



SUPPORTING TEEN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A GUIDE FOR ADULTS

Helping parents, caregivers and adults support
healthy identity development during the teenage years



Building identity, agency and connectedness for teens is a priority of the Presidential-led National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children, and supported by the Hold My Hand Accelerator for Children and Teens.

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Written by MIET Africa with contributions from Shirley Eadie and the Hold My Hand Accelerator Team.
Design by sarahscotttdesign.



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“We were both scared. When we started talking, we saw that we were on the same side.”



The Teen Years are Exciting!

Raising a teenager is exciting, but not always easy!

Many parents, caregivers and adults who take care of teens feel confused, tired, or worried during these years. Some days it can feel like the child you knew has disappeared. If you are feeling unsure or overwhelmed, you are not alone, and you are not failing.

Teenagers are growing in many ways at the same time. Their bodies are changing. Their feelings are stronger. They are trying to work out who they are, where they belong, and what kind of future they want. This search for identity can be exciting, but it can also be frightening for them and for the adults who care for them.

Today’s teens are also growing up in a complicated world. In South Africa, many young people face poverty, violence, unemployment, pressure at school, pressure from other teens, and constant influence from social media. These realities shape how teens see themselves and how they behave. Even strong, loving families can feel stretched.

Young people learn who they are through the way they are treated, listened to, and guided by the adults around them.

You do not need to have all the answers. You do not need to say the perfect thing. What matters most is being present, interested, and willing to listen, even when it is uncomfortable.

When parents and caregivers understand this, they can provide the connection, guidance, and emotional safety teens need to explore themselves safely. Your experience is very valuable, and that is something that you can always share. Your job (and what teens need) is to listen more and not dismiss their concerns or experiences. Your teen doesn’t need you to know everything about their world – they need to know that you provide a safe space for them to talk, even when things go wrong.

This guide is to help adults understand what teenagers are going through and give some practical ways to support them in building a strong, healthy sense of identity.

Who can Benefit from this Guide?

- Parents, caregivers, and guardians
- Extended family members, including older siblings
- Coaches, teachers, mentors, and youth workers
- Any adults in the community who spend time with teenagers

Why is this Guide Important?

The guide explains influences on teens and gives clear messages that are easy to follow, so that you have the best possible experience with the teenager in your care. It gives adults some tools and insights to support teens in positive ways, help them make good choices, and strengthen their relationship with them instead of adding to tension.

We can’t fix everything for teenagers, but by listening, caring, and understanding how they feel, we can help them grow into confident young adults.

When identity is supported, teens are more likely to:

- Stay in school
- Make safe choices
- Build healthy relationships
- Feel confident about their future

When these things are missing, teens are at higher risk of:

- Dropping out of school
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Making unsafe decisions
- Feeling alone or hopeless

“When an adult stays calm, it makes me brave to talk.”



“Most parents worry about drugs, pregnancy, bad friends, dropping out of school, or crime.”

The real fear behind the teen years

Most parents worry about drugs, pregnancy, bad friends, dropping out of school, or crime. But beneath all of this is one deeper fear:

“I might lose my child, and I won’t be able to get them back.”

So, when parents hold tightly, it comes from love, fear, and responsibility.

Parent *“I worry every day. My daughter is growing up so fast. She talks about boys and going to school in the next town... and I’m scared she might get pregnant. I don’t want her to make the mistakes I made.”*

Take it step by step

You don’t need to read everything at once. Even a few minutes at a time can help.

Keep it visible

Place the guide somewhere you’ll see it, like on the kitchen table or in your bag.

Come back to it when you need to

Teens grow and change all the time, so come back to sections that match what they are going through at different times.

Practical action

Use the guide to create small opportunities to listen, talk, and show you care.

TIPS on Using This Guide

Father *“You know, I worry a lot. My son is 16 and sometimes he comes home late from being with his friends, and I don’t know what they are doing. I’m scared he might make bad choices—like drinking, fighting, or wasting his school time. I have seen how quickly boys can get into trouble. I feel like I should be following him everywhere, but I know I can’t.”*

What Identity means in simple terms

Identity development is the process through which teenagers form a sense of who they are and where they fit in the world. It is shaped by personal values and beliefs; cultural and social identity; gender and sexuality; goals, interests, and dreams; what they care about, and how they see themselves.

Teen identity has many parts to it, including four important ones:

- 1 **Purpose:** Feeling that their life has meaning and that they are working towards something important.
- 2 **Belonging:** Knowing they are accepted, valued and loved by their family, friends, and community.
- 3 **Self-worth:** Believing that they matter and are good enough just as they are.
- 4 **Agency:** Feeling that they have some control over their own life and can make choices that affect their future.

READ TOGETHER WITH YOUR TEEN

Identity is shaped as we grow. It keeps changing as teens learn more about themselves and the world, and as they mature. Their bodies and brains are changing quickly, and this can feel confusing and uncomfortable.

This is a time when they need adult support more than ever, even though they want to feel independent, but also a time when it is particularly hard for parents and caregivers to understand what is happening.

How Teen Identity Grows and Develops

As teens go through the many physical and emotional changes, they ask big questions about themselves:

“Who am I, and why do I matter?”

“What makes me important?”

“I don’t need answers. I just want someone to hear me properly.”



As they grow, they start to decide what feels like part of who they are, and what does not. All these questions help teenagers learn who they are becoming.

