

Supporting and nurturing parents and carers in the care of their teenage children

Dr Lynette Rentoul
Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist

Dr Nathalie Seth,
Senior Clinical Psychologist



Themes to be covered

- Understanding what teenage children need to thrive (neuroscience and attachment theory)
- Understanding the barriers facing parents in recognizing and attending to the needs of their teenage children (trauma and adversity), current and historic (support healing of past harm/adversity). Support safety (using tools).
- How can parents be supported to understand their difficulties, both historic and current in relation to the needs of their teenage children? (screening /empathy /engagement)
- How can we support parents/carers to reduce family conflict & enjoy better relationships with teenage children and partner (PACE; Reflective Parenting; Solihull)
- How can we support parents to understand and meet the needs of their teen children and support their emotional and social development? (Reflective Parenting/ PACE)



Parenting programmes: Key themes



- Understanding parental attachment history and experiences (including trauma & adversity)
- Supporting parental understanding of the impact of their developmental history/trauma and making peace with the past. Help parents voice their needs.
- Understanding the impact of cycles of harm
- Understanding the needs of teenage children.
- Understanding the minds, thoughts, feelings and intentions of teenage children (attunement and empathy).
- Supporting parental capacity for emotion regulation, calm and reflection. Therapeutic task. ***Vital importance of capacity for mentalization.***
- Reducing conflict in family relationships; connect with partner and teenage children in loving ways
- Understand better teenage child's emotions; see the difficulties from child's point of view (PACE/SPACE)
- Help parent to convey to teenage child that they are understood and valued (Reflective parenting)
- Connect with teenage child in loving ways –Reflective Parenting; PACE

Key tasks in supporting parents to attend to the needs of their teenage children

- To be trusted, emotionally available adult to parents to have difficult conversations, which increase confidence and competence among parents to support needs of teenage children.
- To have sensitive conversations, which explore with parents their own histories and relationships and the link between those and their parenting styles with their teenage children. To grasp that things that have happened in the past influence us in the here and now – in our relationships and parenting.
- Adopting a strengths-based approach; understanding the challenges of caring for teenagers from carers viewpoint. We may need to help parents get ready for parenting programmes. ('Angels in the nursery', Lieberman, A. 2005).
- Our tasks include stabilization; engagement and relationship building.

“making sense of the past in order to be more loving and healthier in the future”

Engage with parents: understand their needs

- Strength based approach, which supports reflective functioning and mentalization.
- Connect with parental needs; understand their current challenges
- Seek to understand their own attachment and developmental history
- Screen for past adversity and trauma -using evidence-based tools, (e.g. PTSD screen; ACEs questionnaire)
- Help parents tell their stories in their own way (words; creative arts; drawing; emotion cards; metaphors)
- Seek to understand impact of growing up with adversity, and support parental understanding.
- Understand current challenges (e.g. conflicted relationships; housing; work-based stressors)



Consider ways in which screening tools are helpful

- ACEs questionnaire supports understanding of adversity. Supports exploration of adversity and impact of adversity. Provides structure for understanding and normalising impact.
- PTSD screen supports understanding of impact of adversity (including range of impacts such as dissociation)
- Helping parents tell their own story supports carer's narrative; helps make sense of experiences; recognises challenges.
- Trained clinicians may use the Adult Attachment Interview - AAI (first developed by Main, and further developed by Crittenden) to support understanding of early experiences and impact on later attachment and parenting styles.
- Tools such as supporting timeline of experiences; reflecting upon how experiences are remembered (e.g. presence of coherence or internal contradictions)
- Helping carers make connections –e.g. between past experiences and current challenges

Give examples of work with carers using screening tools.

Recognising the impact of experiences by screening for trauma symptoms & adversity (e.g. of 6 clients not known to MH services*)

- ACES [Adverse Childhood Experiences Revised Questionnaire \(acesaware.org\)](https://www.acesaware.org)
- PTSD [*PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 \(PCL-5\) - Fillable Form \(va.gov\)](https://www.va.gov)
- Angels / strengths
- Impact of events in adulthood [IES-R: Impact of Events Scale-Revised \(onlinecbtresources.co.uk\)](https://www.onlinecbtresources.co.uk)

*** NB the scores of the 6 clients cited indicate high levels of PTSD symptoms and adversity in childhood)**

	PCL-5 (PTSD)	ACES
1.	55	9
2.	52	7
3.	57	6
4.	64	9
5.	68	10
6.	53	7

Impact of growing up with adversity: Explore impact of adversity with parents

- How you feel about yourself?
- Fear of being shamed or judged
- Development of unhelpful coping strategies
- Reliance on drugs or alcohol to bear painful feelings
- Fear of close relationships; or volatile and chaotic relationships
- Domestic violence
- Lack of capacity to regulate emotions; to stay calm and thoughtful
- Difficulty in deferring gratification
- Hard to see things from others' point of view
- Understanding of early experiences, e.g. parental difficulties in attending to needs of child; being parented.



