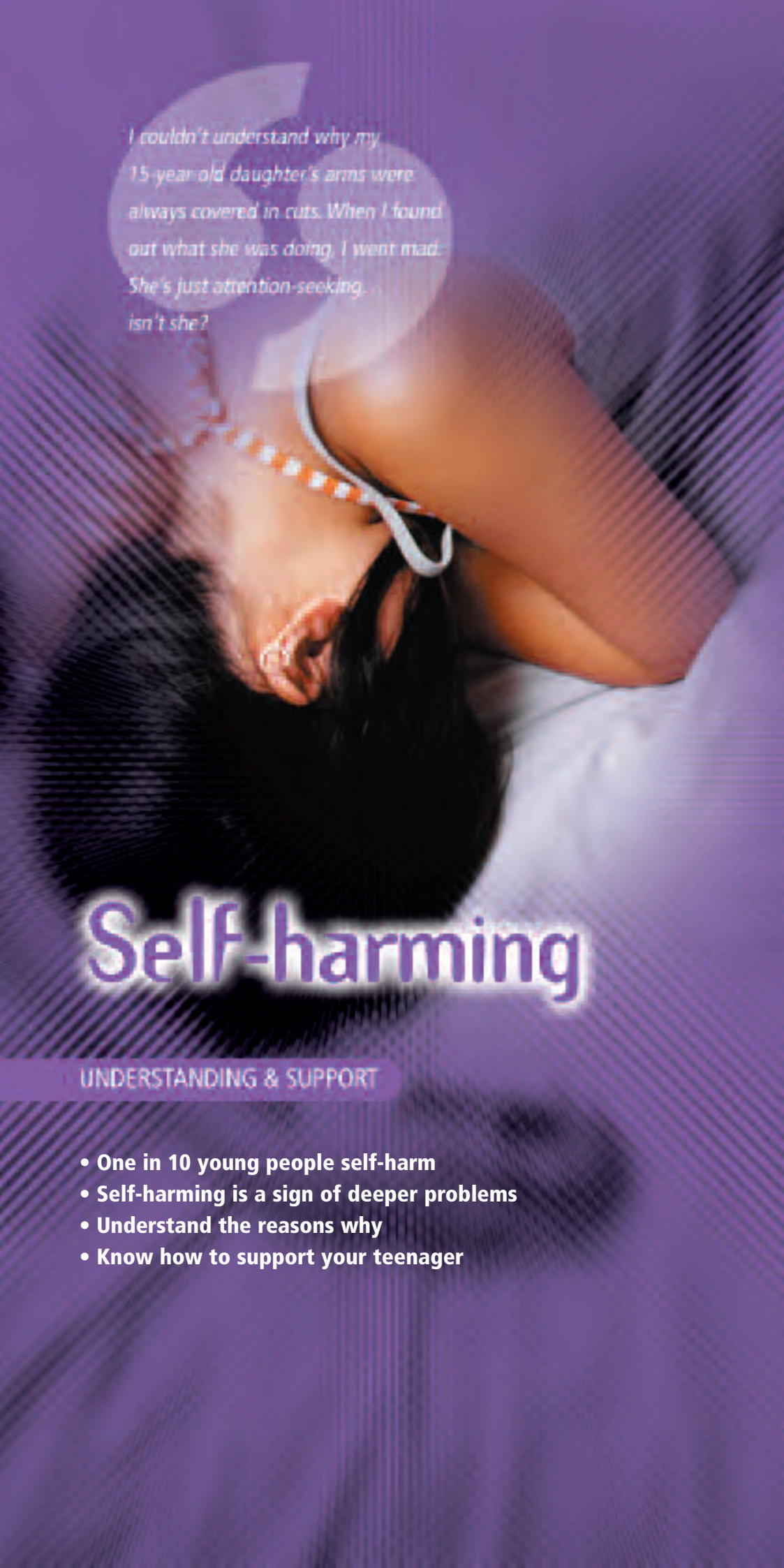


The more informed your teenager is, the better he or she will be able to cope with the changes that come with puberty. Encourage chats to prevent any worries or problems getting out of perspective.



- www.bbc.co.uk/health
- Parentline Plus 0800 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- www.teenagehealthfreak.com
- www.thesite.org
- Brook Advisory Centres
0800 018 5023 www.brook.org.uk
- NHS Direct 0845 4647
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- www.likeitis.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



I couldn't understand why my 15-year-old daughter's arms were always covered in cuts. When I found out what she was doing, I went mad. She's just attention-seeking... isn't she?

