



HOW TEENAGERS TICK

WHEN I TOLD MY HUSBAND I was writing an article on how teens tick, he laughed and said, "I know how they tick . . . like a time bomb!"

I smiled. Teenagers are complex and unpredictable beings. We will never fully understand how they tick, but with God's help, lots of love, and some recent developments in neuroscience, we can defuse some of their fears, frustrations, and fury. Whether we have teenagers or not, we can all learn how to be the loving, wise, and patient supporters they need.

REWIRING THE BRAIN

The teenage brain is going through a “rewiring process,” preparing the brain for adulthood. This can start in the preadolescent phase and

continue into the mid-twenties for most females and into the late twenties for most males. This amazing process, built into our bodies by our loving Creator, equips our brains for maturity and independence.

This neurological process is like rewiring the electricity in your home. During the work, various parts of your home will be without power until they are reconnected. And you might need to rewire certain areas in completely different ways. During adolescence, the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex of the brain are not as well-connected as they usually are. This means that the pleasure-seeking parts of the brain are not always able to assess the risks involved, which is the job of the rational and cautious part of the brain.

The good news is that teenage brains are at the peak of their ability to learn and be creative, and these are incredible gifts that we need to help them use and develop. Teens are often passionate about making a positive difference in the world, and they ask searching questions about God because they want to understand Him better. We can help them flourish and develop their skills.

HOW TO LOVE A TEENAGER

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV).

If there's one experience God uses to grow our patience, it's parenting teens! They often experience complex tangles of emotions, and they can easily withdraw, explode, and behave in unpredictable ways. They need the loving adults in their lives to be calm, reassuring, and forgiving when their emotions spill over. We need to remember how patient God has been with us.

Being a teenager today is much harder than it was when we were young. So be as kind as possible. They need the secure base of loving family relationships to help them steady themselves, even if they push us away. Be gentle and speak kindly, acknowledging their desires and wishes before encouraging them to explore the issues and risks in a situation. Show them your love in thoughtful and creative ways. Let them know that whatever mess they get into, you will be there for them, no matter what. And you will help rescue them, just as God loves us and rescues us from our own mistakes.

RISKY BEHAVIOR

Teens are trainee adults. They are just learning, and learners take risks and make mistakes occasionally. Train them to stop and think about the consequences of their choices and behavior. Make safety/escape plans with them, such as a code word when they need you to drive them home or get them out of a difficult or dangerous situation. Be there to catch them when they make mistakes, and be accepting, comforting, and supportive when they are distressed or worried about what you will do or say.

When the painful emotions have subsided, gently discuss what went wrong and what they could do differently next time. Make sure they continue to feel warmly connected to you. Keep in mind that low self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness, disconnection from parents, peer pressure, lack of future goals, and challenges at school and home are some things that will increase their risk factors.

NO RECORD OF WRONGS

We left our 16-year-old son at home for two days when we went to a church conference. While we were away, he called us up and asked if some friends could come over for the evening. All our alarms bells rang! We knew that these parties often escalate and get out of hand. So we took a deep breath and told him that he could have friends around as long as the house looked the same way we left it once we returned the next day.

The teenage brain is going through a “rewiring process.”



It did . . . but he had to work hard to put everything straight. He was so upset at the behavior of these “friends” that he stopped hanging out with them. We took a risk, we set a boundary for him, and he learned some important lessons without us saying a word.

We discussed the rules for our family with our teens, and they decided on the consequences for breaking them. They would often suggest harsher consequences than we would, giving us a special opportunity to show them grace.

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WHAT'S BEHIND THE ARGUMENT?

Underneath most arguments, teens are really asking one or more of the following questions:

- Do you love me/care about me and my well-being and happiness?
- Are you able to understand what I am feeling right now? Can you empathize with me?
- Are you willing and able to help me when I am struggling?
- Will you always be there for me? Can I depend on you?

If we answer these questions in the way we relate to them every day—regularly showing kindness, appreciation, empathy, and helpful support—and if we express our commitment to them, then this tends to reduce their need to argue with us.

Staying calm, speaking gently, listening to them before answering, responding to their honesty positively, and helping them make their own risk assessments can also help to reduce arguments. If you have a major disagreement, reconnecting warmly and positively with your teen before bedtime is vital. When a painful disconnect lasts too long, it can be devastating for the teen's emotional well-being. As an adult, take the first step to show warmth and forgiveness and set a healthy example.

LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS

Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). So we took a deep breath and told our teens that if they ever found themselves in difficulty or facing a challenge, such as an unexpected pregnancy, addiction, or the possibility that they were gay, we wanted to be the first people to know. We reassured our children that we would always love them and welcome them, and that we would always be there to help them, whatever their life challenges.

Parenting teenagers can be challenging. Pray for them every day and pray for the wisdom and love to respond to them with kindness and patience. Focus on God's incredible love for you, as described in 1 Corinthians 13. Fill your hearts and minds with His love, and generously pass it on to every teenager in your life.

To learn more about supporting teens, watch Karen's webinar: youtube.com/watch?v=KnNPkWoi2DU



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