

PARENTING GUIDE



embark
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



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Welcome

We created this parenting guide as part of our effort to drive adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicide from the all-time highs of today to all-time lows. We want to serve as a resource, not only by offering parents information, strategies, and tips to enhance the emotional and physical well-being of your preteen, teen, or young adult, but to also provide a safe, nurturing, and healing environment to help families and their children address and overcome a variety of behavioral health issues that affect their everyday lives.

Behavioral health problems are common in preteens, teens, and young adults and can make things like school, work, socializing, and everyday life more difficult. An estimated 49.5% of adolescents has a mental disorder, and of those, 22% have severe impairment¹ 13.3% of Americans aged 12-17 will have at least one major depressive episode.² Roughly half of all lifetime mental disorders start by the mid-teens, and three-fourths by the mid-20s.³

During these unprecedented times, many parents find themselves struggling to navigate new, uncharted territory and challenges, from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to the stress of devices and digital life, and more. Given the rapid and drastic changes in daily life that the world has

experienced, it is not uncommon for parents to have doubts concerning their parenting approach and wonder whether they are doing enough and/or what more they could be doing.

While many parents in this situation, understandably, feel overwhelmed, unfortunately there is no official parenting manual on having a child with behavioral issues. Parenting is a difficult job and a juggling act under any circumstances, but dealing with a child experiencing mental health or substance use/abuse issues can be even more challenging. It not only requires balancing your own needs with those of your child, but also managing your time, having adequate resources, and supporting your child.

Your child often hears that their preteen, teen, and young adult years will be the best time of their lives. But for many, this critical period of mental, emotional, and social development can be stressful as they begin to figure out who they are and plan for the future.

We understand you're very likely doing the best to parent in these challenging times. As a parent, you only want what is best for your child. It can be hard to deal with the fact that you cannot fix everything for your child, but you can get them the help they need.

¹ Merikangas, et al. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication--Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 49(10), 980-989. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017>

² United States, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). 2017 NSDUH Annual National Report.

³ Kessler, et al. (2007). Age of onset of mental disorders: a review of recent literature. Current opinion in psychiatry, 20(4), 359-364. <https://doi.org/10.1097/YCO.0b013e32816ebc8c>

If your child and family are struggling with behavioral health issues and need more information, please call us at 855-809-0409 or visit our website at embarkbh.com.



Safety First

We are not naïve to the fact that most parents would sacrifice *anything* for the safety of their child. Over the years, we've heard many parents say something like this: "I would gladly give my own life if they would just live to their full potential! I just want them to be safe and happy!" It is an emotional plea and one of the signs of a good parent.

The question plaguing most parents who struggle with their child is, "How do I keep my child safe?" To this we answer: in all matters of emotional and physical safety, take whatever action you need to ensure your child's safety.

In our experience, the top four most critical issues parents deal with are:

TOP 4 TOUGHEST SAFETY ISSUES

- 1 Suicide Attempts or Self-harm
- 2 Substance Abuse and Addiction
- 3 Debilitating Mental or Emotional Illness
- 4 Sexual Acting-out

If your preteen, teen, or young adult is struggling with any one of these, it is time to get professional help. Your home cannot be a treatment center, and you cannot assume the role of a therapist.

One mother we spoke with recently said, "I am a social worker, and I can't communicate with my daughter! Do you know how embarrassing that is?" We reassured her that she was, indeed, a good mother and likely a good therapist. We counseled her to allow other professionals to step in as therapist, freeing her to tend to the role of "mom." She had given this advice to her own clients and quickly saw the wisdom in the prescription.

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WHAT MATTERS MOST IS Your Relationship

Once a child's immediate safety needs have been addressed, a second question follows quickly: "How do I regain the relationship with my child that we once had?" Parents also often wonder how to influence their children and motivate them to change for the better.

The key is the *relationship*. Many preteens, teens, and young adults struggling with emotional, physical, and relational distress try to deal with the distress by showing parents that they have little influence or control over them. They frequently employ what Dr. Scott Sells¹ calls the "Seven Aces."

THE SEVEN ACES

- 1 Running away
- 2 Disrespect
- 3 Truancy from school
- 4 Sex/Pregnancy
- 5 Violence (threats or acts)
- 6 Threats of suicide; suicide attempts; self-harm
- 7 Substance use/abuse

¹ Treating the Tough Adolescent; Scott Sells, Ph.D.; The Guilford Press, 1998.

If you've ever had your child use one of these, you know how powerless a parent can feel! Any one of these problems would challenge even the most experienced of parents. Put them together in this dangerous combination, and you have a child who is soon to self-destruct.

Parents feel that they have very little control over the actions, thoughts, and feelings of their child, but here are some things to remember...



Secure Boundaries



Secure Relationship



Emotional Safety



Healthy Motivation

An Embark therapist can work with your family to identify unmet needs and how they may be driving unwanted behaviors. From there, you will be able to identify solutions that foster growth.

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Five Things to Try

1 KEEP YOUR SIGHTS SET ON THE OTHER PERSON'S EMOTIONS.

Reflect on what they are “emotionally” telling you. Parents need to accurately reflect back the emotions the child is feeling, using the words and behaviors they are displaying. This is really labeled as “empathy.” Conflict happens when we are focused on behavior and words, rather than the emotions that drive them. It takes practice and intentionality to understand the emotions of our children.

2 AVOID GETTING STUCK ON EXPECTATIONS.

First, focus on danger or threats and how you will do what is best for them, regardless of what they say. If they are emotionally hurting, their words and thoughts are not reliable or accurate. Look beyond the immediacy of their words and actions. Don't lecture on what they “should” do or what the “expectation” is. Use empathetic language. Say, “If I am you, I am feeling...” Be willing to hold the magnitude of their pain. Share their pain, because part of pain is being alone in it.

3 PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING.

Shift from acting as an audience to participating in the conversation to encourage sharing and help them feel understood. Try these steps:

Put away distractions (phone, TV, etc.) to make your child the priority. Use your body (nodding in agreement, eye contact, etc.), along with verbal cues like “mm-hmm,” “that makes sense,” etc.

Ask open-ended questions like, “What is it like to ___?” or “How did you feel when ___?” Then summarize their most important points back to them to show you listened.

Listen with an open mind. Recognize their point of view, even if you don't agree. Wait to form opinions or judgments until you fully understand.

4 DON'T NEGOTIATE.

Follow through with what they need from you as a parent, which is consistency, reliability, and predictability, along with being an unconditionally loving parent capable of empathy.

5 GET CREATIVE!

Stop doing the same thing. Try new approaches to old problems. Figure out your own emotions and where your fear comes from. Decide what your bottom lines are and what you can follow through on to best influence opportunities for your child to seek safety. How you influence is most important.

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Communication

Even the best relationships need help with communication. This is an area in which we can all improve. Here are Seven Bad Habits that hinder communication between parents and their child:

SEVEN BAD HABITS THAT BLOCK COMMUNICATION

- 1 **Passing judgment on your child or their close friends**
- 2 **Sharing personal experiences inappropriately**
- 3 **Ignoring your child**
- 4 **Advice-giving (fixing)**
- 5 **Interpreting what they said incorrectly**
- 6 **Interrogating**
- 7 **Waiting to speak, rather than listening**

It's not that any one of us tries to damage the lines of communication with our preteen, teen, or young adults on purpose. We simply slip into our patterns of interacting. Like well-worn country roads, our tires find the ruts, and it becomes difficult to communicate differently without exerting a lot of effort to move onto smoother pavement.

There are three broad Principles of Communication which can help parents begin to repair broken patterns:

THREE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION



1. Accurately listen.

Take time to predict your responses and feelings to all that your child is probably going to express. Ask yourself what the child is feeling that would cause them to behave in such a way. Think about them as doing their best, especially considering their pain, circumstances, relationships, perceptions, etc.

2. Accurately reflect empathy.

Reflect back in first-person language what you are hearing them emotionally tell you. Don't get stuck in analyzing details and trying to get them to cognitively "understand" how to change or fix emotions and behaviors.

3. You cannot *not* communicate.

Parents should be aware of their non-communication and give consistent and caring eye contact and safe touch if possible. Eliminate distractions, and be as present as possible.

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5 Consequences



We probably receive more questions about how to set appropriate boundaries with teenagers than any other topic. Parents worry that their consequences are too harsh or that they are not working. This is not a popular party conversation, so most parents operate in a vacuum of information, not knowing what other parents have found to be effective.

All parents struggle to balance saying “yes” and saying “no.” We work to help parents understand what boundaries are developmentally appropriate for their child, so the parent is not too permissive or too restrictive, all the while protecting the quality of the relationship parents have with their sons and daughters.

Natural and logical consequences should be reliable experiences that teach rather than punish. Reliable and relational boundaries create natural and logical consequences which reflect the values of the family and serve to strengthen the security in relationships. Creating consequences should be based upon teaching our children positive values and encouraging them to adopt those values into their personal value system.

The pattern should look like this:



The natural and logical consequence of a child being unsafe should be the reduction of privileges which require emotional, physical, and relational stability, as well as responsibility — along with the reinforcement of unconditional love as shown through follow-through with boundaries which keep them safe.

Humiliation, being demeaning, or using fear are all unnatural and illogical consequences that communicate a lack of care for the child and their experience of suffering which is driving their dysfunctional or maladaptive behaviors.

Parents should never withhold the basic necessities of life from their children, such as food, sleep, drink, or bathroom use.

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MORE ABOUT

Consequences

The logical consequence of a child's unsafe actions should be the reduction of privileges which should be given based on repetitive and reliable experiences of connection, vulnerability, and safe intimacy with parents.

If a child is not able to demonstrate that they can connect with their parents, then they are demonstrating that safe vulnerability and intimacy are difficult. Therefore, a cell phone (as an example) will most likely be a device used to create more distance, disconnection, and avoidance of the underlying issues. This privilege should be reduced, not as an enforced consequence, but as a logical and loving consequence that is based in safety (what is best for the child emotionally, behaviorally, relationally, and developmentally).

Custom, Caring Solutions for Your Child

At Embark, we understand there's no one-size-fits-all approach to parenting or helping adolescents with emotional and behavioral issues. Our caring, empathetic staff is here to help your entire family grow and learn together. Learn more at embarkbh.com.

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