



## To go up to the school, or not? That is the question.

By Michael Hawton, Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

If you've had a teenager at school for more than a few years, chances are that there have been times when you have considered whether to go up to the school about an issue that is affecting your child. Working out what requires your intervention can be tricky. Sometimes your teenager's passionate pleas for you to do something can be persuasive. It might be that your child has been moved from one class to another or that your son has been denied permission to go on a much-anticipated excursion or there has been an incident on the playground.

In recent years, Australian high schools have been dealing with an increasing number of parents coming up to the school. I say this as a result of speaking with hundreds of school leaders across Australia and internationally.

So, what is causing this?

1. Many parents are less trusting of institutions in charge of the care of their children, including schools. They are therefore less willing to give school staff the benefit of the doubt when it comes to making decisions that involve their teenagers.
2. There is just an increasing number of parents who are becoming concerned about their child's psychological well-being. Fifty percent more kids are on antidepressants than six years ago - and more people are wanting a diagnosis for their child not coping than has been the case in the past decade.
3. Parents can sometimes feel like they are not parenting properly unless they go to the school to address a problem.

### So, how does one decide if an issue warrants your intervention or not?

If your teenager's health is in physical or psychological danger then you should intervene. However, if the issue is not of this magnitude, ask yourself this; what would happen if I didn't go to the school about this issue?

An important part of being a parent is helping a young person to learn to deal with disappointments and difficulties for him or herself. We can help our children learn to cope emotionally with uncomfortable feelings by being there and listening to them. We can acknowledge that sometimes life is challenging or unfair but that we can learn to cope with this. Helping your teenager recognise their emotional reactions by acknowledging them (but not necessarily acting on them) can improve their emotional resilience.

American psychologist, Joan Rosenberg says that young people have become less equipped to manage uncomfortable emotions. This is partly due to an inability to tolerate painful emotions for any length of time partly because they haven't had the practise in "riding the wave" of an unpleasant emotion. Emotions, she says, are temporary. They're painful sometimes but if we can

teach children to tolerate the painful aspects of their feelings we can show them that they will eventually recede. Like a wave that goes up to the shoreline, it will eventually retreat. (insert reference)

The other important thing that Rosenberg talks about is how emotional strength gets built in children and young people. She says that resilience is built on a bedrock of accepting that painful experiences are a part of life. Teenagers can receive practise to manage their emotional states. Resilience comes with successfully managing suffering, she says. The answer is for teenagers is tied up in their capacity to tolerate pain or in their capacity to handle unpleasant feelings. The more they are able to face the pain they experience, the more resourceful they become. (insert reference).

With this in mind, some issues are worth recognising before you go up to the school in search of a remedy on your child's behalf.

First, **recognise** that the school must make 'system' decisions. While all schools try to follow principles of fairness and equity, it is not always possible to decide matters fairly. There will always be cases where some teenagers will not get the teacher they wanted or be seated close to their friends.

Second, **recognise** that all school staff aspire towards providing an environment where the best interests of the child are held paramount. While teachers may not have the same attachment to a child that a parent does, the majority of school staff care personally for the children in the school.

Third, **recognise** that each time you jump in where a problem could be resolved by your teenager, you may be robbing them of an opportunity to develop resilience skills.

Making a decision about whether or not to go up to the school is about assessing the problem and seeing if it can be an opportunity to help your teenager to learn to manage his emotions, increase his resilience and become an independent problem solver.

Who said parenting is easy? In this upcoming series of articles, we will explore issues that young people face and how, as a parent, you can support or just as importantly know-when to step away.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More and Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

## References: