

Dealing With Your Teen's "Firsts" **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Change is scary, especially when it involves your children. There's a first time for just about everything, but as many seasoned parents will note, they wish that some of these "first times" could be postponed until a later date!

As pre-adolescent and adolescent bodies change and mature, hormones kick in, and social pressures abound our middle-and high-schoolers tend to have one thing in common—wanting to stretch the previously safe, agreed-upon boundaries and add all kinds of activities to their repertoire of desires and needs. Your fifth-grader probably loves to shop with you at the mall, but your sixteen-year-old would most likely prefer to go with her friends. Family movies were cool when your son was younger, but now as a ninth-grader he's pleading to be dropped off, of course without your scoping out the situation, and to link up with his buddies at the show.

What's a parent to do? Well, start with trying to be smart by picking your battles, listen to your child to understand where he or she is coming from, be ready to grow the rules with the kid, and know what your limits are and stick to them. Also, discuss with your teen how trustworthiness and usage of common sense are extremely important attributes when considering the independence-seeking that he or she is engaged in. I've found with my own two kids, as well as with many of the families that I work with in my clinical practice, that compromise and consistency are key parental behaviors. Now, let's take a look at some of the most common, and perhaps anxiety-producing, *firsts* for teens:

First Activities:

The first trip to the mall or movies without you:

Okay, your son or daughter has asked to go to either the mall or movies, and of course it's without you tagging along. Often children as young as 12 or 13 ask for this privilege as they see many of their peers dropped off and picked up by their folks without Mom or Dad participating. The primary focus should be upon safety. Face it, your kid really doesn't need you sitting next to him at the movies—you probably do though, as you may miss the bonding experience, actually want to see the show, or are afraid of either someone hurting your child or the kid leaving the movie to party with his friends. Often parents feel better about the movie or mall trip with the group when these occur during the afternoon or early evening, and only allow night outings when the child is in high school.

When considering these outings, make sure that your kid is running with the pack when allowed at the movies or mall without you. There is safety in numbers but your child needs to promise (and stick to his word) to stay with the group and to not take off on his own to visit another store or to leave the movie theater. Trust is essential and if your kid has a history of impulsive or irresponsible behavior you may want to say no to such requests until he has proven himself to be dependable. If it makes you feel better, have

him or her carry a cell phone, with the rule that they must answer it when you call. And, be sure that he's aware of when and where he'll be picked up and stress that he needs to be on time so that you're not worried. If another parent is doing the driving double check that your child will be brought home at the expected time.

The first boy-girl party:

Although your daughter has probably attended many parties in her grade and early middle school years where boys were in attendance, it's a whole different animal when it comes to high school bashes. Often the party-giver's parents are either not at home or they've taken up residence in their bedroom to avoid the crowd. It's possible that someone will appear with beer or a bottle of liquor, or perhaps even marijuana. Kids who are driving cars come and go, and even with the parents trying to supervise, things can quickly get out of hand when a bunch of kids get together on a Friday night. Now, this doesn't mean that your child will engage in any of this behavior, but it's a scary thought just knowing that she could be around other kids' misbehavior without your guidance.

First, let her know that her first teen co-ed party is a big responsibility for her, and possibly an anxiety-producing event for you. You don't want to make her feel guilty for attending, but some rules do have to be set in stone. Again, trust is critical. Mandate that she is not to engage in any substance use and must stay at the party and not leave the premises without your knowledge and permission. Make it clear that this is not open to debate. No chance, no way, nada. If she's not willing to agree to these bottom-line terms, or you can't trust her word, then she doesn't go. Also, it's imperative that you contact the parents to make sure that they will be on site and to find out how they plan to keep the kids inside and safe. If you don't feel comfortable with their answers, your child doesn't go.

First Possessions:

The cell phone:

I like to view the cell phone as an electronic leash of sorts. It's a great way to keep communication easy and open between kids on the go and their folks, and leaves no excuse for not getting parental permission if the evening's plans need to change. If your child does not have their own phone, you may wish to consider lending them yours for evenings out. But, there need to be clear rules about the care and usage of the cell phone. The issues to be considered are whether the phone is to be used solely to call home or whether your son or daughter can use it to communicate with friends, who will pay for excess usage (a good way to spend baby sitting money!), and whether or not it can be turned off, lent to friends or taken to school. If your teen has their own phone but tends to rack up the minutes, consider purchasing a pre-paid plan with a reasonable monthly fee for a set amount of minutes. Kids get real good, real quick when it comes to rationing out chat time when they know that the meter is running!

The car:

Taking the car out for a spin alone usually ranks high on teens' wish list of firsts. It's almost a rite of passage--getting the restricted license, then the driver's license, and finally the day arrives when you let your daughter take the car to the convenience store all by herself. I can remember when my children began to drive that they seemed to have a newfound need for quick trips to the store to grab some binders for school, to visit a friend that just couldn't wait until school the next day, or an offer to pick up fast food or *anything* that we needed at home. After the novelty of driving wore off, though, it seemed like pulling teeth from a chicken to blast them out the door to pick up the cleaning or whatever I needed done!