They may think about things like:

- Am I shaped by my family, culture, faith, or community, or do I feel different?
- My body is changing - how do I feel about it?
- What am I good at?
- What do I believe in and care about?
- Who are my friends, and how do they influence me?
- What do other people think of me? Am I liked or not?
- How do I see myself - strong or weak, clever or not, confident or shy?
- How do I show who I am through how I dress, music, and how I act?

Identity is made of many parts that grow over time

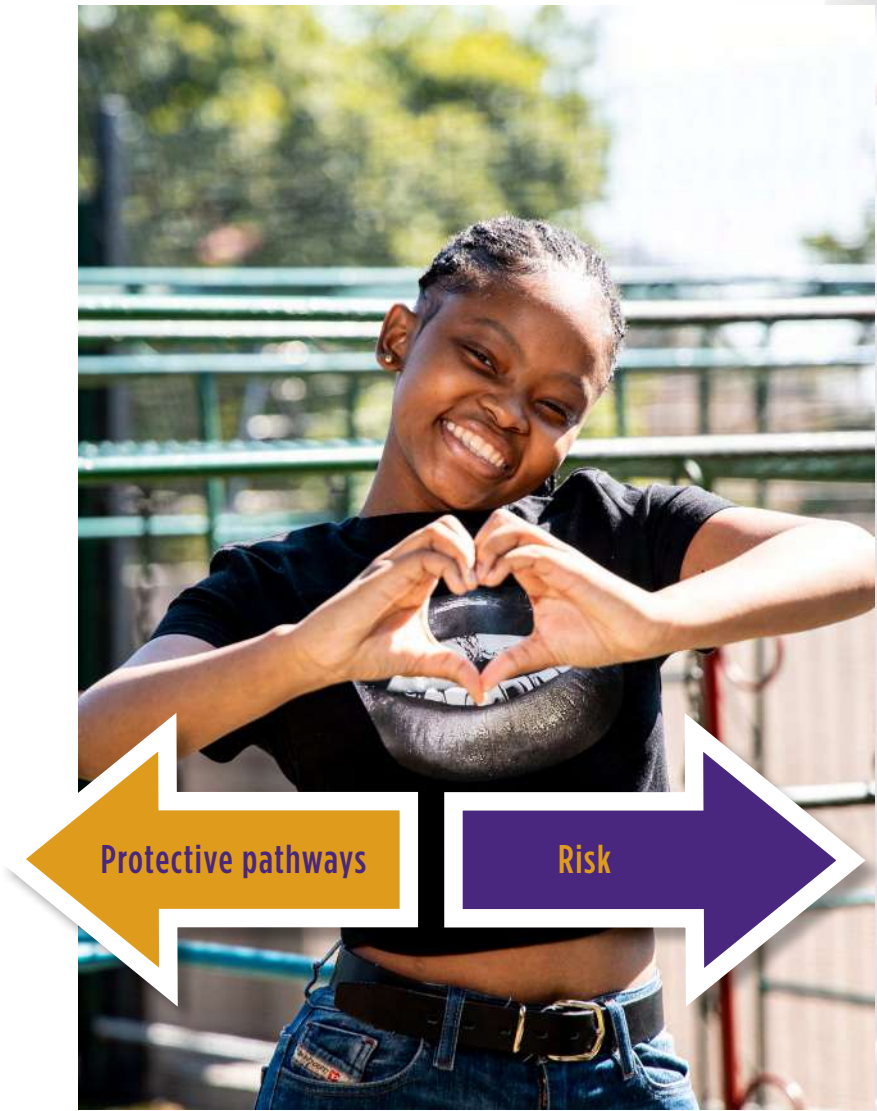


Why is Identity Development so Important?

Identity is important for everyone because it helps us know who we are and what matters to us. When we understand ourselves, we make better choices, deal with problems more easily, and get along better with others. Feeling confident about who we are gives us direction and helps us build stronger families, communities, and lives.

When teenagers feel valued, they are more likely to make good choices and build a positive future. They are more likely to make safe choices, stay in school, get involved in activities, and stay on a positive path in life.

Without support while one's sense of self develops, teens are at higher risk of harmful behaviours, especially when challenged. Building a strong sense of identity gives teens confidence, hope, and resilience, benefiting not just them but the whole family and community.



3. WHY DO TEENS CHANGE SO MUCH - WHAT'S GOING ON?

Teens change a lot because they are moving from being children to becoming adults. Different things contribute to this change:

- **Hormone changes**, which can affect mood, energy levels, sleep, and emotions.
- **Brain development**, especially in areas linked to decision-making, impulse control and emotions.
- They face **new pressures** and more responsibility.
- **They start to question rules** and want to make more of their own choices – they want more independence.
- **Friends** become very important to them, and their feelings can feel stronger than before.

Please Remember

- Your teenager may seem quiet, angry, or not want to talk, but they need you.
- Take time to listen.
- Resist the urge to immediately fix problems and acknowledge emotions without minimising them.
- Show you care and want to understand, even if you don't fully 'get it'.
- Think back to when you were the same age and how you felt.
- A hug or pat on the back can help too.

Growing Brains, Big Changes

A big part of why changes happen is that teen brains are still growing, especially the parts that help with making decisions, controlling impulses, and handling emotions. The brain is only fully developed in our early to mid-20s.

