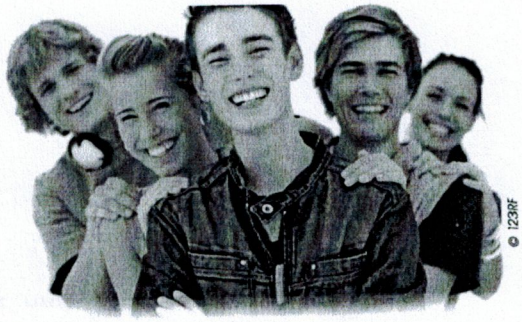


Teen spirit

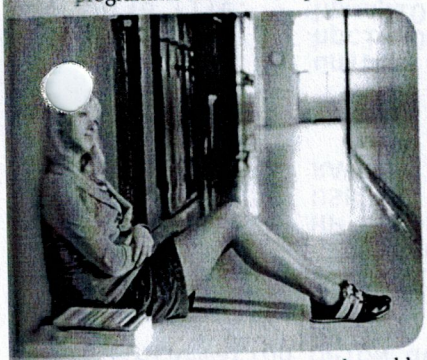
With more than 25 years of experience as a Family Therapist, Deirdre Hayes of THE COUNSELLING PLACE explains how you can help your teen smooth out those bumps on the road to adulthood.

Adolescence is one of the most exciting times in a person's life. This is the time when we form our self-identity, develop our moral compass, set goals, dream dreams and take flight into the world. But during this time, the role of adults in a teen's life is a challenging one. We make tireless attempts to leave a positive mark during this crucial phase of development. It can sometimes seem like a hopeless cause when we are met with the 'couldn't care less' attitude of the average teen. Many people fail to realise the teenage brain works differently than an adult's. In adults, various parts of the brain work together to evaluate choices, make decisions and act accordingly in each situation. This is not the case for the teenage brain, which is like an entertainment centre that hasn't been fully hooked up.

At times even the most sensitive questions of concern are met with a wall of resistance. The source of this resistance, however, is not based on the character and nature of your teen or you. It's based on a common habit of using a 'problem-focused approach', where the idea of solving the problem is to remove the source of stress – which only works when the person has control over the issue at hand.

When this became apparent in Ireland's *Mater Hospital Child and Family Centre*, practitioners decided to use a different method of conflict resolution by asking young people how they confronted their problems. Accounts recapped by youngsters were recorded and published in DVD format titled 'Working Things Out'. This formed a basis for practitioners to draw on when helping teens with their problems, and the DVD opened a new gateway of solutions for youths as they heard first-hand accounts from young people – like themselves – and were receptive to using the solutions narrated in the presentation to get back on track and 'work things out'.

'Working Things Out' is a structured therapeutic and educational programme aimed at helping teens deal with the challenges of adolescent life – including conflicts with parents and peers, relationship issues, anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. It uses an interactive CD-ROM/DVD that contains personal stories of 11 teens who have successfully coped with difficult problems such as depression, bullying, eating problems and self-harm. The stories are illustrated with animation and graphics, narrated by the young people and backed up by mental health information and handouts for facilitators.



The success of the programme stems from three main distinguishing features. First, it focuses on action by allowing youths themselves to come up with ideas to move forward and carry out their own problem solving. Second, it concentrates on results, allowing the teens to see the connection between their thoughts, feelings and actions – and how change in one can affect the other. This is an important step, as changing how teens think about an issue can impact their response to it and consequentially result in positive action. And third, because the eight-week programme includes six group sessions with just the teens, and one pre-programme and one post-programme private individual family session involving the teen and the parents, it promotes the involvement of the parents and opens the channel of communication between parents and teens.

Both teens and their families have seen a huge difference in their lives since being introduced to the programme. One young woman, who was bright but was not doing well in her studies, said after having attended the programme, "It was an eye-opener for me. Listening to the other young people in the stories made me realise I'm not alone in feeling this way. It gave me motivation to get out of bed each day on time and to make changes in my life".

Did you know?

The brain's 'remote control' is the prefrontal cortex, used to form judgments and influence decision making, control impulses and emotions, plan complex cognitive behaviours and other executive functions. This remote control system starts developing just before puberty and does not fully mature till later in life – sometimes not until the mid 20s – which accounts for the difference in teenagers' behaviours.

'Working Things Out' is an essential course to help teens understand some of the reasons behind the decisions they make. Being exposed to other young people's experiences makes them more receptive to solutions. The programme can be run with an individual teen or with his or her family, but better learning is achieved when teens are in a group as a common synergy is generated among peers. F

Deirdre Hayes *Counsellor*

What's new?

Two workshops by Deirdre Hayes for parents, teachers, counsellors and other concerned adults in a teen's life.
Understanding Teenagers
Date: Sept 25 (Tues)
Time: 7pm-9pm
Understanding Teenage Distress
Date: Sept 29 (Sat)
Time: 11am-1pm

The Counselling Place LLP has an international team of experienced psychologists, counsellors and therapists who provide psychological assessments, counselling, art therapy, workshops and related services in English, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin and Cantonese.

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