Hopefully your child has logged many, many hours of driving with you, perhaps completed a driver's education course at school or taken private lessons. Nothing, and I repeat nothing, is as frightening as putting a 16- or 17-year-old behind the wheel, alone, for the first time. How can you make it more comfortable for everyone? Begin by taking baby steps and setting limits. Allow the teen to drive during daylight hours initially, and then only after you feel that they have had sufficient experience will you let them drive in the evening. Check your community's teen driving curfews carefully—most allow them to drive alone during the first year until 11 PM or so. Also, restrict the number of people that they can have in the car. Initially you may want to make the rule that they must drive alone so as not to be distracted, and can pick up friends only after they've had sufficient experience. Continue to ride, as a passenger, with your teen to evaluate if they tend to tail-gate, speed or are inattentive to the rules of the road.

Physical Firsts:

Shaving:

Although as an adult shaving is seen as a mundane, time-consuming affair, to a young man the first shave is a benchmark. Most parents choose to purchase an electric razor in order to lower the frequency and intensity of facial cuts. And, although Dad's tough beard may respond best to a hand razor, Junior's peach fuzz cleans up quickly with the electric model. After some practice your young man may request an inexpensive hand razor, so be sure to throw in some shaving cream and a styptic pencil just in case of a slip up. Nowadays, it seems like the high school guys are going for the "grunge look", so be prepared for your teen to let too much time pass between shaves. Hey, it's his face and if he wants to look a little fuzzy, let it go! However, if it's against school rules or a family function necessitates a clean-shaven look be sure to let him know your expectations.

Most young ladies begin shaving their legs in middle school, and also benefit from an electric razor initially. Take your daughter to the store with you to purchase her first model—there's always time for the hand razor, shave gel and inevitable cuts in the years to come!

Menstruation:

This “first” often comes before the teen years, as girls as young as nine years of age begin to get their period. Hopefully you’ve prepared your daughter for the changes occurring to her body. Many young girls have gross misconceptions as to what a period is and why it is occurring. Prepare her appropriately by giving her a book or two about girls’ bodies, and read it with her. Be prepared to answer her questions in an open and honest fashion. Buy her pads, tampons and any other supplies that she’ll need. Explain how she is to use them, and discuss the increased hygiene needs during her period. If she is concerned about leakage, try a few different types of pads and perhaps have her keep a disguised “emergency kit” in her locker at school.

Emotional Firsts:

Love:

Okay, here’s the biggie—your child’s first emotional relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Although grade-schoolers often tease about having a boyfriend or girlfriend, kids as young as middle-school can develop very strong, loving feelings for another. Even though you, as the parent, suspect that this infatuation will only last for a few weeks, remember that to your child this relationship is going to last forever. Respect privacy on phone calls to a reasonable degree, and be sure to monitor activities. Especially with high-schoolers it’s important to set up house rules such as “no visitors in the house unless an adult is present and if the boyfriend or girlfriend is visiting the kids must stay in a common area.” I would discourage allowing them to visit in the bedroom, even with the door open.

Realize that there’s a fine line between showing interest in your child’s relationship and stepping over the boundaries and snooping. Trust me; your kid will let you know if you’ve become too nosy! Most of all get to know the other parents in order to establish a consistent line of communication so that the young couple has similar relationship rules at both homes. And, keep in mind that if you are not totally fond of your child’s friend don’t be overly critical. Most likely the relationship will not last long and you don’t want to be unreasonable or judgmental.

Break up:

Hand-in-hand with teen love comes teen heartbreak. Often the breakup is just a blip on the screen as your son or daughter moves on to their next interest, be it a sport activity, vacation, new friend or even a new “love”. However, if this was the big one and her heart is really broken, be there for her. Listen, listen and listen some more. Try not to be judgmental by criticizing her ex. Remember, breakups are often tumultuous, moody times for youngsters and just as you’ve agreed that he’s a real jerk, your kid may begin to like him again or to take offense at your criticism.

Expect your child to be moody, in need of desperately talking with her girlfriends on the phone or instant messaging others on the Internet. These are activities that can help her to begin to resolve her feelings, to get over the hurt, and to put feelings of rejection into

better perspective. Try not to band-aid the situation by expecting an instant fix. Broken teen hearts often take a while to mend. You may want to consider trying to keep your child busy with interesting activities or functions if she seems inclined. Watch out for signs of depression (changes in eating, sleeping, studying habits) that continue for more than a few weeks. And, expect and respect her moodiness, letting her know that you understand her hurt but that you expect her to treat the rest of the family in a civil manner while the crisis resolves.