Strength based approach working with carers: never too late to change

- What do you need? What do you really want?
- Magical wish question 'if I were your fairy godmother and could make your wish come true, what would it be?'
- What do your teenage children need? **Reflective parenting***.
- How can you see and understand what they need?
- How can we help you to meet those needs in new and loving ways? (Remember the '**Angels**' in the nursery; Lieberman, A. 2005)
- How can we support you to reduce family conflict?
- How can we support more loving family relationships? Less erratic, and calmer.
- Support parents to access therapeutic help to process past trauma or get support for drugs or alcohol misuse.

***Reflective Parenting (Cooper and Redfern, 2016)**



***Reflective parenting* supports loving connections and reduces conflict (supports mentalization (Fonagy, P))**



- Refers to interest in and understanding of what is going on in the minds of children, and how this relates to behaviour.
- It also includes being aware of what is going on in one's own mind, and an understanding of one's own thoughts and feelings.
- It emphasises the importance of seeking to understand intention
- It supports regulating own emotions and remain more calm
- It supports efforts to be curious and think about the situation
- Try to see the situation from the point of view of others
- It supports seeking to understand better teenage child's emotions and their intentions (including attachment seeking intentions); ***mentalization***
- Helps child to feel understood, valued and attended to
- It supports de-escalation of difficult situations and outbursts

“Reflective parenting sees that the child has their own mind that is a rich tapestry of interwoven thoughts, ideas and motivations, and they wish to understand the workings of this mind”. (Cooper and Redfern, 2016)

Reflective parenting (Cooper & Redfern, 2016): key themes

- Strong links to attachment theory (Bowlby and Main); Reflective Functioning (Fonagy); PACE approach to parenting; **Mentalizing** (curious about and attuned to the minds and intentions of others and self).
- **The Parent Map:** (to support parental understanding of their own mind). What am I feeling? Why am I feeling like this? How can I handle my feelings? What impact do my feelings have on my child?
- How do my past experiences (including childhood experiences) and relationships impact on my care of my child and reflective parenting?
- How do my current and experiences impact upon me and my care of my child and reflective parenting?
- **Difficulties:** drugs and alcohol; physical health; mental health; life events.
- Managing one's own feelings (staying calm and thoughtful; tuning into the child; prioritizing the thoughts, feelings and intentions of teenage child)
- **The parent APP** (Attention; Perspective taking; Providing empathy)
- Helping children with their feelings
- **Discipline:** misunderstandings (authoritative versus authoritarian approaches; things to avoid and things to choose).



Supporting carers to understand the needs of their teenage children

- Engage with parents
- Convey understanding and interest in their challenges
- Use screening tools to understand parental attachment history, experience of trauma and adversity;
- Help parents understand links between past experiences and current challenges. (Use **Parent Map from Reflective Parenting**)
- Help parents manage their feelings (regulation of emotions)
- Help them understand the minds/needs of teenage children; use the **APP from RP** (Attention; perspective take; provide empathy)
- Help parents find helpful ways to attend to the minds, intentions and feelings of their children (using PACE; Reflective Parenting)
- Help parents hold boundaries and discipline in helpful and thoughtful ways –relevant to teenagers' growing independence
- Help parents manage conflict /deescalate distressing situations.



What are prosocial skills? The vital role of carers in their development and supporting teenager's resilience.

