

When to Let Teens Make Mistakes

Your teen has a job to do and it is about the hardest job imaginable. The fundamental task of adolescence is to answer the BIG question, ["Who am I?"](#) As teens begin this long journey, it's important that parents help guide them along the often bumpy road.

Adolescence is about figuring out who you are, your identity, relative to your family and community. It is about discovering your unique strengths and how you might contribute to the world. It is about recognizing your limitations and trying to figure out how to compensate for them. It is about learning how to put your best foot forward and learning how to recover after a stumble. It is about discovering yourself and wondering who will be attracted to you (and hoping somebody will be!) as a sexual being. It is about imagining yourself as independent. It's about wrestling with your unique beliefs and values in addition to expectations from parents and society.

For too many young people, it is about figuring out how to be successful when it seems as though obstacles have been placed in their path.

When to Jump In

Can you believe that so many people refer to the teen years as the carefree years? They are in fact years of both tremendous excitement and angst. There is no larger question than “Who am I?” And if that isn’t hard enough to answer, the question, “[Will I fit in?](#)” follows. It’s accompanied by, “What does fitting in even mean?”

Questions of this magnitude can’t be answered by anybody else. However, caring adults have an irreplaceable role in helping young people figure out who they are. The questions for us are, “When do we jump in?” and “When do we allow for trial and error?” How do we best offer the life lessons we gained through personal wisdom — the ones that gave us the insight in how we see ourselves?

Solving a Complex Puzzle

To uncover your proper role in your teen’s journey, we want you to begin imagining the “Who Am I” question as a jigsaw puzzle with a thousand pieces.

Your children see all of those pieces lying in disarray and mistakenly believe that there’s a limited time to complete the puzzle. Your first role is to assure them that questions of identity take a lifetime to answer and that each of our journeys offer ample opportunities to reconsider our roles and remake ourselves. In fact, it is sometimes our missteps and the reflection following that [give us strength and opportunity](#) for

self-improvement. Even better, if you model for your adolescent how you do not expect perfection of yourself.

While these reassurances may help, your teen is still likely going to work to complete that puzzle as quickly as possible. So what is your role?

Start with the Edges

Let's think about putting together what seems like an impossibly complex puzzle. Where to begin? With the corners and the the edges.

It is our job to create the edges of the puzzle through appropriate boundaries and discipline. Flexibility is an important part of being a responsible parent. It is equally important to know when flexibility hurts our children. We need to create clear, firm and consistent boundaries around issues that involve safety and serious challenges to [morality](#). While children may claim the boundaries are rigid, when they are properly placed they make them feel secure. Teens want to be safe. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. They also need to take some risks to properly test themselves. When we offer clear boundaries around safety it actually gives them the security to take risks elsewhere. It gives them the edges to push against, but not go beyond.

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imaginable. The fundamental task of adolescence is to answer the BIG question, "Who am I?"

Parents as the Picture on the Box

Now that the borders in place, what are the next steps as our adolescents put together the remainder of their puzzles? They'll group pieces of like color. Then, maybe occasionally look at the picture on the box to remind them of what the finished product is supposed to look like.

You, the parent, are the picture on the box. When you show your children what it means to be a healthy, thoughtful, caring adult you make the job easier for them. They better understand what it looks like to be an adult. Even better, if the adult you role model is one who is reflective and continually grows while responding to life's rewards and challenges. Better still if you model the importance of family, community, and [interdependence](#).

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Slideshow

Support Teens Asking the Fundamental Question of Adolescence

Teens are faced with the big question of adolescence, "Who am I?" As they try to answer this complex question, it's rather like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Learn how to support teens as they seek the answer.

Slideshow

Create Boundaries

Offer clear boundaries around safety and morality. This forms the puzzle edges against which they can push.

Slideshow

Role Model

We are the role models that they can measure themselves against. We are the covers on the box that remind them of what it means to be a healthy adult.

Slideshow

Allow Trial and Error

Get out of the way as they work on the pieces in the middle. This takes trial and error -- a vital part of adolescence. This is how teens discover their strengths and limitations, their sense of style, their character, and their ethics and morals.

Slideshow

Trust Their Ability

Trust that your teens will solve the puzzle on their own. Remain available if and when they need guidance.

Fitting Together the Inner Pieces

What is the next thing our teens do once they have looked at the picture and grouped those pieces that easily hang together? They'll look at the pieces that are left over and become aware of (and sometimes frustrated by!) their irregular and jagged edges. They'll try to fit them together, and sometimes find a perfect match. Other times they will think

they have found how they fit together but they'll be wrong. Still other times they'll force some pieces together in a frenetic blend of hopefulness and frustration. They'll usually be honest with themselves about the fact that they've forced some "almost-fits" together, but only after they've found a better match.

Putting together those inner pieces involves experimentation, trial and error, mistakes and recovery.

The middle of the puzzle is the job of adolescence. It is your job, as the parent, to get out of the way as they achieve mastery and ultimately accomplish the tasks. You may not like to hear this, but navigating school is usually in the middle of the puzzle. Most of their peer relationships are there too as long as they remain within safe and moral bounds.

Trusting Teens to Solve the Puzzle

When an issue comes up and you consider whether to "jump in," learn to take a breath and ask yourself whether it is outside of the borders of the puzzle, or safely within its edges. If it's outside the edges, jump! Turn on your full protective instincts. If it is within the edges, continue to serve as a role model and a sounding board. But know that sometimes we serve our children's development best when we watch from afar. We trust in their ability to solve the puzzle and remain available when frustration reaches the point that they call for

guidance.