

When it's Time to Ask for Help: A Parent's Guide to Teen Behavior

- Learn to identify the difference between normal and concerning teen behavior
- An overview of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their affects
- Strategies for parenting a child coping with trauma



As a parent, it can be difficult to tell the difference between normal teenage behavior and real causes for concern. But remember, no matter how much your child has changed over the years, you know your kid best. You also know that there's a big difference between a moody teenager and a violent one, and while some risk-taking is a typical part of growing up, dangerous or delinquent behavior is never a good sign.

Imagine that your child has been acting differently than usual. Maybe they've mentioned getting a bad grade at school or having a fight with their best friend. Maybe they haven't said anything at all, but they're distant, unpredictable, and their emotions are only becoming more dramatic over time. Typical teenage drama, right?

Although it's convenient to brush these things aside, only so much can be blamed on hormones. Many of the behaviors that we attribute to stereotypical teenagers are signs that someone is truly struggling. Because of this, it's always a good idea to be on the lookout for sudden and significant changes in your teen's behavior— especially if these changes last for an extended amount of time.



What to Watch Out For:

Normal Teenage Behavior

Becoming easily annoyed by daily events
Sleeping and eating more during growth spurts
Concern with physical appearance and fitting-in
Wanting to spend more time outside the house
Circumstantial emotions that improve over time
Carefully testing the waters of adulthood
Learning to cope with stress and difficult events

Concerning Teenage Behavior

Angry or violent outbursts with little prompting
Sudden changes in sleeping or eating habits
Dramatic shifts in weight or exercising habits
Avoiding spending time with family and friends
Sadness or anxiety that gets worse over time
Regular alcohol/drug use, or sexual promiscuity
*Self-harm or suicidal thoughts and tendencies

It can be hard for a kid to admit when things aren't okay.

If your teen displays these or other concerning behaviors, they may be trying to communicate with you through their actions, instead. Ultimately, there are many different explanations for behavioral issues, but just because you can't see an underlying cause, doesn't mean there's nothing wrong.

*If your child hides objects such as razor blades, stencil knives, lighters, or matches, or if they are unusually careful to keep their arms, legs, and torsos covered-up even when it's hot outside, they may be engaging in self-harming behaviors. Self-harm is not a cry for attention. If you think that your child is self-harming, approach them in a supportive and non-judgmental way, take their experiences seriously, and consider seeking professional help and guidance.

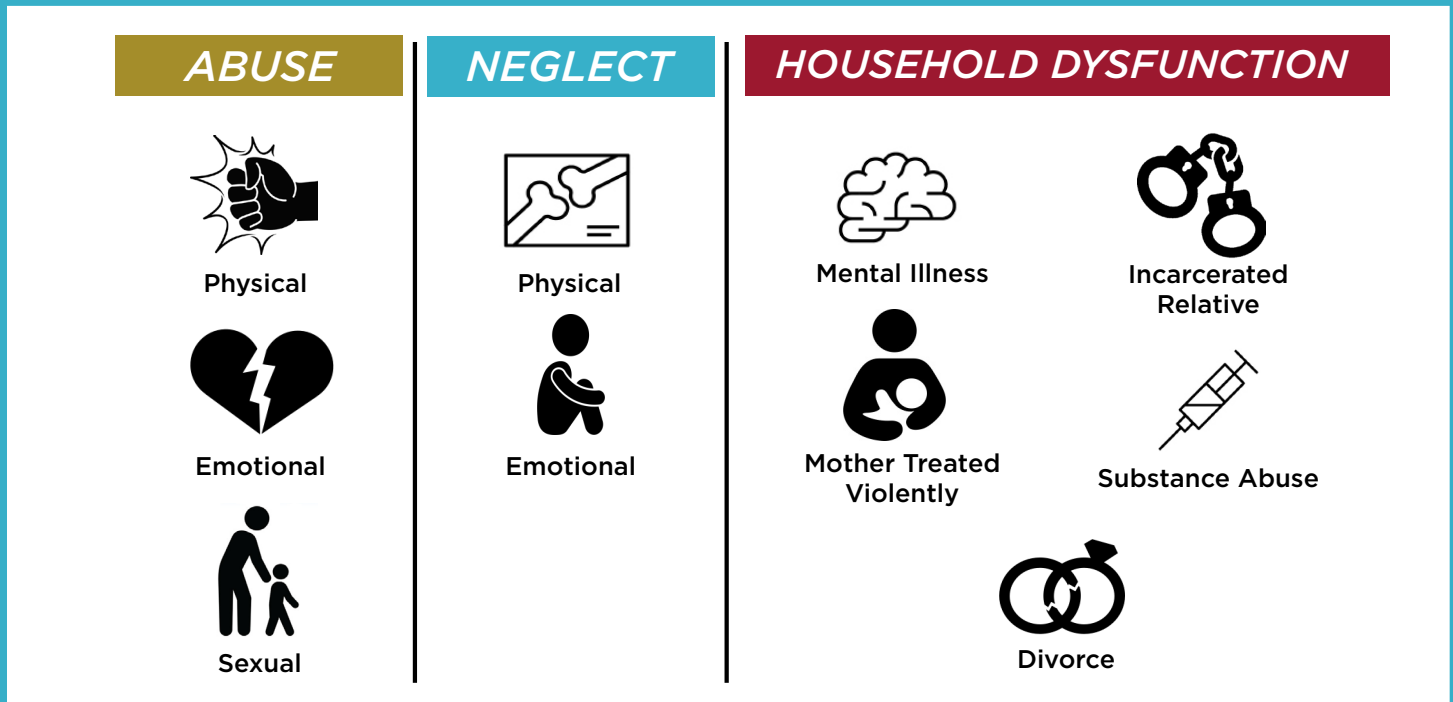
Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 24. If you know or suspect that your child is considering suicide, don't wait— **get help now**. Call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 for confidential support, or contact Idaho Youth Ranch for local resources, professional therapy services, and personalized care.