- Skills which promote healthy, playful, loving & positive connections
- They are the basis of the willingness & capacity to trust, share, help, comfort, & support others (& support communication with others)
- They help us to *understand & regulate our emotions & support our capacity for thinking and reflection; support secure attachments &*
- connect to our inner world of thoughts and feelings (our minds).
- connect with the thoughts and feelings of children (minds of others)
- ***They include:***
 - Seeing others' point of view; Trust others;
 - Tuning into feelings of others; ***All support reflection & problem solving skills***
 - Listening and taking turns;
 - Sharing and helping others;
 - Showing concern for others; follow instructions
 - Putting needs of others above our own when needed;
 - Managing frustration & disappointment; delaying gratification;

Children from all cultures have same forms of prosocial behaviours



Adolescence

- **Physical changes**

- Hormones
- Body growth and maturation



- **Emotional changes**

- Strong emotions
- Rapid change of emotions
- Led by emotions
- Self conscious
- Lack of insight/ reflection



- **Behavioural changes**

- Risk taking behaviour
- Disinhibition
- Communication
- Black and white thinking



- **Social Changes**

- Parents vs Peers
- Independence
- Identity formation
- Responsibility
- Romantic relationships



- **The brain**

Marked changes in brain development during adolescence



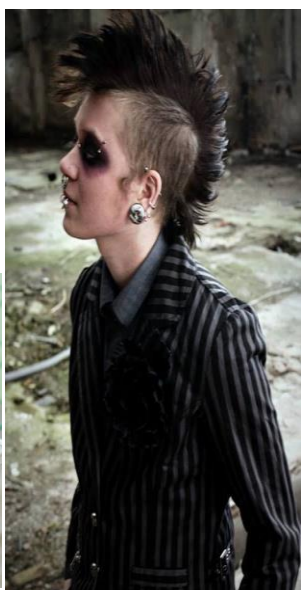
Social & Emotional Challenges facing adolescents

- Puberty, including bodily changes associated with moving into adulthood; changes in the developing structures of the brain
- Increased emotional and relational volatility (ups and downs in our feelings and relationships) and the increased need for emotion regulation skills
- Increasing independence and separation from early family ties, developing peer group friendships, finding new interests and making plans –without feeling lost and lonely. ***Independence but still sense of belonging.***
- Establishing identity, including sexuality (identity and preference) and developing more intimate relationships.
- Educational pressures of learning, facing tests and exams, managing greater learning independence, and finding an educational and vocational future.
- Facing movement into adulthood and increased independence, separation, belonging, - the finding internal resources and resilience to support these challenges. The challenges can be huge and require courage & resilience.



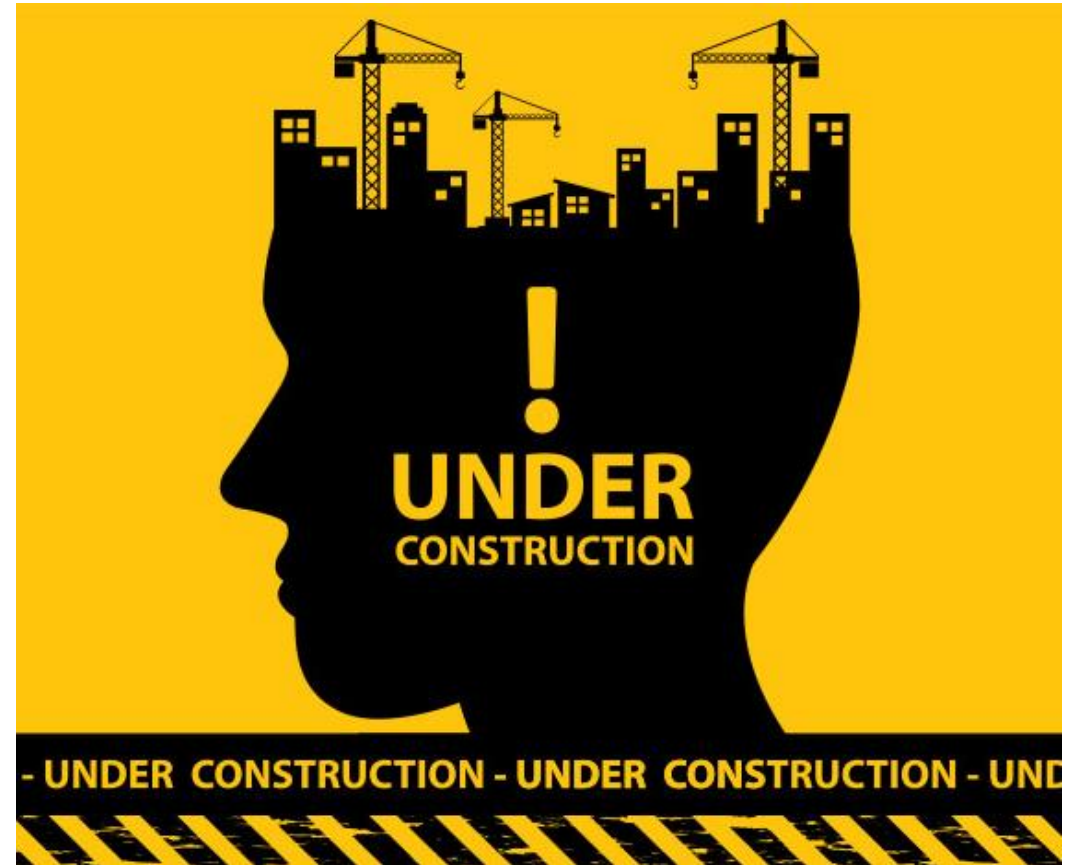
What were you like when you were a Teen?