This helps explain why teenagers may:

- **Take risks** – like trying dangerous stunts, getting into fights, experimenting with alcohol, or ignoring safety rules.
- **Be influenced by others**, joining risky dares, gangs, unsafe online challenges, or unhealthy relationships.
- **Seem different** – dressing differently, listening to new music, wanting new friends, or pulling away from family time.
- **Change their minds often** – wanting something strongly one day and not caring about it the next.
- **React strongly** – getting angry quickly, crying easily, or feeling embarrassed or hurt more than expected.
- **Cry for a long time** over a fight with a friend or **get very excited** about winning a small game.

READ
TOGETHER
WITH YOUR
TEEN

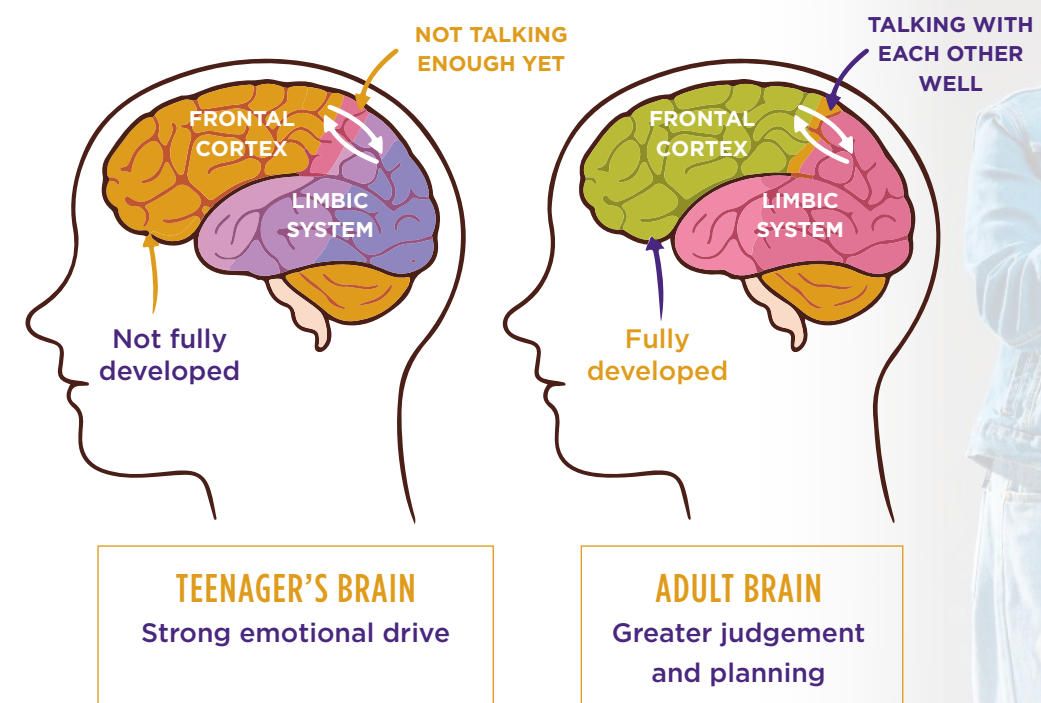
3. WHY DO TEENS CHANGE SO MUCH - WHAT'S GOING ON?

The image that follows shows the ways in which the brain changes during the teen years, with some areas developing more quickly than others. Feelings grow faster than other parts of the brain!

Teen brains are still developing, and this has a big impact on who they are becoming.

Figuring out who I am, what I care about, and where I belong, all while my physical body changes.

Brain Development: Teenager's Brain vs. Adult Brain



The front part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) is more developed in adults – this part helps with planning, thinking ahead, and understanding consequences. All the parts communicate. In teens, emotions tend to be stronger and can override better judgement and planning (limbic system).

We all act on impulse and emotions – but the impulse tends to be stronger in teenagers.

Think of the brain like a car:

TEEN BRAIN: Has a strong engine (lots of emotions) but weak brakes (thinking and planning isn't fully ready). Teens act fast based on feelings.

ADULT BRAIN: Has both a strong engine and strong brakes.



3. WHY DO TEENS CHANGE SO MUCH - WHAT'S GOING ON?

Behaviour vs Character (what they do vs who they are)

A teenager might make mistakes or act out, but that doesn't mean they are a "bad" person. Behaviour can change from moment to moment, while character is built slowly over time. Character is who a person is on the inside – their values, attitudes, and qualities that guide how someone thinks, feels, and chooses to act over time (and it does take time). Separating behaviour from character helps teens feel safe enough to learn, improve, and develop into responsible adults.

- Give them some room to think about the situation.
- Let them learn from their mistakes.
- Guide behaviour without attacking who they are.
- Stay calm, steady, and supportive, so that you are a 'safe place' during difficult or confusing times.
- Let them know you don't like the behaviour but that doesn't change how you feel about them.

Teens often show how they feel through their behaviour. Sometimes this can come across as rude or disrespectful, but it is often their way of trying to understand themselves and the world around them. You don't have to accept bad behaviour, and rules are important, but try to be patient.

Decision-making and Independence

Teens are still learning how to make their own choices and take responsibility for them. Developing independence means figuring out what decisions are safe, smart, and helpful for themselves and others. Hormone changes and strong emotions can make rewards feel extra exciting, so teens sometimes act before thinking through the consequences. Learning from these experiences is an important part of growing up.

