

Family Kids and Youth

Top Tips with Teens

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What is a teenager?

- **How can you define a teenager?**
 - We think of course of the age range 13-19, but many consider that 'early adolescence' starts around 11.
 - And it is thought that the journey of adolescence is not completed until young people reach their mid-20's, with recent developments in neuroscience showing that the brain is not fully developed until this age.
 - The characteristics of the teenage years then can begin as early as 11, and not disappear until 25.
 - The concept of the teenager is also relatively new, and is said to have been invented in the mid- 50's in the US! So it is probably easier to think of teenagers as those children who are mostly at secondary school, seeking an identity of their own, and having a sometimes difficult journey to reach autonomy.

Are teenagers 'difficult to reach'?

- Many teenagers do not naturally volunteer to take part in any exercise that takes them out of their comfort zone, and may make them feel self-conscious and vulnerable.
- Reassurance and information is key to making them feel comfortable.
- They are surprisingly forthcoming when given the opportunity to express their opinions, especially when they are reassured that their opinions count, and that their responses will remain confidential, and the research will not identify them personally.
- Encouraging them to take part in research is often best done with their peer group (we tend to recruit in friendship pairs or triads), and sometimes an appropriate incentive helps, such as mobile phone credits, or even cash.

What if they refuse to communicate?

- The developmental stage of adolescence can mean that teenagers are happier and more comfortable communicating with peers rather than other adults.
- As researchers there are ways around this; making teenagers feel comfortable in participating in research or consultation can help to overcome any reluctance they may have to take part.
- Ways to enable teenagers to communicate in their own language, with the use of projective techniques, can help them to articulate their thoughts and opinions in a way that is easier for them, and less threatening than simply talking which can make them feel self-conscious and stupid.

What research method should I use?

- There are times when qualitative research works best, and times when quantitative research is more appropriate, so a basic consideration of research objectives is essential.
- For example do you need to know how many teenagers adopt a certain lifestyle? In which case, a quantitative sample of several hundred teenagers is called for.
- Or do you want to know why this lifestyle is attractive to them? In this case a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviewing techniques with small groups would work well.
- Do you need to consult large numbers of teenagers about new and complex services that affect them? This might call for an immersion session explaining the new services, followed by debate and voting.

Where do I find teenagers to take part in my research?

- As most teenagers are at school or college, this is often the first place to look, but there are disadvantages in using these as venues.
- Peer group pressure may affect answers, and sometimes it can be difficult to convince teenagers that their replies remain confidential in such a setting.
- Time is limited, and some teachers may be reluctant to give up the time to help to administer questionnaires or help to organise focus groups.
- Having good relationships with schools helps, but be aware that researchers need enhanced CRB clearance.
- Parental consent is not needed for most topics, but the Head Teacher needs to give permission for the teenager to take part, in locus parentis.

Is it best to do research at home then?

- Often teenagers feel more comfortable in their own homes, and there are advantages in getting them away from their peer group in terms of producing more honest answers.
- If research is qualitative, it can sometimes be difficult to find a quiet place in home to conduct the interview, and parents and siblings have a habit of adding their contribution also!
- Researchers need to reassure parents that the research is being carried out for a valid purpose, and gain their permission for the interview to take place.
- Care needs to be taken not to identify the teenager through film or photographs that might be taken, or through inadvertently revealing the address of the interview.
- Once again researchers should have CRB clearance.

Which research methodology to use with this age group?

- Teenagers are adept at communicating on-line, so on-line quantitative research works particularly well for this age group; it is fast and easy to administer, and teenagers are likely to give honest answers.
- In qualitative research there are many ways to carry out research with teenagers, including observation, ethnography, focus groups, in-depth interviews; a knowledge of tried and tested projective techniques is a useful tool to have. Blogs, on line white boards and focus groups also work well.
- Sometimes just observing behaviour in a school, in a shopping centre, or in the park can reveal huge amounts of information that throws light on teenagers' behaviour.

Do I need to immerse myself into their world?

- It certainly helps to be familiar with their world.
- Having some knowledge of the TV programmes teenagers watch, their favourite music, the way they dress, and the way they talk is helpful in making sense of research findings.
- It is also useful to understand the basic developmental stages of the teenage years.
- Knowing about, and understanding how 'tribes' work, and how quickly they can change, is useful also.

Do researchers need to be young when working with teenagers?



- No, but researchers do need to earn the respect of teenagers.
- This does not mean behaving like them, dressing like them, or using their language. In fact such behaviour can totally alienate the teenager from the researcher.
- Remember that anyone over the age of 20 is regarded as old to a teenager at school, so they are unlikely to identify with a researcher in terms of age.
- What they do respond to is a sense that the researcher is genuinely interested in what they have to say, that they are looking to the teenager to explain their world, and, most importantly, that they will be non-judgemental.

Confidentiality and Ethics

- Research with young people can sometimes focus on emotive issues such as sexuality, drugs, bullying, smoking, alcohol, knife crime, and to be valid we need to ensure that participants feel as comfortable as possible when giving their answers.
- All research carries a code of ethics, but when working with young people this is particularly important, and needs to be considered in full before research takes place (see next slide) .
- There are for instance rules and guidelines about seeking permission to take part in research from parents or guardians. It is also essential that young people understand what they are being asked, the meaning of confidentiality, and how research findings will be used.
- It is essential that researchers understand these issues, as well as the meaning of 'informed consent', and that the young person has a right to withdraw from participating in a research study at any time, no matter how inconvenient to the researcher.

Codes of Ethics

- The following codes are worth consulting:
 - The British Psychological Society (BPS)
<http://www.bps.org.uk/home-page.cfm>
 - BERA (British Educational Research Association)
<http://www.bera.ac.uk/index.php>
 - British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) <http://www.bacp.co.uk/>
 - Market Research Society (MRS)
<http://www.mrs.org.uk/code.htm>
 - ESOMAR <http://www.esomar.org/index.php/codes-guidelines.html>