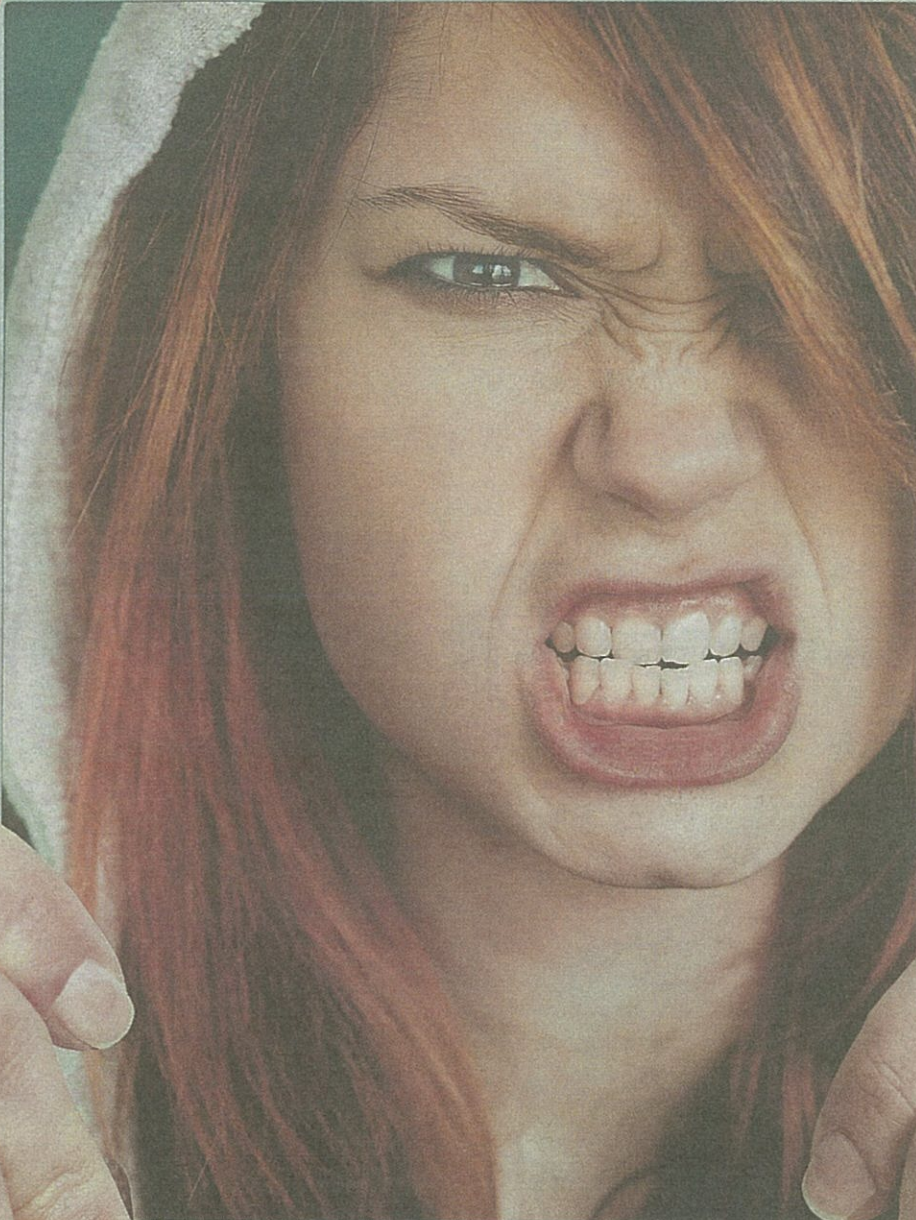


QWEEKEND



RAISING HELL

Why bringing up kids in the age of social media is sending parents crazy

ELISSA LAWRENCE

OUT OF THEIR DEPTH

Raising teenagers has never been easy but, in a digital age of social media and internet angst, parents are confronted with new challenges. So who can they turn to for help?

ELISSA LAWRENCE

It's the eye roll that does it. The sometimes ever so slight, but mostly overt, roll of the eye that is at once infuriating and wounding. An attempt to call it out is met with an even more dismissive, even more cutting "whatever".

Who is this person who has come to stay? Such levels of disrespect just *did not happen* when I was growing up.

It's a scenario played out in thousands of homes every day. Seemingly overnight, once delightful children are replaced with mood-swinging, disrespectful, often downright unpleasant teenagers.

It's always been tough to be a teenager, through the awkwardness of puberty, the stress and cramming of school assignments, the desperation to belong, the wrath of non-understanding parents, the underage sneaking out to night-clubs ... But parenting experts, psychologists, teachers and healthcare professionals agree that today's teen is a different beast from generations past. In the age of social media and all things technology, a completely new and foreign parenting landscape has emerged. Parents must now confront a multitude of frightening issues – cyber-bullying, social media obsession, premature discovery of sex, sexting, revenge porn, digital footprints, anxiety, sleep problems, gaming addictions and, yes, a truckload of disrespect.

With techniques used during their own upbringing no longer effective and a widespread fear of saying "no", parents are floundering. In response, a swath of rescue manuals for desperate parents has been published. It's hard to be a parent and, more than ever, it's easy to lose your way.

ABBY HARVEY WAS AT HER WITS' END. HER 13-YEAR-OLD daughter Danika was disengaging from the family before her eyes. A talented swimmer, Danika was doing nine training sessions in the pool a week and seemed sad and withdrawn. She was also spending more and more time on her phone in her room to the detriment of a regular bedtime. Tension in the home was rising and Danika refused to talk to her parents about what might be wrong.

"We (she and husband Stuart, 37) didn't really know what to do," says Harvey, 36, of Deagon, in Brisbane's north. "She was just really sad. She was not engaging and there was niggling between the siblings. Dani is a competitive swimmer at state and national level and she was putting a lot of pressure on herself. She was shutting down and not talking to me or anyone in the family. She was withdrawing from us. I felt, what the hell am I doing as a parent? We didn't know how to deal with her."

Harvey says she sought help from teenage expert Michelle Mitchell, the founder of Brisbane-based not-for-profit charity Youth Excel. Harvey also wanted advice on how to deal with social media issues. "I was concerned with Dani's internet safety. I was scared for what could happen



Michelle Mitchell, founder of Brisbane not-for-profit charity and counselling service, Youth Excel; (opposite page) Abby Harvey with daughter Danika, 15, who felt pressure as a 13-year-old competitive swimmer. Main picture: Mark Calleja

to her. I could see there were some problems ahead if we didn't get some advice," she says. "We've only just let Dani have Instagram at the end of last year at age 14. It was actually Michelle who suggested to me that I needed to let go and let her have it because it's how teenagers communicate with each other these days. Michelle made me see that social media is a really important part of their lives."

As part of establishing safe social media use in the Harvey home, Danika, now 15, and her parents agreed to a social media contract that included conditions such as no phone-charging in bedrooms overnight, phones off by 8pm, and access to Dani's social media accounts by her parents. "I think it's always been the case that parents have had trouble dealing with teenagers, but it's completely different now because of social media. Teenagers know so much more than we did at their age because they just Google the information. There's no going to the library to look up the encyclopedia any more," Harvey says. "Overall, seeking help has been a really positive experience for our family. It's given me the skills in dealing with issues I had no experience with growing up. A channel of communication has definitely been opened up and we are all much happier for it."

Michelle Mitchell, 44, of Murrumba Downs, north of Brisbane, is the author of *What Teenage Girls Don't Tell*

Their Parents (2011) and the newly released *Parenting Teenage Girls In the Age of a New Normal*.

A former primary-school teacher, Mitchell, who has two teenage sons, set up Youth Excel in 2000 and has since helped thousands of families through a private psychology practice attached to Youth Excel that sees up to 120 families a week. Along with her own counselling services, she also regularly presents at schools.

Mitchell says the biggest issues impacting the current generation of teenagers are disrespect, anxiety, bullying, social media, sexuality and drugs. "A really big issue is disrespect," she says. "I have parents come in all the time concerned about back-chat and they say they would never have spoken to their parents in this way. They don't know how to manage it. It's a different generation of kids today. When we grew up, we thought our parents knew everything."

"These days, teenagers are telling me, if they want to make a decision, they research the internet. Kids have a global awareness and a social conscience, and they have an opinion about what they think is fair and how they think the world should work."

"Parents don't have that reverence around them any more. They're only one voice in a multitude of competing voices that are in the media, movies, film clips and online. Among that, parents are grappling to be a moral compass."

Mitchell says a "new normal" has been established where teens make up their own minds about social and moral issues, are completely dependent on their phones – which keep them constantly entertained and connected with their friends – are exposed to sexual content at a young age, expect high standards of living and have a sense of entitlement. They also have fast-paced lives and typically struggle with management of their emotions, disappointments and anxiety. But, she says, this new normal is not necessarily OK. "Most commonly, parents will ask, 'is this normal? Because I can't remember it being like this'," Mitchell says. "Human nature doesn't change but there are things about this generation that are unique. It is driven by the internet. The ages that kids are seeing pornography, the age they have sex, it's just horrific. Issues that were once 18-year-old issues have become 12-year-old issues. Everything is sliding down the scale and a lot of it has to do with access to information at strikingly young ages."

"Strategies our own parents used don't work on this generation any more. You can't lord it over kids any more and parents feel disempowered and at a loss to know what to do. Also, I find once parents see that something is socially accepted, they lose confidence, they throw their hands up, surrender and stop trying. They don't want to give up but they just don't know what else to do."

Adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg agrees ▶

She was shutting down
and not talking to
me or anyone in the
family ... We didn't know
how to deal with her

”





Eunice Ng, 20, who sought help from counselling as a teenager for her issues. Picture: Mark Cranitch

Teenage girls aren't always the nicest ... Not many people know how to deal with all the changes in that age group

and I didn't really want to be here, like, to be alive. It got pretty bad. I was at a really low point when I started seeing Michelle."

Ng is now studying clinical psychology at Brisbane's Griffith University and wants to work with adolescents – helping teenagers going through much the same as she did herself. "Seeking help has had such a positive impact on my life that I want to help others," Ng says. "It might be just a small thing that a family needs help with, but nothing is ever too silly. If it upsets you, then it is important."

ANXIETY IS A MAJOR ISSUE AFFECTING OUR TEENAGERS.

Melbourne-based clinical psychologist and family therapist Andrew Fuller, who has worked with teenagers for 30 years, says there has been a demonstrable rise in anxiety in this age group.

Fuller, 58, has written more than 10 books on the well-being of young people and has co-authored a series of programs promoting resilience and emotional intelligence that are used in more than 3500 schools in Australia and Britain. His not-for-profit group, Resilient Youth, has developed an online Resilience Survey – the largest of its kind in Australia, with data collected from 160,000 students from a 99-question survey.

Fuller says anxiety is one of the top issues for which adolescents seek help at his private psychology practice. "Anxiety is rife," he says. "Our Resilience Survey shows 59 per cent of year 11 and 12 girls and 46 per cent of year 11 and 12 boys have clinical levels of anxiety disorder."

"There has been an increase in the amount of anxiety experienced by young people as our world becomes more complex and more demanding on young people at a younger age. They are not coping very well. We also live in a world where we want to rank kids in relation to their peers. Kids are also comparing one another's lives through social media."

Fuller also works with not-for-profit group Generation Next, a national program that provides education about the prevention and treatment of mental illness in youth. He has written the foreword in a Generation Next book released this month called *Nurturing Young Minds – Mental Wellbeing in the Digital Age*. The book, edited by Sydney GP and researcher Dr Ramesh Manocha with contributing chapters by a variety of clinicians, deals with issues including cyber-bullying and online abuse, sexting, porn, friendship and social skills, understanding boys' health, and violent video games and violent behaviour.

There's also the issue of "digital heroin" – the use of electronic screens at night, particularly gaming and texting, which has been likened to the dopamine surge associated with illicit drug use. Contributing author Dr Chris Seton, a Sydney pediatric and adolescent sleep physician, says this contributes to make Australian teenagers the third most sleep-deprived in the world.

Fuller says many parents are "overwhelmed by the rush of life", resulting in many who don't know their kids as well as in times past.

"The art of conversation isn't valued as much," Fuller says. "They are not bad parents, it's just the world seems to seduce them into this rush. In my counselling work, I see lots of young people who sit and have a conversation about an issue and they haven't been able to do that in any other setting of their life."

"It's incredibly important to have family rituals, whether it's a Sunday lunch or Friday night pizza or walking the dog. This is a time of catch-up in the week where you aren't distracted by screens and you have a conversation. We all live in a world that is quite demanding and, at times, chaotic. A lot of young people are not really taking great care of themselves – they are sleep-deprived, they are

today's teen has a strong sense of entitlement. In his new book about teenage boys, *The Prince Boofhead Syndrome* (as a companion volume to 2006's *The Princess Bitchface Syndrome*), Carr-Gregg says child-centred parenting, as a response to authoritarian parenting practices of the past, has swung too far in the opposite direction.