Sometimes teens make poor choices, like experimenting with substances or unsafe sexual activity. Calmly explaining the possible outcomes helps them understand how their decisions affect their lives and the people around them. For example, they may make bad decisions – and we must warn them calmly and realistically about possible dangers. Even give examples of what could happen – becoming addicted to substances, for instance, can cause serious injury to themselves or others, or an unplanned pregnancy can be life-changing.

At the same time, we can encourage positive challenges – safe ways for teens to test limits, make decisions, and grow confidence, so that they become more independent. Examples include:

- Trying out for a sports team or cultural club.
- Learning to ride a bicycle.
- Performing or speaking in front of others.
- Trying a new skill, like making things to sell.
- Helping in community projects or leading small group activities.

These activities let teens practice independence, make decisions for themselves, and build confidence while staying safe. Remember that letting them change their minds, like switching hobbies or friends (as long as they follow through on what's important, like schoolwork or family chores), is also part of becoming independent.

4. CORE AREAS OF TEEN IDENTITY

To recap, these are core areas of identity development

- **Purpose** – feeling they have a goal in life
- **Belonging** – knowing they are part of a family, group, or community
- **Self-worth** – believing they matter and are important
- **Agency** – feeling they can make choices and have control over their lives

This means your teen believes they can make decisions and take action to influence their own future

Values and Beliefs

Teens start forming their own opinions, which may be very different from yours. This is normal and important. You may think you know what they believe, but often the best way to find out is to ask and listen.

- Ask their opinions and pay attention to what they say, without judging or arguing.
- Explain why your family, community, religion, or culture values are important to you.
- Be willing to think about your own ideas and, if you can, adjust them a little so you can connect with your teen.

Belonging and Social Identity

Feeling that they belong is very important for teens. They may see themselves as part of different groups – friends, family, culture, school, community, or gender. Belonging affects how they behave, feel accepted, and understand their place in the world. They can struggle with:

- Feeling pressure to fit in or change who they are to be accepted by different groups.
- Balancing different identities (family expectations vs. friends).
- Feeling misunderstood.

We need to acknowledge their experiences. This helps teens feel understood, even if things cannot change. We can also share similar experiences, so they know they are not alone.

"If I talk, it becomes a lecture. So it's better to keep quiet."





Body Image and Self-Esteem

In South Africa, like the rest of the world, media (TV, magazines) and social media show unrealistic images that can make teens feel bad about their bodies. Teens compare themselves to celebrities, edited photos, or popular classmates. On top of this, peer pressure is intense.

During this time, we need to:

- Not tease teens about how they look (even as a joke).
- Point out positive features and help them feel good about themselves.
- Explain that many images/pictures are edited, filtered, or not real.
- Watch for signs of extreme dieting or unhealthy weight loss or gain.

Gender and Sexuality

Some teens question their gender or sexuality or explore different ways of being. This can be challenging for both teens and their parents or caregivers.

If this happens, we need to:

- Listen to them and show care and compassion – even if your beliefs are different.
- Respect them, even if you don't fully understand or agree.
- Remember that sexual orientation is part of who they are, not a choice.
- Create a safe space where it's okay to be different.
- Rejection can harm a teen's mental health, while acceptance helps protect their well-being.
- Even if you don't agree with your teen's choices, you can accept who they are – don't let them think you are ashamed of them.
- Don't force labels. Let them share as much as they are comfortable with and protect their privacy unless they are in danger.

Parent *“As parent, I see teens today, rural or urban, face many of the same struggles, but their environments shape them differently. In rural areas it's limited resources and opportunities, while in cities it's pressure to compete and keep up.”*

Rural, Township and Urban Realities

South African teenagers grow up in different environments. Experiences in rural areas, in townships, and in towns are not the same. A teen's home environment may also be very different from those of other learners in their school. Some teens are growing up in a disadvantaged place, and others in a more privileged place. There are many common challenges, but environment does place different pressures on teens.

Wherever you live and are raising teenagers, try your best to:

- Be positive about a teen's sense of the value of their own environment, for example, being part of an extended family and a close-knit community.
- Make teenagers aware of the dangers that exist in each community and help ensure that they are alert and ready to protect themselves.
- If they express negative thoughts about their environment, try to understand their reality.
- We cannot fix reality, but we can shine a light on the positive things.

“I’m constantly comparing myself to others and worried about my future.”





Culture, Language and Family Life

South African teens grow up having to work around multiple 'identities' in each culture: their home culture, community culture, school culture, peer and digital culture. Added to this, there will be language, tradition, religion, peer pressure, and community expectations. All of these things influence them and how they interact or present themselves in these different places.

It is important to:

- Explore and discuss with teens about home language and culture, especially morals and values.
- Encourage teens to question and explore their background and talk about their experiences as a young person.
- Talk about why culture and heritage are important – it defines where we come from.
- At the same time, accept that teens who share your culture may have a very different view of the world, which could be hard for you to understand.

School Pressure, Social Media, Online/Media Influences

Teenagers constantly compare themselves with others, and these days, media and especially social media can make teens feel that they should look or live perfectly, which isn't realistic. Social media can also expose them to things that they may not be ready for, leaving them unsure and questioning.

There is also a lot of pressure on teens to perform academically and in other spheres of the school environment, for example, sport, music and drama. These factors can create great anxiety for teens who may not be at the top in those areas.

We all want our teens to be the best they can be, but it is important to encourage them:

- Keep affirming your teen's value and self-esteem (looking a certain way is not the most important thing).
- Keep shining a light on everything they do well.
- If you know they have worked hard, praise them for what they've done or achieved.
- Avoid comparing them with others who may have done better.

