

# How to raise happy teenagers

By Michael Odel



How to get through to moody teens. *Photo: Getty*

As I make my way to meet parenting gurus Janey Downshire and Naella Grew for a nice grown-up cup of tea in a smart London café, it dawns on me that, if I am really going to test their teenager parenting skills, I ought to turn up in role.

First I should be late, irked that they never told me London was so big. Then, looking for my pad and pen, I ought to throw a hissy fit because I've lost my bag (the new one they bought me for my birthday). Then, as they begin talking about their exciting new book *Teenagers Translated*, I should be texting friends under the table while picking the icing off Janey's carrot cake. If she looks annoyed, I ought to say, "I am listening," and roll my eyes. At the end I would need to sign off with a casual "Nice story, bro," and ask for a lift to a friend's house.

Finally, when starting this article last thing at night and realising I haven't listened to a word they've said, I'd need to sidle up to either of them brushing their teeth and demand they help me. If the answer is "no", I should stamp off screaming, "OK, fine, make me fail!"

"I think many parents recognise facets of this behaviour," says calm, reflective Grew, when I put this scenario to her. "Our aim is to provide a tool kit for parents to deal with the tempestuous emotions of the teenage years."

Parenting classes and manuals are a big industry these days. But Downshire and Grew's book (subtitle: *How to Raise Happy Teens*) stands out due to its powerful core idea: neuroscience can explain the chaotic impulses and emotions of the evolving teenage brain.

Research supported by MRI scanning shows the brain undergoes huge structural changes during the teenage years. Important neural pathways are laid down, which contribute to long-term behavioural responses. Once you understand that the nuances of your parenting (and these can be as basic as voice tone, eye contact, the wording of a request) influence the

release of brain chemicals (aim for calm, stable dopamine rather than stressy cortisol), you can affect your child's behaviour and emotional welfare.

More importantly, if you can show your teenage child how their own brain chemistry works, you can teach them an invaluable skill: how to self-regulate the sometimes powerful urges of the brain's amygdala (a primitive structure which MRI scans show is hyperactive and ultra-sensitive in teenage years).

For me it is a timely book. I have three children aged 16, 13 and 11 (Downshire and Grew assert that teenage turmoil can start as early as 10 and might go on until 24), and the teenage terrain they are currently navigating bears no relation to that which I experienced.

"Even in our lifetimes, teenagerhood has evolved massively," says Downshire. "There's less homogeneity. Teenagers are entering a more complex and competitive world and assailed by all sorts of stimuli, which we never had to deal with. Social media, the internet, TV, their phones have all compromised parental influence."

I have learnt this the hard way. When my eldest two told me they wanted to watch someone making a recipe on the internet, I took them at their word and congratulated them on their interest in cooking. Actually, they were watching a young school friend solemnly preparing a cocktail of eggs, sardines, Cherryade, vodka and washing-up liquid to drink "because someone told him to". This was neknominate, the online drink-dare craze where a "nominee" is encouraged to "neck" a cocktail of ingredients.

Similarly I discovered Tinder (the location-based social media "hook-up" site where strangers, sometimes just yards away, judge each other by their photos) only while my daughter was revising Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. She needed to know the significance of the ball at Netherfield and I tried to explain using clumsy olde worlde references. "So it's like a Georgian version of Tinder ... strangers checking each other out in a room but, instead of selfies, they're dancing a jig and asking about your 'accomplishments'?" she asked.

We have got from the ball at Netherfield to Tinder in 200 years. Tinder, neknominate, Snapchat, Vine and countless other internet innovations are reconfiguring the world for our children. They are not all bad but the onus is certainly the cheap thrill in the moment.

"There is no doubt television, the internet and social media are huge challenges," says Grew. "It's important to teach children their cues come from family, friends and people they know and trust. But the brain can seek sublimation in these media if things around them are stressful."

The authors are not scientists. Grew has previously worked for the bank JP Morgan and the World Health Organization before having children and doing an MA in counselling. Downshire ran a toy shop before also starting a family and doing counselling training. After a further course on emotional intelligence and undertaking research into parents' relationships with teenage children, Downshire joined forces with Grew to run parenting classes five years ago. Their own reading on the neuroscientific basis of teen behaviour and their experiences teaching were then distilled into the book.