Self-harming

UNDERSTANDING & SUPPORT

- One in 10 young people self-harm
- Self-harming is a sign of deeper problems
- Understand the reasons why
- Know how to support your teenager

Self-harming - or self-injury, as it is also called - describes a range of actions carried out to cause oneself harm.

This may include cutting, burning or scalding, hitting, picking skin, head-banging against a wall or other object or taking an overdose.

According to a recent report carried out by the charity, Samaritans, one in 10 young people self-harm and young women are more likely to self-harm than men. While the aim is to hurt, it is not usually to kill themselves and it may carry on for years without getting any worse.

People who self-harm tend to use it as a way of dealing with problems, such as depression, bullying, abuse or family neglect. Self-harmers say it is a way of being in control and use it as a coping mechanism, as cutting or burning actually brings them physical relief from their state of mind.

Self-harming is not just attention-seeking behaviour, as it is most often carried out in private and kept secret from family and friends. Those who self-harm tend to have low self-esteem and therefore need attention and support, but because of the stigma attached to it, are less likely to seek help. The problem is serious whether the person lightly cuts themselves or inflicts deeper wounds. Like being addicted, a self-harmer can't just decide to stop - they need help and support to get over their problem. And while most cases of harming aren't life-threatening, it does increase the likelihood of a more serious incident or a suicide attempt in the future.

How you can help

Knowing that your teenager is deliberately hurting themselves can make you feel deeply distressed, angry and powerless. But what your teenager needs is your calm understanding and support. Listen to what they are telling you without being judgmental, showing anger or disgust or trying to force them to stop. If this is their way of coping, other methods of dealing with stress and problems need to be sought and tried before they can address the harming. Helping them learn to deal with stress and preventing the triggers that cause them to self-harm will be more useful.

If your teenager finds it difficult to express their feelings to you, encourage them to confide in another family member, teacher, friend, youth worker or social worker.

Make sure your child has first aid supplies to treat injuries and prevent infection. If a wound looks serious, or you're not sure what your child has ingested (such as painkillers), call 999. You should also encourage your child to call you or the emergency services if they ever self-harm more seriously than they meant to.

Encourage your child to talk to their GP, who can discuss alternative ways of dealing with stress and problems, and can refer them for psychiatric help. Individual counselling, support groups and practical support are all beneficial.



Look out for unexplained injuries such as cuts, burns, scalds, torn skin and bruises. Your child is also probably being more secretive.



Try to find out if your child is self-harming. Think of reasons why they might be doing so, so that you can discuss problems and other ways of dealing with them.



Although distressing, don't be judgmental or angry or try to force your child to stop. Make time to really listen to them and encourage them to talk about their problems. Suggest they see their GP who can refer them to professional help, if necessary.

