

When Do Teens Feel Loved by Their Parents?

In their drive for independence, teenagers can seem to reject parents. A new study suggests that the key to making them feel loved is to be persistently warm, even in conflict.

About the Author

Parenting teens can sometimes feel like a tightrope walk. It's no small feat trying to balance providing support to help teens navigate the world and easing back in recognition of their growing independence. Despite all our attempts to show love and care, we can often end up in conflict with our teens.



But a [new study](#) offers some insight into how to help teens feel loved.

Psychologist John Coffey and his colleagues surveyed over 150 teens (ages 13-

16) and their parents—mostly white and all living in two-parent households in the United States—for 21 days. Every evening, the parent (usually the mother) received a survey about warmth and conflict in their relationship with their teen. Warmth referred to how much praise, understanding, and affection they showed toward their teen that day; conflict included how much anger and tension existed between them. Teens were asked a single question each evening: how much they felt loved by their parent that day.

The researchers discovered that teens generally felt loved at moderate to high levels, but there were fluctuations over the 21 days. This was true even in parent-teen relationships that teens rated as close, with lots of respect, acceptance, and sensitivity. They also found that some teens felt not at all loved by their parents on some days.

As expected, teens tended to feel more loved on days when their parents showed more warmth, and they tended to feel less loved on days when there was more conflict with their parents. The interesting finding? On days when parents were warmer, the conflict between them didn't matter as much to how loved teens felt. In other words, being warm and affectionate toward teens seemed to protect against the cost of conflict.

According to Coffey and his colleagues, these findings are important because emotional experiences can influence

adolescents' coping skills and behavior in ways that affect their well-being in the long-term. When teens regularly don't feel loved for long periods of time, they may be at greater risk for mental illnesses like depression.

These findings can help parents recognize that offering their teens daily warmth that isn't conditional on their behavior can strengthen their relationship, especially in the face of conflict. That might mean offering a compliment or a hug, or expressing empathy with whatever they're going through. You can also keep a journal about interactions with your teen, which could help you notice patterns and see how warmth makes a difference.

"Emotional love needs to be made and remade on a daily basis—even in close, long-term relationships," explain Coffey and his colleagues. "For parents, maintaining the parent-adolescent relationship can be complicated. Conflict is an inescapable element of parenting, but it is not necessarily a [dysfunctional] element."

Parents and teens can find small ways throughout each day to give and receive warmth that will nurture love between them. In this way, these moments of love [accumulate](#) like a reservoir that you can dip into to help smooth the edges when disagreements inevitably happen.