What struck them both was an ingrained cultural defeatism around raising teens, and they have high hopes their methods can reverse this trend.

"We are saying the old reaction is not enough," says Grew. "Neuroscience now tells us that, with teenagers, we are moulding fluid personalities into firmer identities. Rather than throwing your hands up, it's essential to see this is not the time to disengage. It's time to affect the outcome with specific tools."

This insight is a great help to me. Sometimes my first spat of the day with my eldest daughter occurs outside the bathroom and is invariably about my face not being right.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she will say.

Before reading *Teenagers Translated*, I admit I might have passed this off with a silent, weary "She's just like her mother", but the book asserts that this aggression is not inherited but natural. The amygdala is permanently assessing threats and dangers, leading to hair-trigger responses in sensitive teenagers. "We all have a default primitive response to perceived threat - fight, flight or freeze," says Grew. "Once you've identified it, you can work at developing more stable, sophisticated reactions. For a parent it often means just stepping back and remaining calm."

When stress arises, the book is also good at sifting and matching an array of familiar teen coping strategies with their underlying causes. Thus, feeling isolated or lonely might explain why a child is on Facebook all night. Anxiety about the opposite sex might explain an interest in porn, and overdoing alcohol might be ascribed to simple insecurity among crowds.

Downshire and Grew are not preachy. A lot of their ideas derive from personal experience: they have seven children between them, ranging from 15 to 23.

"I went through a very frustrating period with one child," says Grew. "There was a lethargy and disengagement that looked like laziness, a 'just can't be bothered' attitude. It took me a while to stop reacting to the behaviour and see the message. And that was: 'I am scared of failure'. I had to stop myself being angry to see my child actually needed reassurance."

And that brings us to the crux. *Teenagers Translated* is as much about changing parents as teenagers. I became a teenager in the late Seventies. My parents weren't interested in understanding my inner teenage world or "the inside of that ping pong ball", as my dad used to call it. There were rules to follow. The alternative was "the slipper" and, for big infractions, "the belt".

I simply do not have the emotional gearing to deal with the current teen terrain where age thresholds of discovery have tumbled. When I was 13, sure, I took a nip of cider from a friend's older brother and gagged on the odd cigarette. But no one I knew smoked dope or knew how to get it. Now the "weed-heads" are a recognised school clique from Year 7.

Getting hold of cheap alcohol is far easier today, too. With the booming black market in fake ID, 15-year-olds are adept at being served and even getting into clubs. And then there are the drugs. Apart from weed and Ecstasy, there is a current teen craze for the hallucinogenic ketamine. Although it is also used in human medicine and is being trialled for the treatment of depression, its primary use is veterinary, where it's administered as a horse tranquillizer. A 15-year-old boy died earlier this month after his drink was spiked with the drug at an illegal rave in Croydon. I have twice driven to the rescue of teenagers reeling from spiked drinks. It's scary and I have tried to teach my elder two to think twice about sipping anything, even when I am personally handing them a glass of squash.

As for porn, I do remember my first astonished sight of magazines such as *Razzle* and *Hustler*. But in the light of what's available on the internet, that now seems as quaint a sexual initiation as glancing through a church hall window to see ballroom dancing. Online porn is ubiquitous and brutal. And you can see attitudes towards sex changing accordingly in social media interaction, especially in boys. "Sexting" and revenge porn (where a girl who has shared an intimate photo with a boy finds it plastered all over the internet if the relationship turns sour) are new parental challenges.

I now accept that it is I who must change. Faced with this new world, I cannot parent like my father. There is no point going from 0-apoplectic in three seconds. I have been running outmoded parental software. I need Calm Parent 2.0.

So, for example, when my 13-year-old Tommy told me that in his crucial history test he faced the question, "What do you consider to be Isambard Kingdom Brunel's greatest engineering failure?" and that he had answered, "His hat", I tried very hard not to flip.

Not getting angry is just the start. Grew and Downshire estimate that 85 per cent of what we communicate to our children is non-verbal. They are absorbing the way we talk and dress, and whether we smile and hold eye contact.