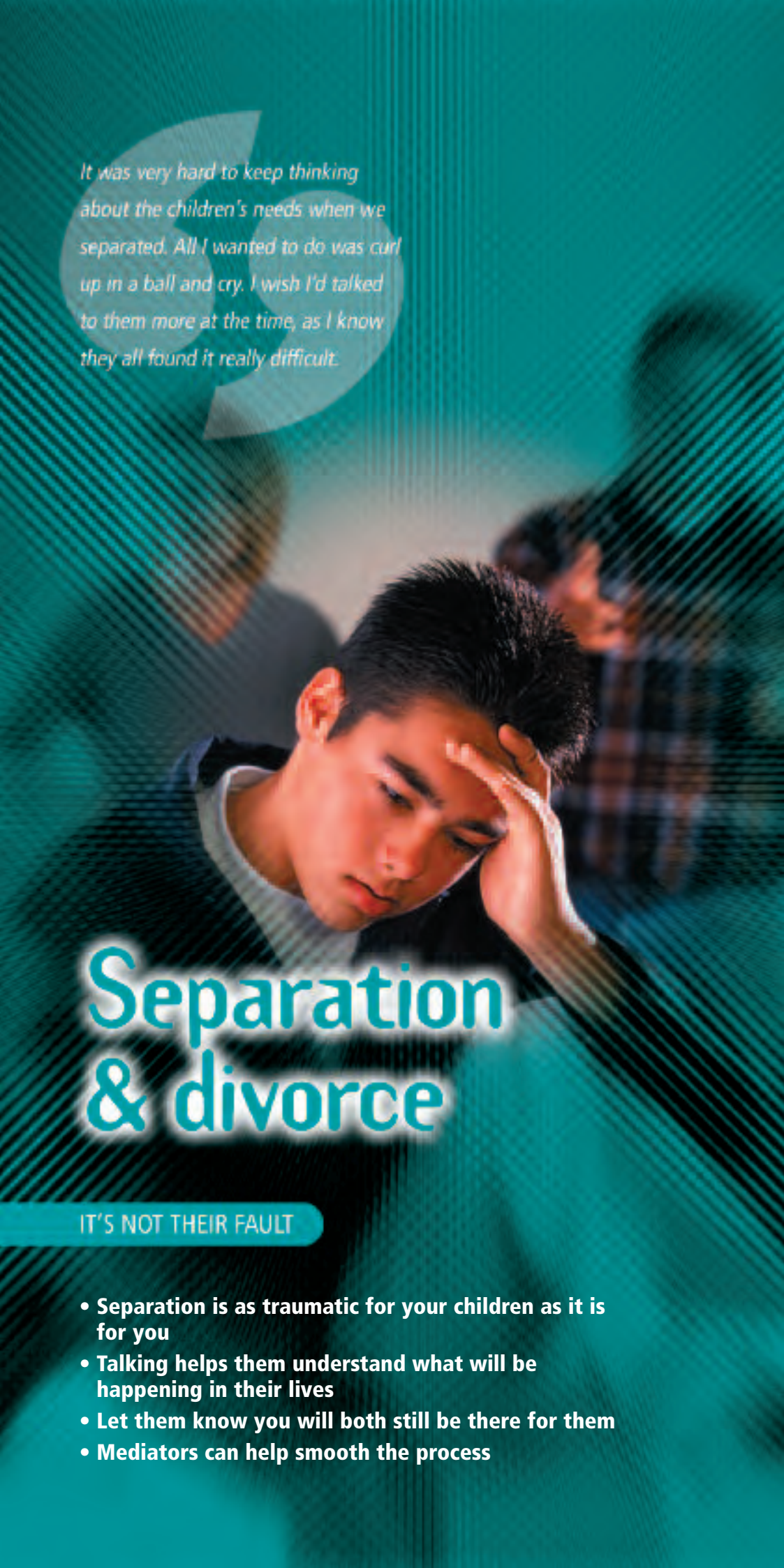


People who self-harm feel isolated and unsupported. Giving your teenager time to talk to you, discussing concerns they have and letting them know you are there for them will help prevent them turning on themselves when they face problems.



- ChildLine 0800 1111 (24-hour helpline) www.childline.org.uk
- The Samaritans 08457 90 90 90 (24 hour) www.samaritans.org
- NCH - The children's charity www.nch.org.uk/selfharm
- National Self-Harm Network www.nshn.co.uk www.helen.ukpet.com
- National Children's Bureau www.selfharm.org.uk

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.



It was very hard to keep thinking about the children's needs when we separated. All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry. I wish I'd talked to them more at the time, as I know they all found it really difficult.

Separation & divorce

IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT

- Separation is as traumatic for your children as it is for you
- Talking helps them understand what will be happening in their lives
- Let them know you will both still be there for them
- Mediators can help smooth the process

When a relationship breaks down, it is traumatic for the whole family. While you may think it is kinder to try and protect your children from the details, the reality is that the more children understand what is going on, the easier they find it to cope.

If possible, have both parents present when you explain what's going to happen and why. Try not to criticise each other or fight in front of them and reinforce the idea that, although you will be living separately, you will both be there for them whenever they need you. They will experience a range of emotions during the process of separation or divorce, including feeling hurt, confused and rejected, so you need to be patient and understanding of their needs as well as your own.

Children often think that their parents' separation is somehow their fault, that they've done something wrong, triggering the parent to leave. They may also feel that if they do things differently in the future you may get back together. It's vital that your child understands that what's happened to your relationship is not their fault.

While most children want a good relationship with both parents, a young person can view what's happened differently to their parents and may blame one of you for the break-up, siding with the other parent. Hopefully, this will be a passing phase and by explaining the facts, a good relationship can be kept with both parents.