Uncertainty About the Future

We live in a very uncertain world. We all worry about the future. This is doubly difficult for teens, who have lots of questions and doubts about their personal futures – school, work, friendships, money, and life in general. On top of that, they may worry about things like South Africa's economy, politics, or climate change. All these worries can make their emotions feel heavier.

We cannot change the reality of the world that we live in, but we can support teens by:

- Making time to talk with them and encourage them to talk about their doubts and fears.
- If you had similar doubts as a teen, tell them about it.
- Help them to focus on what they can control and how to set limits for themselves.
- Help them to break things down into things that can be managed – worrying about matric exams can be broken down into smaller goals, for example.
- Encourage them to talk to other adults who will also be prepared to listen and may have advice.



"I learned that I don't have to fix everything. I just need to be there."



“Sometimes I feel like I have to act a certain way just to fit in with my friends, even if it’s not really me, because I don’t want to be left out or judged.”



Relationships are very important during the teenage years as they learn how to connect with others and find where they belong, which helps to shape their identity.

Friends, family, romantic relationships, and the wider community all influence their growth. When teens feel accepted and cared for, they are more likely to grow in healthy and positive ways.

Peer Relationships, Peer Pressure

During this time, teens often face friendship challenges – they have to handle conflicts, understand peer groups and loyalty. These can be big lessons!

Having friends, ‘fitting in’, and being accepted by others become very important during the teenage years. Teens may change their behaviour to fit in or be like the “popular kids”. Teens may:

- Do or say things just because their friends do them.
- Worry about being rejected or left out of their friend groups.
- Feel pressure to act a certain way, dress a certain way, or behave like their peers.
- Try unsafe things, like experimenting with alcohol, drugs, or dangerous stunts, to impress others.
- Struggle to balance family expectations with what their friends expect.

We need to talk openly about peer pressure and make it clear they don’t have to follow everyone else:

- Encourage friendships with people who treat them well and make them feel safe.
- Share your own experiences with peer pressure and how you handled it.
- Remind them that it’s okay to be themselves, even if that means being different and enjoying hobbies their friends don’t, for example.

Real-life examples to show what teens experience.

Your teen comes home upset because a friend spread a rumour about them at school. Instead of immediately scolding the friend, giving a long lecture, or trying to “fix” the problem, you sit with your teen and say:

“That sounds really hurtful. I can see why you’re upset. Want to tell me what happened?”

You hear what they need to say, ask questions, and let them share their feelings. You don’t have to solve the friendship problem or know all the answers, but you can help them handle the situation themselves. You can even share a time when you experienced something similar.



“They tell me, ‘You’re still young, you don’t know stress.’ But I do feel stress. I just don’t know how to say it nicely.”





Bullying and Exclusion: Recognising and Responding

Sadly, teens can face different types of bullying, both face-to-face and online. This can affect their self-worth, mental health, and sense of safety. Bullying, online or offline, can be very harmful. This can include ‘exclusion’: leaving someone out on purpose to be mean and not allowing them to join activities, games, groups, or conversations, even though others are included.

It is important to know that your teen might sometimes be involved in bullying (being the bully). If this happens, act firmly but calmly. Explain why it is harmful and work with the school or parents of the child who was bullied, to make sure it stops.

Types of Bullying and How Adults Can Help

Type of Bullying	Examples	How Adults Can Help
Cyberbullying	Hurtful posts, false messages, sharing private photos, WhatsApp groups that can be used to target someone	Listen without blaming, teach safe phone use, help teen address the situation, talk to school if needed
Physical bullying	Hitting, pushing, taking belongings	Make sure teen is safe, teach them to walk away or get help, report serious incidents
Verbal bullying	Name-calling, teasing, mocking	Reassure teen it’s not their fault, model calm responses, talk with school or community if it continues
Social bullying	Excluding from friends, spreading rumours, damaging friendships	Encourage teen to talk about it, support good friendships, involve trusted adults to mediate

If bullying happens, save any evidence such as copies of messages, photos or names of those involved so that you have proof if you need to report the incident.

Family Connections: Staying Close Without Controlling

As teens grow, they want more independence. They may spend less time with family and more time with friends. This does not mean they don’t care about their family anymore. It can be difficult because they may be more distant and question family values – adults may feel pushed away or worried.

It is important to:

- Stay interested in their lives, even if they don’t always want to talk.
- Find out what they’re interested in and try to connect with them on that.
- Set clear rules but explain and encourage them calmly.
- Give them some freedom while still checking in.
- Show love through small actions, like asking about their day or spending time together.

Staying close does not mean controlling. Teens need guidance, but they also need trust. Remember that it does not matter what your family looks like – it could be made up of a single parent, an older sibling looking after younger ones, or a relative being the main caregiver – it is a family and a teen’s safe space.

Social Media and Online Connections: WhatsApp Groups, TikTok Trends, and Digital Peer Pressure

Social media is a big part of teen life. WhatsApp groups, TikTok trends, and online friends can strongly influence how teens think, act, and feel about themselves.

For teens with cell phones or access to them, constant online communication on social media, like WhatsApp groups or TikTok, may have become more important than face-to-face communication with their family or friends.

This could pose serious danger for teens, and because it is often hidden from parents and caregivers, you may have no idea what serious threats teens may be facing or what is influencing them. What may seem harmless to adults can lead to trouble for teens.