- What were you like when you were an adolescent?
- What was it like for you going through adolescence? Your memories?
- What did you feel passionate about? Music?
- Challenges? Fears? Anxieties? Risk taking?
- Changes in family relationships? Challenges of Education and work?
- What are the 3 things that shaped you the most during this time?



Working with the teen brain

- Underdeveloped prefrontal cortex
- Limited executive functioning
- Pruning, and strengthening (myelination of connecting fibres)
- Risk taking
- Understanding other's points of view
- Seeking independence when the brain is undergoing significant change
- Potential and risk
- Strengthen growth (or possibility of exploitation of youth)
- Vulnerabilities of teenage brain (impact of some drugs; dangers of exploitation)



Emotional functioning in Adolescence

- There is a mismatch between emotional and cognitive components of brain development in adolescence
- Brain structures mediating emotional experiences change rapidly at the onset of puberty (in amygdala).
- Maturation of the frontal brain structures (PFC) underpinning cognitive control lags, by several years, the growth of the amygdala (emotion centre).

Adolescents are left with powerful emotional responses to social stimuli that they cannot easily regulate, contextualise, create plans about or inhibit



Social Cognition in adolescence

- The ability to see things from others' point of view (perspective taking) is diminished in teen years –the ability to 'step into other's shoes'
- Experiment – shown a face & word, need to name and match emotions to face portrayed (uses working memory & decision making) – **pubertal 'dip' in this ability**
- 'Face processing' – (happy, sad, angry, fearful, disgusted, surprised expressions) –not good at fear, disgust and anger. Young teens rely on '**gut reactions**' rather than reasoning. These abilities develop during puberty (fear, disgust, anger) and **then** they can use **reasoning to greater extent**.



EXECUTIVE Functioning (EF) lags and risk-taking in adolescence

EF (planning, organising, reflecting, thinking)- the capacity that allows us to control & coordinate our thoughts & behaviour is less developed in early adolescence. Adolescent capacity to inhibit responses & impulses & regulate their emotions is not mature and works less well.

Adolescents tend to take greater risks than adults, as a result of developmental lags in EF.

Adolescents tend to foresee fewer possible outcomes of their risk-taking, underestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes, and overvalue the benefits of having fun and obtaining the approval of others – and then engage in more risk-taking behaviours.

Younger adolescents, for a period of time, find it more difficult to read the expressions of others and see the world from other points of view as part of the process of maturing –this impedes empathic response and seeing the world from others' point of view.

How to support parents to parent adolescents

What adolescents need

What adolescents need:

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Seeing their development as something beautiful even if it is challenging
- Helping them make sense of themselves without criticism
- Understanding their world even if they don't share it



How to support parents to parent adolescents the relationship

- Stay connected:
 - Your young person needs you even more now ***but in a different way***
 - Have activities that bring you together
 - Being connected may look different (e.g. indirect through text messages)
 - Have a good village around your young person
- Be consistent
- Be human
- Be fair



How to support parents to parent adolescents

Tools for parenting an adolescent

- Two handed approach/ connection before correction
- Repair
- Natural consequences
- Listen and respect
- Give them wings and attend to their roots
- Support independence in each developmental area



Common parenting practices to choose or avoid

Avoid

Conveying personal disappointment in child's behaviour ("I am so disappointed in you when you do that")

Questions and answers that convey blame (why did you do that?)

Punitive responses such as 'Time out' (making child sit alone for a number of minutes, withholding attention)

Using illogical consequences (you didn't go to bed on time so you can't go to the park tomorrow)

Insisting on discussing something when child is distressed or demanding eye contact

After misunderstanding leaving child to dwell on it on his own.

Not thinking ahead to situations, you know will make child distressed. Child needs help to anticipate.

Choose

Using empathy and support. (This is tough for you. We will get through it together).