Learning to listen

Talk to your children and listen to what they have to say. How you handle the break-up is important for their well-being and stability. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and involve them in making decisions about the future. For instance, as well as feeling like they are losing a parent in some way, they may also be worried that they will have to move house or change schools, so keep them informed of what may need to happen. Talk to your children about who they will live with and where, and what other changes may have to occur. Even though you are going through a difficult time yourself, your child will also be feeling a sense of loss and hurt, so let them know what is happening at each stage of the process to help them deal with their feelings.

Making arrangements

If you and your partner are finding it hard to communicate and agree arrangements, you can seek help from your local Mediation Service. As well as helping you to sort things out, they can offer help and support for children, too.



Criticising or fighting with your partner in front of your children is only going to hurt them. Try to remain civilised when talking about what's going to happen - how you handle the situation will have a big impact on their future.



Keep your children informed about what's happening and how it will affect their lives. Show them that their well-being is the main concern for both of you, by acknowledging their feelings and wishes.



Children often think the break-up of their parents' relationship is their fault. Explain why you are splitting up and that it is nothing to do with things they may have said or done. Always give them a chance to talk about their feelings and express any worries.




If separation or divorce is inevitable, then trying to prevent your children feeling hurt, guilty, or rejected is vital. Talk to them so they understand why you are separating and how this will affect their lives. Let them know that both of you will do what you can to keep their lives as stable as possible.



- www.dca.gov.uk/family
Government website with tips for handling separation
- www.itsnotyourfault.org
Advice and support for both parents and teenagers

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a clear condom with a red ring. The hand is positioned next to the waistband of a pair of dark blue denim jeans. The background is a solid teal color.

My parents explained so little to me about sex, I had to find out from friends - and half of what they said was wrong. I'm determined that my kids know exactly what to expect and learn about safer sex.

Sexual health

KNOW THE FACTS

- **Well-informed young people wait longer before trying sex**
- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) don't always have symptoms**
- **Some STIs can lead to infertility, if left untreated**
- **Condoms help protect against STIs and pregnancy**
- **How to talk to your teenager**

Children and young people want their parents to be their main source of information about sex. While they may gather information from TV, magazines, friends or PSHE classes at school it is still their parents they trust to tell them about sex and relationships.

It's important that your child learns about sex and relationships and using contraception before they become sexually active. It means they will understand the male and female body, what happens during sex, how to help protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections, prevent unwanted pregnancy and the importance of a loving relationship.

How to educate them

While it may be hard to talk to your child about sex, it is important that you do. Research shows that young people who are well informed about sex and relationships are more likely to delay their first sexual experience. They are also more likely to use condoms and other contraception when they start being sexually active.

The risks of being uninformed are very real. The most common sexually transmitted infections are HIV, chlamydia, herpes and gonorrhea. Chlamydia affects teenage girls more than any other age group and, if untreated, can lead to infertility, as can gonorrhea.

At any age, answer questions they have about sex or their bodies with simple, clear answers. You don't have to know the answer to all the difficult questions they might ask; if you're not sure, say so.

Although the sexual age of consent is 16, one third of young people under this age are already sexually active. Under 16s are legally entitled to confidential advice, contraception and abortion without the knowledge of their parents, if they are deemed mature enough by their GP, health visitor or clinic.

Ensure that your child has access to information about local services and that they can make informed decisions about their health.

Unprotected sex

Emergency contraception is available to young people and can prevent pregnancy in most cases if taken in time - usually up to three days after unprotected sex. If it is three days or more, they may still be able to have an emergency IUD (intra uterine device) fitted. Emergency contraception is FREE from family planning clinics and some pharmacies.

If they have taken emergency contraception and have not had a period within three weeks, they should have a pregnancy test.

Teenage pregnancy

If you believe your child is pregnant, the sooner you can discuss it and she can make an informed decision about her opinions, the better. The longer she does nothing about it, the narrower her options. They need help and understanding, not judgements. Talk to them about their options of abortion, adoption or keeping the baby and the pros and cons of each choice.



Young people are starting to become sexually active younger and younger. Don't think this won't apply to your teenager - by the time you recognise the warning signs that they are having sex, it's too late to give them the advice they need. Make sure they are well informed before they hit puberty.



There are many pamphlets, books and websites which can give you advice on how to talk about sex and relationships with your teenager. The more you read, the more comfortable you will be talking to them about it.



Rather than sitting down and having a one off discussion about sex, sexually transmitted infections and relationships, it's better to draw the topic into natural conversations. Use magazine articles and TV programmes to help bring up subjects and to use as examples.



