

The father factor what teenage boys learn from their dads

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In an age where the role of the father is increasingly unclear, it can be tough being a dad. But don't give up! Here are 3 important reasons why dads matter, particularly in the lives of teenage boys, and a few 'must-dos' to help guide all the confused dads out there.

Improved self-esteem and mental health

Mental health problems are a huge issue for teenagers, and boys are slightly more likely to experience mental health problems than girls. However, research consistently demonstrates that teenagers with dads who are actively involved in their lives have improved self-esteem and lower instances of depression than those who don't. Teens with attentive fathers are at less risk of developing a negative self-image.

Conversely, teens who grow up with dads who are harsh or neglectful are at greater risk of developing depression or other mental health problems. If dad is depressed, teens have an increased likelihood of displaying depressive symptoms.

Better relationships

If a teenager has a dad who relates to them and other family members in a caring and loving manner, there is a good chance they will have fewer relationship problems in adolescence and later in adult life. Dads provide a model of how relationships work – an example that is imprinted deeply into a young person's psychological DNA.

Boys learn about being a man

There is a saying that goes "link a boy to the right man and he seldom goes wrong". The wisdom of this saying is demonstrated time and time again when I see young men who have grown up with an attentive, committed and loving father.

Dads are the primary example to their sons of what it means to be a man. This is true whether fathers are intentional or completely unaware of their impact. Young men learn from their dads about what it means to be responsible, ethical, caring, and appropriate. More specifically, a teenage boy watches how his dad treats women, uses his physical strength, values his work, relates to kids, and expresses friendship with his mates. These observations will form the default option for teenage boys as they become men.

Must-dos for dads of teenage boys:

Spend time with your son

Being in the house at the same time doesn't count. Carve out time in your week to just be with your teen. Schedule it and be strict. Keep your promises.

Find common interests

Sometimes it can take a bit of effort to find something you both like, but persistence will pay off. Whether it is bike riding, cooking, following your favourite sport team, photography, or playing Xbox, the activity is just a means to developing the relationship.

Show them you love them

As teenagers get older, physical displays of affection may not be received as well as they once were. But dads can show their love in other ways: picking your teen up late at night; watching them play sport every weekend; making a special breakfast every Saturday morning; or offering to fix whatever it is that is broken.

Stay connected

In the digital age staying in touch is easier than ever. Your teen might not want you posting on their Facebook wall, but the occasional text message or email is a great way to keep the lines of communication open.

Ask them questions

Don't expect your teenage son to take responsibility for prompting conversations. Be an adult; take responsibility for the communication in the relationship. Ask about how your teen is going, ask about issues you think they might be wrestling with, ask if there is anything bothering them, just ask them *something*. Sometimes you might only get a grunt, but don't stop asking.

Model respect

Dads need to treat themselves and their children's mother with respect and dignity. Teenagers will follow their dad's example. If dad is dismissive and rude to mum, then his son will think it is ok to disrespect mum. If fathers fail to look after themselves, their sons will be less inclined to take care of themselves.

Not every teen has a dad

Of course, the opportunity of having a dad is not one that every young person gets. Kids grow up without their dads for all sorts of reasons.

If your teenager doesn't have a dad in their life, it is not the end of the world. Teens will take their cues from whoever it is that fills the role of caregiver.

That said, if at all possible it is definitely helpful to find an older male who can play a role in your teenager's life. He doesn't need to become their parent, but he can be someone who is involved, and close enough to the family, that your teen gets to observe and interact with him on a regular basis. Seeing an adult male in action, learning what is expected and what to expect from a real-life example helps your teen on his journey to becoming a good man.

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