If you or your child are in immediate danger, call 911 for emergency assistance.

What are ACEs and how do they affect us?

ACEs or Adverse Childhood Experiences are traumatic events which have taken place before a person's 18th birthday.

Defined ACEs include:



ACE research shows that prolonged exposure to trauma affects young people on physical, mental, emotional, and even biological levels. Continued exposure to trauma has a way of getting under our skin and changing the ways that our brains naturally handle stress. This can result in unregulated levels of toxic stress which may be the origin of many observable issues.

In addition to those outlined in the previous section, reactions to toxic stress might include:

- becoming startled or frightened easily
- being brought to tears easily
- aggression towards others
- feelings of guilt or shame
- aversion or loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- emotional numbness or lack of motivation
- poor performance in school
- symptoms consistent with ADHD

Because toxic stress causes a lot of 'wear and tear' on someone's mind and body, it is a culprit behind many lifelong health outcomes. With this, the higher a person's ACE score, the greater their risk for chronic disease, mental illness, violence and/or becoming a victim of violence.

If your child is suffering from or has experienced trauma and the effects of toxic stress, they may benefit from professional treatment to help them overcome their experiences.

What's your ACE score?

Note: this assessment is intended for educational purposes only and should not be used as a substitute for professional advice or treatment.

Idaho is one of the highest ranking states for its prevalence of kids with high ACE scores, but a person who has experienced trauma is never lost cause.



Trauma-informed Strategies for Parents

When treating a person in pain, trauma-informed care openly rejects the question ‘What’s wrong with you?’ and instead asks them ‘What happened to you?’ and ‘How can we help you heal?’

By taking a trauma-informed approach to parenting, you can acknowledge that your child’s feelings are valid, help teach them how to move past difficult experiences, and actively work to address the problem— not just the symptom.

Here are some strategies for helping your child manage behavioral issues and adversity:

- 1. Respond, don’t react to your child’s behavior.** It’s important to stay calm when addressing negative behaviors and to not take your child’s actions too personally. Demonstrate understanding for your child’s reactions but show them that there are other— more proactive and acceptable ways for them to express themselves.
- 2. Make yourself available.** Reassure your child that you will always be there to listen without judgement. Take what they say seriously, don’t avoid or force difficult conversations, and be the safe place they need in good times and in bad.
- 3. Learn your child’s triggers and coping mechanisms.** Be on the look-out for behaviors that are unusual, inappropriate, or exaggerated given the situation at hand. Once you know your child’s emotional triggers, you can help them avoid or prepare for stressful situations while encouraging skills that help them stay grounded and relaxed.
- 4. Be patient. Understand that healing is a process.** Nothing of significance can be resolved overnight, and trusting the process is an essential part of supporting your child’s personal growth and recovery.
- 5. Don’t be afraid to seek professional help.** Treatment saves lives. Deciding to get help is not the same as giving up. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. And by providing your child with the treatment they need, you are giving them a greater opportunity to overcome their experiences and build a stronger future.

If your child has experienced any ACEs or is struggling with other forms of adversity, toxic-stress, or destructive behaviors, remember:
it's not all about you, and it's not all your fault.

Avoid feelings of guilt, shame, or inadequacy. Empower yourself by learning the facts of the situation, and work to be your child's strongest advocate of healing, support, and unconditional love.



Idaho Youth Ranch is here to help.

Idaho Youth Ranch is a safe place where kids, teens, and families can heal from life's heart-wrenching struggles. Proven therapies to help your child become happier, healthier, and more resilient are just a click or call away.

YouthRanch.org • 208-947-0863