

Getting Your Teen to Join a Support Group

by Janene Pack, LMHC



IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE TEEN YEARS CAN BE FRAUGHT with change, change that can seem so dramatic it resembles more of a roller coaster ride than normal growth and development. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry reports that the adolescent years are marked by trying on independence through experimentation. This can take the form of listening to different kinds of music, finding new hobbies, experimenting with different hair colors and piercings, finding new friends, and asserting independence over school work.

Parents often see their teens begin to struggle with peer pressure, anxiety, depression, and relationships with others. Many parents wonder when to look for outside help. A general guideline is to seek outside help whenever your teen's struggles begin consistently to interfere with the quality of his or her life. According to Middle Earth, a New Jersey nonprofit that has worked with teens for over 40 years, the following are not just typical teenage behaviors but warning signs for more serious concerns:

- Stealing
- being physically or verbally abusive
- anxiety or sadness that never seems to go away
- hanging out with dangerous crowds
- never hanging out with friends
- being openly defiant and refusing to follow rules

- never taking responsibility
- constant need to argue over little things
- obsessing about weight

Deciding that your teen needs help is only part of the process. Many parents struggle with the task of getting their teens to buy into the idea that talking about their personal feelings with a stranger is a good thing. It's not unusual for a teen to initially refuse outside help. Remember, the teenage years are a time to spread their wings and assume independence over their lives—which is a good thing and can be used to a parent's advantage.

Consider your timing when you first approach your teen about gaining support from a counselor or a teen support group. When you see your teen in a vulnerable place, take him or her out for one-on-one attention. Let your teen



Some teens might feel attracted to joining a group where they can air their grievances and frustrations about caregivers, and that the information will be kept confidential. Parents need to acknowledge that teens don't always receive satisfaction when they talk to their parents about their concerns. A teen support group is a forum for airing frustrations in a safe place where other teens will understand and offer sympathy without suggestions.

One of the biggest benefits to stress to your teen is the concept of universality. A teen support group is a place where teens can come together and, through the sharing of personal experiences and feelings, realize they are not alone in what they are going through. They are able to connect with other teens they wouldn't otherwise meet. Those teens also feel depressed, lonely, frustrated, and overwhelmed with striving to find their center and direction in life. It is beneficial to realize they are not alone, that there is a safe place where they can talk about inner thoughts and feelings they often don't even confide in their friends.

Some parents worry about who their teens might meet in a group, since the members share similar struggles. Be on the lookout for groups that have a "no contact outside of group" policy. To protect the confidentiality of what is said in the group, many groups require that teens not have ANY outside contact—including texting, social outings, or social media. This rule allows the group to function strictly as a therapeutic group where thoughts and feelings are shared and supported, with the knowledge that all information will be kept in a safe space until the next group session.

When all else fails, incentives can be an option to entice your teen to at least try a teen support group. The incentive can be phased out as the natural benefits begin to outweigh it.

Teens need to know that joining a group is not a punishment or a sign that there is something wrong with them. A teen support group is a resource where their needs and concerns are met through the power of the group process. It is a place where mutual understanding and appropriate coping skills can be discovered and practiced with their peers, with the hope that these skills will be used in the outside world for their personal success. 🗨️

*Using communication and mediation to enhance social skill development in children and teens through the group process is a particular passion for **Janene Pack, LMHC**. With extensive experience counseling families, children, and adolescents, she is currently accumulating additional supervised hours toward her LPC at In Step in Fairfax, Virginia. She is also a school counselor at Burke School, a public day school for middle school students who receive special education services due to emotional or behavioral needs.*

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know that you care and that you see him or her struggling. Ask for your teen's suggestions about what would be supportive. If he or she suggests outside support, explore what that would look like on his or her terms. Ask what your teen would or would not be comfortable with. One-on-one counseling might be the first step before moving into a group. Ask if he or she would mind hearing some of your ideas. With teens, presenting the option through the back door disguised as their idea is often the best approach.

Once the idea is presented, the initial sell depends on putting yourself in your teen's shoes to figure out what would be appealing. Some teens need reassurance that it can be a slow process, much like easing yourself slowly into cold water, which gives you time to get used to the group dynamics. Your teen can meet with the group leaders first. The leaders can talk about what the group looks like, what they talk about, and the benefits of joining a group. The leaders can give your teen time to share questions and concerns. Teenagers often need reassurance that they don't have to talk, that they can share when they feel comfortable sharing. Connecting first with the group leaders gives teens an opportunity to feel comfortable knowing they will see a familiar face when they join the group.