

PARENTS & TEENAGERS

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE HEALTH EDUCATION COUNCIL
AND THE SCOTTISH HEALTH EDUCATION GROUP



What's a turn on?

What makes a teenager want to learn.

Motivation and self-image

Learning isn't just – or even mostly – about school work. It's about all the things that contribute to the teenager's self-image – about becoming the kind of person they want to be. To understand a teenager's motivation to learn

you need to look at how they see themselves. For example, two teenagers might want to learn to play trumpet in a band for different reasons: one may be primarily motivated by the idea of being able to play music, the other by the idea of taking part in the band's social life.

Adolescence is a time of rapid development in self-image. The things teen-

agers are most keen to do are things which enhance their view of themselves. Activities which leave their self-image untouched, or damaged, will not be as motivating. You can usually tell when something is motivating by the rapid learning and absorbed activity which takes place: for example, when your teenager decides he or she wants to find out all about computers, or dyeing hair.

What turns your teenager on?

① This activity looks at what currently motivates your teenager.

1 Overview: first, look at the aspects of self (opposite) which provide most of your teenager's motivation to learn. Make a table like the one shown on the right. Fill in the 'parent' columns as follows:

Column 1: think about the range of activities your teenager engages in. Which aspects of self do they mostly relate to? Mark each one as very/fairly/not very/barely important.

Column 2: try to decide how confident your teenager feels in each aspect of his/her self. Mark each one very/fairly/not very/barely confident.

Column 3: try to decide who your teenager is learning most from for each aspect. Mark in: parents/school/friends etc.

If your teenager is interested, ask him/her to fill in his/her own responses too. If you and he/she do not agree – why might this be? In this exercise it is his/her view of him/herself which is the most important thing to reckon with.

Your teenager may be taking risks in aspects of self which are important for him/her, but where he/she is not particularly confident yet. Aspects which are apparently not important, and in which he/she is not confident, may suggest he/she is deliberately avoiding certain activities for a while.

It can be painful for parents to see that they are no longer the most important source of learning for their teenager. But in developing their own views and values, teenagers often need to explore different views from those their parents hold. For a while, the views of friends may be the most supportive – though not, in the long term, the most important.

Self	1 Importance		2 Confidence		3 Learning from	
	Parent	Teenager	Parent	Teenager	Parent	Teenager
Physical						
Sexual						
Social						
Vocational						
Philosophic						

2 Specific activities: Now ask your teenager if he/she will take a more detailed look with you at, say, six of his/her activities. Some of these should be formal subjects such as those taught at school, others should be things he/she learns about informally, at home or with friends. Make a chart like the one below from a parent tester and her teenage daughter. Mark in the following gains and effects.

○ short term gains (satisfaction, praise etc.)
○ long term gains (qualifications, job, purchases etc.)
○ the effects of these on self-image (status, confidence etc.)

Which activity does your teenager like best? Which least? The differences between these may highlight the gains in self-esteem that are major sources of motivation for your teenager.

Activity	Short term gains	Long term gains	Effects
Needlework	Satisfaction	None	Confident
Household chores (least)	Good conscience	Small wage to spend	Confident
Pet care – family cat	Affections from pet	Broadened knowledge	Feels knowledgeable
Typing	Praise	Qualif. job	Confident
History	Satisfaction and interest	Qualif. job	None really
Badminton (best)	Relaxing	Fitness	Feels good
Main source of motivation: good, happy feelings – physical sense of achievement.			

Five aspects of self

As the central chapters of this book suggest, there are five key aspects of self: physical, sexual, social, vocational, philosophic. During adolescence there is a lot to learn about each of these aspects. In each, the teenager is exploring the question (rarely asked directly): "Who am I?" At times he/she will be uncertain, and may well react differently from one occasion to another.

The physical self: concern over looks is displayed in many ways – interest in clothes, testing strength, sensitivity about height, skill in sport and so on. Many teenagers want to learn how to present themselves well. They also have an interest in learning more about their health and how their bodies work.

The sexual self: teenagers are often uncertain about some of the biological aspects of their sexuality. But they are more strongly motivated to find out how this aspect of life can be integrated into their relationships. Nowadays there is a range of beliefs and approaches as to what a sexual relationship should mean. So there is much to decide – in an area which is often difficult to discuss.

The social self: learning how to get on with other people is a key motivation in adolescence. The teenager will want to develop social skills to handle a variety of situations: starting a conversation, coping with embarrassment, how to say 'no thanks', making new friends, needing to be alone, for example. He will also be developing an understanding of other people's points of view.

The vocational self: teenagers are still strongly motivated to have a job, for the independence and sense of personal worth it brings. This can raise difficulties when it is hard to get a job. Teenagers want to learn about what working life is like, how to get on with workmates – and how to balance work with other interests. They also want to learn those things they think will help them get a job which will suit them.

The philosophic self: teenagers are learning to make their own decisions about what gives meaning to life, and to develop their own beliefs about what is moral behaviour. Personal relationships, politics and religion are often areas where teenagers are clearly seeking to 'find themselves'.

At school . . .

"What's the point of taking exams? I'll never get a job, even with 'A' levels." "My dad earns more than a teacher, and he hasn't got any qualifications."

Teenagers like these don't seem motivated for school-work. They don't see the point. They can't see prospects in terms of a job, or money; and they don't mention day-to-day enjoyment of learning for its own sake. They're just biding their time until they can leave school. This may be because they've had repeated failures at school or, currently, they may be more motivated by learning how to mend motorbikes or play in a band.

Schools vary a great deal in the effects they have on teenagers' motivation. Immediate praise for good behaviour and work has more impact on the teenager than long-term treats or displaying work on the walls. Democratic forms of teaching, where pupils are involved and interested, are more effective than authoritarian ones. Punishment has only a weak effect on motivation, and may actually worsen behaviour.

To some extent, teenagers live up or down to what is expected of them, in terms both of behaviour and performance. Activity – being involved – and responsibility – being trusted – seem to be the key to motivation at school. Good teachers can build up an atmosphere of sharing and confidence to which their pupils respond whatever their ability.

. . . and at home

What applies in school applies equally at home. Parents need to look at the praise, involvement and responsibility they offer their teenager over a whole range of activities. If these things are missing at school, it becomes even more important that they happen at home.

Mixed feelings and uncertainty about what is motivating are a normal part of adolescence. The real tragedy is the teenager who can't get turned on by anything, who feels cut off and depressed. Prolonged inactivity may be a sign of depression – see pages 200–201.

Parents have mixed feelings too. They no longer know where they are, as

they did when their teenager was a child. It can be frustrating to see the teenager apparently waste good opportunities, and it can be difficult to let go and show that you trust your teenager to manage his or her own life.

What you say to your teenager is important. Parents can give messages which boost self-confidence and motivation. Or they can limit the teenager or make him/her feel a failure. Messages may be about the teenager themselves: "you stupid boy", "you clever girl". Or they may be about what's OK or not in the family: "our lot never were much good at school", "all our family are in the bakery trade". What messages do you give your teenager?

