

# parent-teenager CONFLICT

*'I want to live my way, not yours!' yells 15 year-old Lepa. She objects to attending a family gathering because she wants to go shopping with her friends. This sort of conflict is happening more and more. Lepa's parents love her but have trouble dealing with her moods and demands for independence. What can they do?*

Lepa's parents are not alone – parents everywhere find themselves in conflict with their teenage children at some time. There are, however, methods for coping with conflict that can restore harmony to the home.

## The pressures on teenagers

It's useful first to look at the pressures on teenagers. When they leave childhood behind, life suddenly becomes more complex. Not only do teenagers go through physical and emotional changes, their whole world seems to turn upside down. Parents can be in for a shock as their teenage children:

- try to discover who they are and challenge the example set by parents
- feel intense pressure to fit in with their friends
- worry about doing well at school or finding the right job
- want to make more decisions for themselves
- still want to please their parents but find themselves pulled in different directions.

## Bridging two worlds

Being a parent can be very challenging. The challenges are even greater for Pacific parents in Australia because accepted ideas about how kids should be raised and how they should behave are different from our own and many of us still want to follow the Pacific traditions.

On top of dealing with the usual teenage pressures, our children are also trying to bridge two worlds.

It's likely they will make friends at school who are from other cultures and spend more time away from the family. As a result, our teenagers might start to question the culture and values we've taught them as children. While at home we may expect our teenagers to obey the rules without question, at school they are encouraged to express their views and voice their opinions.

## Managing conflict

It's inevitable teenagers will disagree with their parents at times. This may be because your teenager is challenging traditional values or simply because they are growing up.

Whatever the reason, it's important to work through the issue. Sticking rigidly to our own ideas can make kids turn away from us.

Often there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to a problem. What really matters is how we go about finding the answer. If you're having a serious conflict:

- make time to listen to your teenager and understand what they're saying, even if you don't agree with them
- hold a family meeting and allow everyone to talk openly and honestly
- look for different solutions to the problem
- be flexible – think through what rules you want to keep and what rules can be changed
- negotiate, don't insist. This will get a more positive response from your teenager.

It can also be useful to involve people outside the family when coping with conflict. For example, ask a respected Pacific community member to sit down and talk with the family or seek advice from someone whom you trust.

## Building strong relationships with teenagers

If we have a strong relationship with our teenagers, we're more likely to be able to work through problems together. Our kids will benefit as well. Research shows that if a child has a good relationship with at least one parent, they're less likely to get into serious trouble.

Ways to build trust and respect include:

- learn to have fun with your teenage kids
- be encouraging – notice the good things they do
- respect your teenager's privacy
- make time in your life for them
- get to know what they're interested in
- say sorry if you've made a mistake
- show them that you care and that you will be there when they need you.

## Support for parents

As Pacific parents, you'll be able to draw support from your extended family in dealing with conflict. It's worth speaking to other parents because they may have learned some tips by working through similar issues to your own.

If things are very tense or your teenager is physically violent, you need professional help. You can talk to:

- the counsellor at your local community health centre. Check the White Pages telephone book for the number
- the Transcultural Mental Health Centre. The Centre can arrange an adolescent counsellor who speaks your language. Phone (02) 9840 3800
- the Adolescent Family Therapy and Mediation Service assist both parents and young people. Phone (02) 9890 1500.