- Popular apps like TikTok, and online gaming can be very addictive and can quickly show teens harmful or upsetting content. This can affect their mental health, encourage unsafe behaviour, and make it harder for them to focus.
- Group chats, like WhatsApp, can be hard for teens because messages come all the time, and this can make them stressed and tired. Hurtful words, gossip, or bullying can spread fast and make teens feel scared or ashamed. Teens may feel pushed to join in or agree with others just to fit in. Messages can also be misunderstood, and harmful or unsafe content can be shared.

It is okay, and important, for parents and caregivers to keep an eye on what teens are doing online to keep them safe. The most important thing is to stay involved, listen, and guide, even if you don’t understand technology very well. If you don’t know enough about online and social media platforms, ask someone else, for example, another relative, older teen, school or church mentor. Some countries are choosing to ban social media for teens under sixteen to protect both children and teens.

“Belonging grows when teens feel seen, welcomed and valued, and adults play a key role in helping this happen.”



Keep them safe online

- Ask your teen what they do on their phone and who they talk to online. Respond calmly and don't judge.
- Agree on times or limits for phone use, especially at night, so that they can rest and sleep.
- Learn a little about WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, or other apps they use. Ask them to show you how they work: this is also letting them 'teach' you something new!
- It is okay to look at your teen's phone now and then, especially if you are worried about their safety.
- Tell teens not to share private photos, videos, or personal information and why it's risky.
- Encourage teens to leave or mute groups that make them feel uncomfortable or bullied.
- Tell your teen they can come to you if something online upsets or scares them. You will help, not punish.
- See Annex at th end of the document for useful contacts and resources available to your teen even before a problem arises.

‘Romantic’ Relationships: Navigating Feelings Safely

Many teens start having romantic feelings during adolescence. This is a normal part of growing up, even if it feels uncomfortable for adults. Often, we still see them as our small children.

Romantic relationships can bring strong feelings!

Teens may experience:

- Strong emotions, excitement, or heartbreak
- Confusion about feelings and boundaries
- Pressure from peers to have relationships

If teens start sexual relationships too early, or without protection, it can cause serious consequences in their lives. These can include pregnancy, illness, stress, and dropping out of school. Adults play an important role in helping teens stay safe. Teens need safe and open spaces where they can talk about their bodies, feelings, health, and relationships without fear or shame.

- Talk to your teen about relationships and sex in a calm and honest way, if you can.
- If you are not comfortable talking about sex, make sure your teen has one trusted adult they can talk to or a reliable place they can get information.
- Teach teens about waiting, consent (permission), respect, and saying no, as well as about safer sex and contraceptive options.
- Help teens get correct information, not stories from friends or social media.
- Find out where teens can get free health services, such as clinics or school health programmes, in your area.
- Remind teens that their future matters, and that they do not have to rush into relationships to prove anything.
- Encourage girls not to engage with older boys and men.

Overall, it is better to:

- Create a safe space to talk about feelings without judgement.
- Talk about respect, consent, and safety in simple terms.
- Guide them without shaming or scaring them.
- Remind them that it's okay to take things slowly.

This can be an uncomfortable thing to talk about, but teens need guidance, not silence or punishment.

Community and Cultural Belonging

Teenagers have a strong need to feel that they belong. Feeling connected to others helps them feel safe, valued, and included. Being part of clubs, religious or youth groups, sports teams, cultural groups, art clubs or spending time with extended family can give teens a sense of identity and pride.

Taking part in local traditions, ceremonies, or community and school events also helps teens feel rooted and connected.

When teens feel that they belong, they are more likely to make positive choices and feel confident about who they are. When they feel left out or alone, they may become withdrawn, angry, or try to fit in in unhealthy ways.

- Notice if your teen seems shy, lonely, or unsure, and help them connect with others (even if it means taking them with you to an event).
- Encourage involvement in safe activities like sports, interest groups, youth groups, faith gatherings, cultural events, or community projects.
- Help with transport or safety so they can attend activities and feel someone is there for them.
- Encourage connections with extended family members who can offer guidance and a sense of belonging.
- Hear your teen when they say they feel left out or don't belong, and take their feelings seriously, even if you don't fully understand them.
- Remind your teen that they matter and that there is and always will be a place for them in the family and the community.



Why Mental Health is Important

Many teens in South Africa face real challenges, such as stress, depression, bullying, violence, not having enough food, exposure to harmful substances, unsafe relationships, or sexual harassment. In addition to making them feel stressed, anxious or sad, these experiences can affect how they see themselves, their confidence, and the choices they make. It is worse if teens feel they cannot talk about their problems, or if adults dismiss their feelings.

It is very important for parents, caregivers, and other adults to notice how teens are feeling, and to help them when needed.

Remember, talking about these things can really help:

- Let your teen know you're there for them and that they can come to you anytime to talk.
- Pay attention to changes in their behaviour, mood, emotions, or physical health.
- Create natural opportunities to connect, such as going for a walk together, doing chores, or finding a quiet moment to chat. Ask open questions and try not to interrupt.
- If your teen feels uncomfortable opening up to you, support them in finding another trusted adult they can talk to.
- Seek help immediately if you believe your teen may be in danger or thinking about harming themselves.

Reducing Stigma

Struggling with feelings like sadness or anxiety is not a weakness. Many teens experience these emotions. Teens need to know it's normal to feel this way, and they shouldn't feel ashamed.

