

Don't Think the Worst About Your Teenager

Parents fear that adolescents are prone to rebellion and moodiness, but research shows that expecting bad behavior can be a self-fulfilling prophecy

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When my son turned 13 last fall, the reaction of friends and family was mixed. Along with well wishes came sympathetic eye rolls and condolences: “Oh, good luck with the teen years!”

The stereotype of the moody, rebellious, reckless teenager is deeply ingrained in American culture. Bookstores stockpile survival guides for fearful parents. Movies and television shows capitalize on depicting teens at their worst. But an increasing number of psychologists are pushing back against these negative ideas, seeing them not only as inaccurate but as harmful to teens.

Over a century ago, the pioneering American psychologist G. Stanley Hall introduced the concept of adolescence as a time of heightened “storm and stress.” As the theory goes, the need of teenagers to disengage from parents, coupled with hormonal changes, sets off risky behavior, extreme emotions and family conflict. In the 1960s, the psychoanalyst Anna Freud went further, claiming that the absence of such behavior in adolescents was itself abnormal.

Though the teen years can be a turbulent time, decades of research show that these stereotypes aren't inevitable or biological, and they certainly don't apply to the overwhelming majority of teens, says Richard Lerner, director of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University. “It's not that adolescence doesn't have its problems and challenges,” he says, “but so does every period of life, like the toddler years or aging.”

In fact, adolescent trends with respect to risk-taking have been positive in recent decades, says Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a professor of psychology at Clark University. In a review published last August in the *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, Dr. Arnett details the decline of four types of risky behavior: substance use, unprotected sex, crime and hazardous driving. Rates of alcohol use, for instance, have sharply declined since the 1990s, while other illicit drugs have declined to their lowest points in more than 40 years, with the exception of marijuana, which rose in the 1990s and has fluctuated since, says Dr. Arnett.

“While, on average, adolescents do engage in more risk-taking, experience more negative moods, and are more likely to fight with parents than younger children, parents need to know that the absolute levels of those things still remain quite low during the teenage years,” says Christy Buchanan, a professor of psychology at Wake Forest University. In a 2016 review of decades of adolescent research published in the *Encyclopedia of Adolescence*, Dr. Buchanan and Johna Hughes Bruton found that contrary to popular belief, the majority of adolescents don't

experience debilitating or disruptive emotional problems or have a distanced, difficult relationship with parents.

Adolescents who do display high levels of negative moods and behavior, says Dr. Buchanan, often have a pattern of such behavior stemming from childhood. The danger with stereotypes is that parents can dismiss troubling behavior as “teens being teens,” she says, when really it is a symptom of something more serious that could benefit from early intervention.

Parents who believe that they are “just being realistic” about teenage behavior may even unknowingly contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy, says Dr. Buchanan. In a 2009 study published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Dr. Buchanan and Ms. Bruton surveyed 270 sixth and seventh graders and their mothers about their expectations for the teenage years, such as whether teens were rude, grumpy, selfish, talked back, acted without thinking and were distanced from the family. When researchers followed up a year later, mothers who expected stereotypical behavior were more likely to have a child with higher levels of problem behavior, even after controlling for other risk factors. And the adolescents who believed in these stereotypes were more likely, a year later, to report less closeness and more conflict with parents and were more likely to be influenced by peers.

Research also finds that adolescents tend to start or to continue using illicit substances when their parents believe they’re using them, even if they’re not, according to a study published last year in *Addictive Behaviors Reports*. Using a sample of 3,000 U.S. adolescents from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Hei Wan Mak of the University of Cambridge analyzed data collected in grades 7–12 during the 1994-1995 school year and again a year later. She found that adolescents who used cigarettes and alcohol at the beginning of the study were more likely to continue to use them if their parents were aware of their use. Adolescents were also more likely to use cigarettes if their parents believed they smoked when in fact they didn’t—perhaps, in part, because teens interpret parents’ beliefs as expectations and may try to conform to them.

A number of factors may contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies. A parent’s negative expectations may lead an adolescent to have lower expectations of themselves, making them more vulnerable to peer pressure. When parents know about bad behavior and don’t act on it, teens may perceive it as tacit approval. And if parents think rebellious behaviors are inevitable, it may also change the way that they parent; they may make less of an effort to monitor their teen’s life and to stay engaged because they don’t expect to make a difference.

But parents’ beliefs can also influence teens in positive ways. A 2015 study in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, conducted by Dr. Buchanan and Terese Glatz of Orebro University in Sweden, found that parents, particularly mothers, who believe that they can shape their child’s behavior during adolescence are more likely to engage in positive parenting strategies, such as greater involvement and communication, which in turn foster positive behavior.

One way for parents to lessen the hold of negative stereotypes is to counter them directly, according to a study published last October in the journal *Child Development*. In experiments with several hundred Chinese seventh graders in Shanghai, researchers taught the students that

stereotypes about the irresponsibility of teens were inaccurate and asked them to give positive examples of teen behavior. Compared with students in a control group, those who took part in the intervention reported higher academic aims, performed better on an academic task and showed a decrease in risk-taking. Study co-author Eva Pomerantz of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggests that parents talk with their teens about the validity of stereotypes and encourage activities like volunteering that contradict negative stereotypes in a concrete way.

“Too often we describe ‘good’ teens because of what they don’t do: They’re good kids because they don’t smoke or do drugs or hang out with the wrong crowd—what a dispiriting message for a teen to hear,” says Dr. Lerner. We owe it to our adolescents to write a more positive script of these years, he says. Parents who turn their focus to the admirable things that teens do, who help to foster their child’s strengths and talents, will find, he adds, that their teen has a much easier time getting through adolescence.