One thing their book could do with is a glossary of teen speak so I can actually understand what my children are talking about (see my own guide, below). After a pointless spat with my eldest about whether she really ought to be writing to "Binky" from Made in Chelsea about her break-up with Alex rather than her own grandmother who is, after all, real and sent her a birthday present, I followed the book's advice and went to say sorry. I took along a cookie as a form of tribute.

"I brought you a cookie," I said and held it out as though pushing it through the bars of a bear cage.

"DBI," she muttered, without taking her eyes off her phone.

I had no idea what she was talking about but, in keeping with the book's advice, remained calm with good eye contact and the cookie held at appropriate grab-level.

"I'm not sure what DBI means; nevertheless, I am sorry and have brought you a cookie," I said.

"DBI. Don't beg it," she said. I was trying too hard. And simply asking for a translation of DBI means I was risking a DPMO scenario (DPMO means Don't P--- Me Off). In this context I quickly learnt this meant I was to leave the room immediately, taking my "epic fail biscuit" with me.

"Well, yes, we do hear of parents trying too hard," sympathises Grew. "I hear about some mothers taking their sons out for a candle-lit meal, holding their hands and asking, 'Darling how are you feeling?', which is a complete turn-off. Don't lurch from one extreme to the other. Our strategies are long term."

I can see that Downshire and Grew have superhuman parenting abilities. Frankly, they don't look tired enough for mothers. They are glossy and well dressed. Where is this morning's omelette inadvertently wiped into the hair? I wondered if the suggestion in Chapter 9 that dads play a round of golf with their sons indicated a privileged parenting environment.

Indeed, their training courses (variously aimed at parents, school staff and children themselves) are proving very popular in independent, fee-paying schools in the UK, India and Qatar.

"That's not by design," Downshire points out. "We'd love to do more in state schools but the independent sector, especially boarding schools, have picked up on these ideas very quickly because they are so hot on quality pastoral care."

On their courses outside of schools, it is mostly mothers who sign up. But, interestingly, a group of fathers recently organised to do a course.

"For dads the cause-and-effect explanations appeal," says Downshire. "Many of our ideas resonate with the management and leadership skills they may have encountered at work."

Besides, dads are tired of being wheeled on as the disciplinarian at home. They enjoy having these more sophisticated tools."

Most significantly, when they do their seminars for teenagers, the response is effusive. In one role play, Grew takes them by surprise, shouting at them. Then she explains that the uncomfortable feeling is cortisol being released by the brain.

"They start to recognise the nuances of their own brain chemistry. They then make connections about how they react. We forget teenagers can feel daunted and powerless. They love anything that gives them a measure of control and an insight into who they are."

My children found the book fun. They love the idea that they have a "reptile brain" loaded with (almost) irresistible primitive urges.

And let's not forget, either, that the cost of failing to understand our teenagers is becoming higher.

"In the modern world we don't have the luxury of not teaching our children to manage their feelings," says Grew. "The internet and social media age more or less insists they have a self-regulating response to the temptations of smoking, porn, self-harm, eating disorders, alcohol or drugs. Without that skill, they are just so vulnerable."

#### **How parents should speak to teenagers**

1. Slowly change how you communicate. Talking to a 13-year-old is not the same as talking to a 19-year-old, who should be addressed adult-to-adult.
2. Recognise an "emotional hijack". Wait until there's calm before addressing the issue.
3. Remember that behaviour is an effort to communicate a need. Try to interpret what's going on underneath.
4. Remember that addiction and motivation use the same pathways in the brain.
5. Model what you want them to emulate rather than just lecture.
6. Don't punish too much. Be firm but fair and offer warnings first.
7. Be calm when things go wrong. Show them you can problem-solve without losing it.

Source; [http://www.essentialkids.com.au/older-kids/teens/how-to-raise-happy-teenagers-20140701-3b5wn.html#utm\\_source=FD&utm\\_medium=lifeandstylepuff&utm\\_campaign=teenshappy](http://www.essentialkids.com.au/older-kids/teens/how-to-raise-happy-teenagers-20140701-3b5wn.html#utm_source=FD&utm_medium=lifeandstylepuff&utm_campaign=teenshappy)