- Talk openly about feelings.
- Think about your own beliefs that might make you dismissive or judgemental.
- Encourage teens to seek help early.
- Lead by example and show that it's okay to express emotions.
- Never dismiss your teen if they share their struggles.
- Avoid saying things like "boys must be strong" or "stop crying" as this can make teens shut down.

Self-Harm and Suicide: What to Know

Teen suicide is a serious issue in South Africa, being the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15–24. More than two in 10 teens have thought about suicide, and most teens who attempt suicide show warning signs, but these are often missed, as we don't see the signs. Events, such as failing exams or a breakup, have been known to cause suicidal thoughts. Noticing the signs and offering help can save a teen's life.

Look out for:

- Withdrawal or sudden changes in behaviour (not eating, isolating, stopping activities they used to enjoy)
- Big mood swings: sadness, anger, anxiety, or being withdrawn
- Loss of interest in friends, family, or activities
- Trouble sleeping or eating
- Struggling at school suddenly
- Saying they feel hopeless, worthless, or want to die
- Self-harm or talking about hurting themselves
- Giving away belongings
- Use of alcohol or drugs

What we can do

Ask directly: **"Are you thinking of hurting yourself?"** Talking about it does not make it more likely or encourage them to do something; it helps them to feel heard and cared for. Seek professional help right away if you believe your teen is in danger – through the school, clinic, your church/faith community and emergency services. You can find helplines at the end of this book.

If your teen has experienced any form of violence or abuse, act strongly and quickly to protect them. This may include reporting to the police, the school and local social workers or district support structures.





Above all, enjoy the teen in your care!

Even though the teenage years can be a tough time, it is also one of the best times! You are watching a teenager develop their identity and grow into the best version of themselves.

Being present matters more than being perfect. Teenagers don't need perfect parents or caregivers; they need adults who will listen to them, take them seriously, and be there for them!

And remember the basics:

Emotional Safety

Teens need to know they can talk without being judged, lectured, or shamed. Even if you don't agree, you can still acknowledge their feelings. Feeling heard is often the first step toward feeling better.

Listening First

Slow down and really listen. Put distractions aside. Let them finish their thoughts. Sometimes what sounds like anger, silence, or attitude is actually fear, stress, or embarrassment underneath.

Encouraging Independence

Some teens grow up with responsibility early in life. Respect that - offer guidance, but don't take over. Help them think through options so they can make their own informed choices. Others may not have had much responsibility - they need to be encouraged to start.

Support Without Controlling

You care very much but cannot control everything - offer help and don't immediately try to step in and take over. Encourage problem-solving.

Recognise effort, not just results. Whether it's school, chores, sports, or work, noticing persistence builds confidence.

Imagine your teenager is on a bumpy road, walking, cycling, or riding a bus - their feelings and life changes are the bumps along the way. You can't carry them or steer for them, no matter how much you want to.

While they travel this road, you might feel like jumping in, getting upset, or trying to fix everything. Instead, stay calm and steady, like a guiding hand or a safe fence - there for them when they need help.

When they pause or ask for help, talk with them, help them make sense of what happened, and plan the next safe step together.

During dialogues many teens said that they do not feel 'heard' when raising issues that they feel anxious or confused about. They feel that they are often not taken seriously by the adults in their lives.

"We don't just want to be told what to do. We want to be understood."



Here are some practical ways to support and connect with teens in everyday life:

Conversation Starters

Use simple questions to open up a chat:

- “What was the best part of your day?”
- “Who do you enjoy spending time with and why?”
- “Is there something that worries you, or what are you grateful for right now?”
- “What do you want to try or learn this week?”

Listening Tips

- Give them your full attention, put your phone down or switch off the TV.
- Nod or say short words like “I see” or “Hmm” to show you’re listening.
- Don’t interrupt or judge. Let them finish what they want to say.
- Ask gentle questions if you don’t understand, like “Can you tell me more?”

Identity-Building Exercises and Habits

- Encourage them to try new things: cooking, helping in a small business, helping you with a work task, or learning a craft.
- Ask them to write or draw what they want for their future.
- Help them set a small weekly goal and celebrate when they achieve it.
- Encourage them to join clubs, cultural/religious/community groups, or youth activities.

Independence-Building Ideas

- Let them manage their own school responsibilities. Instead of reminding them daily about homework or projects, ask them to create their own study plan.
- Give them control over a small budget - whether it’s transport money or airtime and teach them how to plan for the week or month.
- Put them in charge of one household task completely.
- Involve them in some family decisions. Ask their opinion.

Small Actions That Make a Difference

- Praise effort, not just results.
- Notice and comment on their positive qualities: kindness, hard work, creativity.
- Share your own experiences of mistakes and learning from them.
- Make time to do small activities together, like cooking, shopping, walking, or storytelling.
- Encourage them to do things that will build trust with you.

Daily Practical Actions

- Ask about their day at least once daily.
- Give them small responsibilities and trust them to complete them.
- Remind them they are valued and loved.
- Make time for a simple shared activity, like eating together or helping with chores.

These activities can be done alone, in a group, with another parent or in some cases, with your teen.

Remember Being a Teen

- What was hard about being a teen?
- Who helped you feel seen?
- What do I sometimes forget about being a teenager?

Scenario example

A teen changes their style and you don’t like it/ approve

- Is your reaction appropriate or over the top?
- How might control look?
- How might support look?
- Are you insisting they change just because it is what you want, or are you genuinely concerned that their new style could be sending out the wrong message?
- If you feel the new look is inappropriate, how will you explain your opinion and decision in a calm way?
- How could you compromise?