One third of under-16s are sexually active. The fact is the more informed your teenager is about sex, the longer they are likely to wait for their first experience. They are also more likely to use contraception to prevent sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. Young people want the facts from their parents, so make sure you're well-informed to help them.



- Sexwise 0800 28 29 30 www.ruthinking.co.uk
- Brook Advisory Centres 0800 0185023 www.brook.org.uk
- FPA 0845 310 1334 www.fpa.org.uk
- Marie Stopes 0845 300 8090 www.mariestopes.org.uk
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222 www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- NHS Direct 0845 4647 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Sense CDs www.sensecds.com
- Your GP

For details of helpful local organisations for this topic, please see pages 42-43.

Helpful local organisations

General contact details

- The Family Information Service can provide advice and information on childcare and services for children and young people up to the age of 20 years in Merton. 020 8545 3800 or email fis@merton.gov.uk www.merton.gov.uk/familyinfo
- Merton Youth Service, The Pavilion, Farm Road, Morden, SM4 6RA
020 8640 7050 or
email youth.office@merton.gov.uk
www.merton.gov.uk/youthservice
- INSIGHT in Merton (support for young people run by Merton Youth Service) 020 8687 5226
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau
020 8715 0707
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Adolescent behaviour

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau
020 8715 0707

Anti-social behaviour

- The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU), which is part of Safer Merton, can offer help and advise for all aspects of ASB.
020 8274 5973 (during office hours)
020 8274 4907 (for our 24hr Reporting Line)
Email: ASBUnit@merton.gov.uk
www.safermerton.gov.uk
- Merton Parent Support
Offers group work or one to one support for parents/carers of children aged 8 - 17 yrs who are either at risk of offending, who are truanting from school or have already offended.
They can provide parents with the tools they need to communicate better with their teenager and give them the confidence to tackle issues such as education, drugs and crime.
020 8274 4967

Bullying

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050
- Insight in Merton 020 8687 5226
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau
020 8715 0707

Coming out

- See general contact details above

Depression & mental ill health

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
020 8254 8061 (Please note you will have been referred by your GP, a teacher, a school nurse or another health or educational professional)
- School Nurses 020 8687 4669/4649
- www.suttonandmerton.nhs.uk

Domestic abuse

- Merton Police Community Safety Unit
020 8649 3065 www.safermerton.gov.uk
- National Domestic Violence (24 hours)
partnership between women's aid and refuge
0808 2000 247
- Victim Support Merton 020 8685 1637
- Samaritans 020 8399 6676
- Everyman Project (support & advice for men who are concerned about their violence) 020 7263 8884

Drug & alcohol abuse

- Merton Community Drug & Alcohol Team (DAAT)
020 8725 0618
- Youth Awareness Programme (YAP) 020 8640 9736
- Merton Parent Support
Offers group work or one to one support for parents/carers of children aged 8 - 17 yrs who are either at risk of offending, who are truanting from school or have already offended. They can provide parents with the tools they need to communicate better with their teenager and give them the confidence to tackle issues such as education, drugs and crime. 020 8274 4967

Eating disorders

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
020 8254 8061 (Please note you will have been referred by your GP, a teacher, a school nurse or another health or educational professional).
- Child and Adolescent Outpatient Clinic, Springfield University Hospital 020 8682 6683

Education, truancy & employment

- Connexions 020 8254 3300
www.connexions-southlondon.org.uk
- Merton Education Welfare Service 020 8545 3272
- Merton Parent Support
Offers group work or one to one support for parents/carers of children aged 8 - 17 yrs who are either at risk of offending, who are truanting from school or have already offended. They can provide parents with the tools they need to communicate better with their teenager and give them the confidence to tackle issues such as education, drugs and crime. 020 8274 4967
- Merton College 020 8408 6400
- Job Centres' Wimbledon 020 8700 8100
- Mitcham 020 8687 3000

Friendships & peer pressure

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050
- INSIGHT in Merton 020 8687 5226
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau
020 8715 0707

Internet abuse & exploitation

- Merton Children's Social Care 020 8545 4226 or contact the Police

Living away from home

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050
- INSIGHT in Merton 020 8687 5226
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau 020 8715 0707

Loss & bereavement

- Jigsaw4U 020 8687 1384
www.jigsaw4u.org.uk

Missing from home

- To report a child who is missing contact the Wimbledon Police on 020 8649 1212

Puberty

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050

Self-harming

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) 020 8254 8061 (Please note you will have been referred by your GP, a teacher, a school nurse or another health or educational professional).