Too many parents, he says, are exhausting themselves to make their sons' lives easier, leaping in to fix their problems, handing opportunities to them on a plate and being their full-time cheerleader. "We have become too terrified to say no, to set limits and enforce consequences in case we damage our child's self-esteem," Carr-Gregg writes. "By not allowing our sons to learn from their own stuff-ups and develop resilience and self-respect, we are creating rudderless, disconnected, bitter and resentful boys. We have to allow these boys to experience adversity."

"The time has arrived for the self-esteem movement to be relegated to the wastepaper bin of parenting history."

THE TEENAGE BRAIN IS A WORK IN PROGRESS. DURING THESE years, when impulsivity and risk-taking are at their highest, the brain undergoes massive changes. Queensland Brain Institute deputy director Professor Linda Richards, who specialises in brain development, says the adolescent years are when important changes occur in the brain's frontal cortex area, where crucial connections for decision-making, risk-taking, planning for the future and complex social interactions are formed.

"There are a lot of changes occurring in the teenage brain," Richards says. "It's a time when hormones are changing and this has an impact on the connections that are forming in the brain. There's a lot of potential risk-taking that happens during that period and that continues into the mid-20s. It's a time of many brain changes, and teenagers are not in control of what is happening to them."

Richards says teenagers learn from their own actions but also from watching others and by hearing about other people's experiences. So parents can, she says, influence their teenagers by talking to them about things such as the dangers of drugs and by modelling good behaviour themselves. "But it's not like you can take a teenager and put them in a bubble and just get them through this period," Richards says. "Everybody has to go through multiple

learning experiences for the brain to wire up correctly. They actually have to experience life, and that's why parenting is so tricky during this period. It's not an excuse for some of the behaviour that happens in these years but it may go some way to being an explanation."

The adolescent years are also when mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and depression first show up. Eunice Ng, 20, of Holland Park in Brisbane's south, sought help for depression and self-harming issues when she was 15 years old. Ng, who has also been a client at Mitchell's Youth Excel, says she spent a lot of time in her teenage years "being really angry" and fighting with her mother. On her worst days, she couldn't see a way forward and contemplated suicide.

"The issues had been manifesting for a while but it all came to a peak when I was about 15," Ng says. "I saw Michelle for about two years until I was about 17 and I still see her every now and again."

"I found it tough transitioning into high school and my dad also got really sick when I was in grade 8. He ended up passing away when I was in grade 12 (in 2014). There was a lot of stuff going on at once and I was trying to deal with it."

"Teenage girls aren't always the nicest. There was a lot of negativity and dramas. Not many people know how to deal with all the changes in feelings and emotions and relationships in that age group. I was in really low moods



Adolescent psychologists and authors Dr Michael Carr-Gregg (left) and Andrew Fuller.

eating poorly, not exercising as well as they could, they are not motivated at school and are feeling overwhelmed.”

At the end of the day, Fuller likens growing up to riding a wild rollercoaster. He says there are ups, there are downs, there are twists and turns. And sometimes, the aim is simply to hold on for dear life and not go off the rails.

“Teenagers feel things very intensely ... when things are great they are really great and when things are deplorable they are absolutely obnoxious and awful. You get the wonderful highs and the desperate lows, and that’s for normal adolescents,” Fuller says.

“Every family has some challenges, and the quality of the relationship you have with your kids is the most powerful tool. If you can communicate, you can sort it out.”

FROM HER TURBULENT TEENAGE YEARS, EUNICE NG AND HER mother have emerged out the other side, all the stronger for it. And it’s a message Ng feels passionate about sharing.

“I want to be able to tell people that it will get better from those teenage years, even though at the time it doesn’t seem like it will,” she says. “You will get through it and I can guarantee you will look back and even be grateful that it happened. Now, I’m so much better equipped to deal with other situations in life.

“I still suffer depression and I still have some bad days when I need to chill. But now I’ve got the skills and strategies to deal with it. It’s knowing my moods and not letting it interfere with my work or social life.

“Mum and I are as close as ever. She learnt a lot too. It’s about the parent and teenager working together, not pitting them against one another. It’s about understanding each other.” ■

Parenting Teenage Girls In the Age of a New Normal by Michelle Mitchell (published by Ark House, \$25); *The Prince Boofhead Syndrome* by Michael Carr-Gregg and Eily Robinson (Penguin Random House, \$28); *Nurturing Young Minds - Mental Wellbeing in the Digital Age*, edited by Ramesh Manocha (Hachette Australia, \$35), are all out now.

For help: Kids Helpline ph 1800 55 1800 / kidshelp.com.au;
headspace ph 1800 650 890 / headspace.org.au