Listening Practice

- Have someone you know speak for 2 minutes
- Listener may not interrupt the person, or immediately try to ‘fix’ the problem/give an opinion
- Repeat back what the speaker has told you
- Reflect on how it felt to just listen
- Try to do this when your teen wants to talk to you going forward

Then vs Now – This is a good exercise to do with your teen

- Compare teenage life then and now
- Look at challenges and positive things
- Discuss how things have changed and how adult responses could change
- Avoid statements like ‘it was harder for us when we were your age’
- Look at possible solutions together



You can approach your school (particularly the School-Based-Support Team (SBST), NGOs, community groups, and faith-based support structures. You can write their numbers at the end of this guide.



Helplines and Professional Help

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

SERVICE	CONTACT	WHAT THEY DO
Childline SA	116 083 371 2104 (WhatsApp)	Help for children and teens with any problem.
SADAG (Depression & Anxiety)	0800 567 567	Support for depression, anxiety, or stress.
Lifeline SA	0861 322 322	Emotional support and counselling.
Suicide Crisis Line	0800 567 567	24/7 help for suicidal thoughts.
Akeso 24 Hr Psychiatric Unit	0861 435 787	Help in mental health emergencies.
Adcock Ingram Helpline	0800 70 80 90	Support for depression or anxiety.
ADHD Helpline	0800 55 44 33	Help with focus and attention problems.
SA Federation for Mental Health	011 781 1852	General mental health information and support.
Cipla Mental Health Helpline	0800 456 789 SMS 31393	Emotional support and counselling.

VIOLENCE & ABUSE SUPPORT

SERVICE	CONTACT	WHAT THEY DO
Stop Gender-Based Violence Helpline	0800 150 150	Help for victims of abuse.
TEARS Foundation	0800 083 277	Help for victims of violence and abuse.
GBV Command Centre	0800 428 428 or 1207867#	Report abuse and get support.
Child Welfare SA	086 142 4453 011 452 4110	Support in child protection cases.
Rape Crisis	083 222 5164 (WhatsApp)	Help for victims of rape.

OTHER USEFUL HELP

SERVICE	CONTACT	WHAT THEY DO
AIDS Helpline	0800 012 322	Support for HIV/AIDS questions and advice.
Parent Line SA - SAPPIN	087 813 4290 (WhatsApp)	Help for parents and families.
Poisons Info Centre	0861 555 777	Advice if a child or adult swallows something harmful.
Substance Abuse Helpline (Dept. Social Development)	087 163 2025 (WhatsApp)	Help for alcohol or drug problems.
NPower SA Helpline	0800 515 515 / SMS 43010	Mental health and general support.
Law for All	063 603 3759 (WhatsApp)	Free legal advice

GENERAL TEEN ADVICE & SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

SERVICE	CONTACT	WHAT THEY DO
Keready	060 019 0000 (WhatsApp)	Support for teens and parents.
B-Wise	087 373 1548 (WhatsApp) 060 017 9672	Health, wellness and relationships.
loveLife	011 523 1000 060 017 9672	Youth health and wellbeing support.
KTCares	www.ktcares.org.za	Safe, truthful and supportive information to children, parents and teachers on their changing bodies, gender, sexuality, sexual health and relationships
The Warrior Project	Emergency *134*7355#	thewarriorproject.org.za/helplines

- Agency:** Believing “I can make choices.” Feeling some control over your own life.
- Belonging:** Feeling part of a family, group, church, school, or community.
- Boundaries:** Clear rules about what is okay and what is not okay.
- Bullying:** Hurting someone by hitting, teasing, spreading rumours, or online messages.
- Consent:** Permission. Saying “yes” freely, without pressure.
- Consequences:** What happens after a choice. Good or bad results.
- Culture:** Your traditions, language, beliefs, and way of life.
- Cyberbullying:** Bullying on a phone or online.
- Decision-making:** Choosing what to do after thinking about it.
- Emotional Safety:** Feeling safe to talk about feelings without being judged, laughed at, or punished.
- Independence:** Doing things on your own. Making choices. Taking responsibility.
- Identity:** Who we are. What we believe. What we like. What matters to us.
- Mental Health:** How we feel inside - sad, happy, worried, calm, stressed.
- Mood changes:** Feeling happy, sad, or angry in different ways/times.
- Peer Pressure:** Feeling pushed by friends to do something to fit in.
- Popular kids:** Teens who are liked by many others.
- Purpose:** Having something to work towards. A goal. A reason to try.
- Resilience:** Being able to keep going after something hard happens.
- Responsibility:** Doing what you are supposed to do without being forced.
- Safe boundaries:** Rules about what is okay or not okay with others.
- Self-harm:** When someone hurts their own body because they are in emotional pain.
- Self-worth:** Knowing “I matter.” Feeling important and valued.
- Social Media:** Apps where people talk and share things online and on cellphones.
- Stress/anxiety:** Feeling worried or under pressure.
- Suicide:** When someone tries to end their own life.
- Values:** What you believe is right and important.
- Wellbeing:** Feeling okay in body and mind



Imagine if every child born today,
tomorrow and the next day
and the next...

had enough love, enough food,
enough safety and brain power.

Together we would change our future

www.holdmyhand.org.za

[@holdmyhand.sa](https://www.instagram.com/holdmyhand.sa)