Separation & divorce

- Merton Youth Service 020 8640 7050
- INSIGHT in Merton 020 8687 5226
- Mitcham/Morden Citizen's Advice Bureau 020 8715 0707

Sexual health

- Family planning (including under 16s): sexual health helpline 020 8407 3636 www.gettingiton.org.uk
- St Helier Hospital GUM (sexual health) Clinic 020 8296 2543
- St George's Hospital Sexual Health Service 020 8725 3342
- NHS Walk-in Centre St George's Hospital 020 8700 0505
- Brook Advisory Service (Brixton) 020 7787 5020

Teenage pregnancy

- Teenage Parent Adviser 020 8787 4732 or 07876 684 277
- Connexions Teenage Parent Adviser 020 8254 8359 or 07500 608090
- Mitcham Multi-Agency Team 020 8464 4429
- Commonsides Community Development Trust 020 8764 9582
- Health Visitors (contact via GP)
- Midwives (contact via GP) or 020 8296 2990

EVER THOUGHT ABOUT ADOPTION OR FOSTERING?

Contact Merton Adoption and Fostering Team for more information about how you could make a difference to a child's life today.
Call 0800 073 0874 or log-on to www.merton.gov.uk/adoptionandfostering



COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

We are interested in your feedback about how useful this handbook has been. If you have any comments or suggestions, please send them to the Merton LSCB (address, telephone number and email address are on the back of this handbook).



If you would like more information in your own language,
please contact us at the address shown in the bottom box.

Albanian Nëse dëshironi më shumë informacion në gjuhën tuaj, ju lutemi të na kontaktoni në adresën e dhënë në kutinë më poshtë.

Arabic إذا أردت معلومات إضافية بلغتك الأصلية لارتقاء الاتصال بنا
في كل من الصور حسب الاختيار أدناه

Bengali যদি আপনার নিজের ভাষায় বেশী জানতে চান তাহলে, দয়া করে আমাদের সঙ্গে যোগাযোগ করুন, তাহলে যাক সে আমাদের জিানা করবে।

Chinese 如果你需要由中文印成的資料，
請按低端方格內提供的地址與我們聯繫。

French Pour tout renseignement complémentaire dans votre propre langue, veuillez nous contacter à l'adresse figurant dans l'encadré du bas.

Gujarati એ તમને સમાચી પોતની ભાષામાં વધારે માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો કૃપા કરીને નીચે અંતમાં આપેલા ખાનામાં ઉપરિલેખ સરનામે અમારો સંપર્ક કરો.

Polish Jeśli chcesz uzyskać więcej informacji w Twoim języku, prosimy o kontakt pod adresem podanym w ramce na dole.

Punjabi ਜੇਕਰ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਪੰਜਾਬੀ ਵਿਚ ਹੋਰ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਲੈਣੀ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ ਤਾਂ ਹਿੱਸਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠ ਲਿਖੇ ਥਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਚਿੱਠੀ ਭੇਜੋ ਤਾਂ ਸਾਡੇ ਨਾਲ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

Serbo-Croat Ako želite više informacija na svom jeziku, obratite nam se na adresu koja se nalazi u kvadratu na dnu strane.

Somali Hadii aad u baahan tahay faahfaahin intaa ka badan oo ku saabsan afkaanka hooyo ama Al Somali iadlan lana soo xira cinwaanka hoos ku qoran.

Spanish Si usted desea más información en su propia lengua, por favor contactenos en la dirección al pie del formato.

Tamil உங்களின் சொந்தமொழியில் மேலதிக தகவல்களைப் பெற விரும்பினால், கீழ்க்கண்ட முகவரிக்குத் தகவலை எழுதி அனுப்பி உங்களின் மொழியில் தகவலைப் பெறவும்.

Urdu اگر آپ کو اپنی زبان میں مزید معلومات حاصل کرنا چاہتے ہیں تو اس پر
میں سے یہ پتہ دیجئے کہ آپ کے لئے کون سی زبان ہے

**Merton LSCB, Civic Centre,
London Road, Morden SM4 5DX
Tel: 020 8545 4866
E-mail: mertonlscb@merton.gov.uk**

This booklet was given to you by

who can be contacted on