Language of gentle exploration. 'That seemed hard for you. I wonder what was going on there'

Supportive responses such as 'Time in' -asking child to sit near you to express his feelings and cool down.

Using natural or logical consequences. 'Well, it's hard for you to settle down at night. We will shorten your playtime before bed and have some relaxing down time.

Finding ways to discuss things, not letting them go unresolved. When situations have calmed down, talking through problems during car journeys or at bedtime.

After misunderstanding, reconnect as soon as you can and as soon as it is likely to be successful.

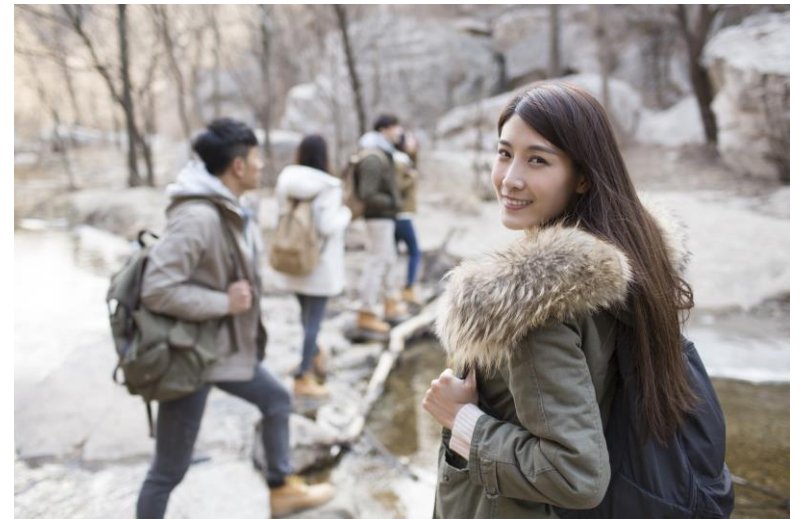
Scaffolding situation so that child can succeed and increasing help so that child will succeed.

Understanding the challenges of caring for teenage children

- Difficulty in taking pride in some aspects of teenage development (examples of this: risk taking; spending time with friends away from home; challenging carers; taking different points of view; lags in social cognition)
- Managing teenagers seeking increased separation and greater independence from early family ties.
- Managing increased challenge to carer authority.
- Managing increased emotion dysregulation
- Concerns about lag of empathy (which is lag in Social Cognition)
- Supporting both sense of belonging and need for independence and separation.
- Understanding and supporting teen vulnerabilities – ***risk of exploitation***; increased anxieties; difficulty navigating the transition to adulthood.
- Managing teenage challenges at time in carers life when facing their own social, emotional, financial and health challenges.

Supporting carers to manage conflict with their child

- Remain calm and thoughtful
- Try to put emotions aside.
- Connection and active listening. The first step is taking the time to listen to what the other has to say and try to understand what they mean and convey to them you want to understand from their point of view.
- Try to understand what is going on in the child's mind, pay attention and listen to your child
- Understand the perspective of your child; try to see things from their point of view as well as your own.
- Communication: Don't interrupt your child while they are speaking; check that you understand them by asking questions; Communicate your side of the story clearly and honestly
- Don't place blame
- Collaboration; try to find common ground
- Compromise with your child.
- Recognise and apologise for the things you got wrong.
- Repair the ruptures in understanding and relationships
- Offer solutions and choices



Getting parents the help and therapeutic support they need

- Be trusted and emotionally supportive adult.
- Ensure parent is emotionally and physically safe
- Help processing past trauma and adversity (including therapy). ***Examples of therapy.***
- Help with current challenges such as drugs and alcohol, or domestic violence
- Help with conflict and challenging relationships in the family
- Access to trusted adults to support mentalisation.
- Access to therapeutic and enjoyable activities (rambling; yoga; swimming; community groups)



Concluding comments: to help parents in the care of their teenage children we need to

- Connect with them and understand their challenges from their point of view. Be safe, reliable, trusted and empathic adult.
- Help them make sense of their past experiences and find some peace with the past. Help them tell their own story.
- Help them make sense of the impact past experiences have on current relationships, including with their children.
- Help them understand what children need to flourish
- Help them find reflective ways of connecting with their children
- Convey a sense that they are not alone in facing challenges in attending to the needs of their children.
- Help them attend to current challenges in their life that impede their health and wellbeing and their connections with their children. Offer helpful therapies.
- Do so with humility and when appropriate playfulness and joy.

