

# Why teenagers need quality time with their parents more than toddlers do

With a study suggesting that the only stage at which the quantity of time parents spend with their offspring really matters is during adolescence, Anna Tyzack investigates the pros and cons of the new 'teen maternity leave'

[Anna Tyzack](#)



Five weeks after giving birth to me, my mother returned to her office job. It was the same when my brother Will was born. But, years later, she more than made up for the time she lost with us as young children. When I was in my early teens she gave up work for eight years to concentrate on us. How

convenient, we joked – we were out of nappies, and at school full-time.

It turns out, however, that our mother was something of a pioneer. A study published recently in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* suggests that the only stage at which the quantity of time parents spend with their offspring really matters is during adolescence.



Jo Wiltshire and her daughter, Evie

Having parents who are there physically and emotionally for teenagers is a factor associated with better behaviour during the hormonally-turbulent years, according to the study of 1,600 youngsters by the University of Toronto. And the more time teenagers spend with parents at meal times and family occasions, the less likely they are to do drugs, drink alcohol or indulge in illicit behaviour.

Another study, published last month by the Children's Society, of 53,000 children in 15 countries, reports the alarming fact that British youngsters are among the unhappiest in the world. They feel worse about going to school every day than their peers in Ethiopia and Romania, with bullying and

anxiety about body image prime concerns.

Parenting expert Jo Wiltshire says that an increasing number of mothers see “teen maternity leave” as the only way to provide teenagers with the support they need. She’s doing it herself; her daughter, Evie, 11, is starting secondary school in September and she wants to be there for the transition.

“The period between the ages of five and 10 is quite calm in terms of parenting, but when they hit the teenage years children can revert to a neediness that is more akin to toddler-hood. I feel that I’ll need to support her more,” she says.

Teenage girls are most needy around age 13-14, she says, while boys are more insecure at 16-17. Major changes in environment are a factor. Adolescents have moved from the familiarity and certainty of their first school to a larger establishment where they are exposed to influences that can be negative and damaging. Add to this the pressures of achieving academically, plus an obsession with appearance that is prevalent in an age group desperate to fit in, and no wonder some struggle.



From the start of term next month, Wiltshire will take Evie to school each day and collect her, something she hopes will provide a positive constant in her changing world. “I’m looking forward to the after-school hours we’ll have together,” she says. “When you’re working, life at home can be an exercise in logistics – but now I’ll have time to talk to her properly.”

My mother confesses that she found term-time quite dull after the stimulation of the office, but the holidays more than made up for it. Having spent years paying for us to do activities with a nanny, she could now be part of the action. “It was great to enjoy my children while I had the energy,” she says.

But what happens when your children no longer need you and it’s time to return to the workplace?

Career breaks at this stage are certainly longer than traditional maternity leave and, as my mother discovered, it’s almost impossible to slot back into your old job. A more junior role was unacceptable – but equally she didn’t want to do nothing, although income was less of a factor after we’d left home.

In the end she applied her business skills to running a b&b. Now, however, she says that she wishes she’d “kept an oar in” at her office.

Wiltshire acknowledges this is an obstacle for many women and says far greater flexibility is needed in the workplace “so that parents can step up when most needed”.

For women who suspect that spending more time with their teenagers would result in stress for all concerned, the Canadian researchers recommend staying in work. An anxious or unhappy full-time mum will only make matters worse.

I think my mum got it right. I don’t have any recollection of the nanny who cared for me during the first years of my life, but I do have many happy

memories of school holidays spent with my mother.

[Inside the mind of a teenager: A parent's guide](#)