

Dr Kate Owen

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LAUNCHING MESSAGES FOR YOUR TEENAGER

One hundred years ago the time between becoming a teenager and then taking on adult responsibilities such as work and children was very short. In today's society, the period defined as "adolescence" is less clear. Regardless of when you believe your teenager has transitioned across the threshold to become a "young adult", there are several messages – both verbally and through your attitude – that are important for you and your child to experience during this phase.

These messages are not prescriptive but rather a "guide" to help navigate this lifecycle stage. And please hold in mind that the multitude of economic and socio-cultural factors influencing each family will shape these messages further.

How To Use This Worksheet

- Download this worksheet.
- Read each education section.
- Follow the self-reflection prompts and record your personalised hopes for supporting your child during the adolescent years.



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"You Can Go"

Message One: It is time to become a young adult

This message signals to your child that this is a transition point in life and that things will change. These changes will involve renegotiation of the parent-child relationship, changing roles and responsibilities in the family, and the whole family appreciating the healthy balance between maintaining closeness whilst encouraging identity development and individuality.

This message is not just about physical boundaries of healthy separation, but also emotionally encouraging your child to embrace their own uniqueness and determine their own values and way of being in the world.

One practical tip is to say "Now that you are getting older..." followed by encouragement to try a developmentally appropriate task.

Self-Reflection

- How can you talk with your teenager and signal to them that they are in a stage of transition and that this is ok?
- What language can you use?
- How are you modifying your parenting behaviour to help this renegotiation phase?

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"We Believe In You"

Message Two: That you believe in them

This message signals that the family has faith that the adolescent will be ok in the outside world. Although parents will naturally worry about their child and how the world will treat them, this message fosters a sense of competence, security, and optimism for the young person.

When your child internalizes this message they will draw strength from it in times of uncertainty and self-doubt. Think of this message as being a "cheerleader" on the sidelines for your child.

One practical tip is to say "You've got this". When you say this, make sure your non-verbal behaviour matches the message.

Self-Reflection

- How are you fostering confidence in your teenager?
- What words and language can you use?
- How can you cheerlead?
- What internalized messages is your child taking with them into young adulthood?

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"We Will Miss You"

Message Three: That you love them

This message honours the attachment and bond between parent and child, and that despite the appropriate physical and emotional distance being felt, the adolescent will always be a part of the family.

This message also honours the natural grief reaction that parents will experience as their "baby" grows up. It is ok for parents to acknowledge that they feel the growing separation in the teenage years and to acknowledge that the childhood years have passed.

One practical tip is to seek your own support if you feel emotional about the healthy separation occurring in the relationship.

Self-Reflection

- What can you say and do to honour the attachment bond with your child, recognising that geographical and emotional distance is a part of this lifecycle stage?
- What support do you need as a parent to acknowledge your changing role?

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"We Will Be OK Without You"

Message Four: That you are ok with them growing up

This message is to counterbalance the previous message. If the message of "We will miss you" is fraught with sadness, worry, and emotional intensity, then your child may feel guilty about growing up. They may choose to sacrifice their developmental needs to protect their parents' fears and anxieties.

The counterbalance message of "We will cope without you" signals to your child that they do not need to be responsible for your emotional reactions during this time, giving them permission to navigate this change without additional burden. This message promotes you as the adult as a pillar of strength and reliability.

One practical tip is to re-evaluate your values, priorities, and lifestyle. Who are you when you are not a parent? This life cycle stage provides an opportunity for you as an individual to connect with your own dreams and goals.

Self-Reflection

- How can you counterbalance the message of "We will miss you" and promote both verbally and non-verbally that your child does not need to worry about you?
- What aspects of your life can you pursue now that your role and responsibilities are changing?

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"Let's Stay In Touch"

Message Five: Figuring out how to stay connected

This message is usually delivered when your child has become very independent, is navigating young adulthood more so than being seen as a teenager, and may (or may not) have left the family home.

This message is crucial as it sets up families for ongoing rituals of connection, and having healthy entries and exits in the family home. The essence of this message is figuring out ways to stay connected in the newly formed "adult to adult" relationship. This will take many years to consolidate, with the focus on balancing connection and separation.

One practical tip is to have this discussion openly with your adult child. Ask them how they would like to stay connected to the family, whilst honouring their independence. What rituals of connection are they looking forward to? And share your hopes and views too.

Self-Reflection

- How can you establish rituals of connection with your adult child?
- How will you as a family now celebrate important events?
- How will you stay connected?
- How will you respect individual boundaries?
- What opportunities do you have to open up these conversations?

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Final Tips and Tricks

1. Don't simply read these messages to your child and think they will then be "launched". Remember that these messages need to be experienced verbally and non-verbally through your attitude and behaviour towards your child over a long period of time.
2. Try not to focus just on one message, but to consciously balance one message with the others.
3. Timing of the messages will be important. You know your child best, and you will know when each of the messages is relevant and important.
4. This is just a guide. Take what is relevant to you, change the messages to fit your family, culture and context, and disregard anything that does not fit.

Reference and Source of Information: Ward, D. (2009). Five messages every adolescent needs to hear. *Psychotherapy in Australia* 15(3), p48-54.

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