

Appearance



Your Dilemma:

“Honey! Your hair! It’s pink!”

“Magenta. And it’s only the tips.”

“Right. Magenta. Interesting effect.”

“I knew you’d be like this.”

Body piercing, tattoos, dramatic hairstyles, and unconventional clothing are all part of youth culture. For many teens, exotic attire is an important part of their emerging personal identity. So where is the line between healthy self-expression and bizarrely anti-social behavior? How do you set reasonable limits yet leave room for each teen’s unique personality? By being honest about your own reactions and defining clear boundaries for your teen, it’s possible to come up with some useful guidelines for what’s okay—

while respecting and supporting your daughter's or son's individuality.



COMMUNICATE POSITIVELY AS A FAMILY

Whatever your teen's new look, consider that it may simply be an attempt to fit in with peers. Listen without judgment to what she or he tells you. Fashion is a matter of taste, and you don't all have to agree on what looks good. Recognize that part of what your daughter or son is doing is defining separation from you, which is part of growing up.

Be creative when discussing changes that are more or less permanent, such as tattoos or piercings. For example, ask your teen, "Imagine if I got that tattoo—would it be weird for someone my age to have that?" If they answer yes, you can respond, "Well, someday you'll be my age." Another approach is to ask your son or daughter to consider a trend that was popular six months ago and ask if he or she still likes it. The answer is often no. Sometimes, it's easier to get teens to think about the past rather than imagining their future tastes.



ENSURE SAFETY

Make sure your teen understands that some fashion trends can be risky or even dangerous. In general, procedures that involve puncturing the skin (such as piercing and tattooing) carry the risk of infection and, if performed carelessly, transmission of disease. **You may want to set a minimum age at which your teen can choose certain styles.** (Or, this type of adornment may simply be unacceptable to you.)



SET FAMILY BOUNDARIES

If you don't like your teen's new look, reflect on why. Does it not fit your style and your "image"? Or does the con-

cern deal with values and safety? To help everyone understand what really matters, consider whether the mode of dress or adornment in question is:

- ◆ Safe, or involves a possible health risk.
- ◆ More or less permanent.
- ◆ Sexually inappropriate (skintight, skimpy, or otherwise suggestive clothing can put young people—especially girls—at risk for sexual aggression and exploitation).
- ◆ Gender bending (e.g., boys now color their hair and wear earrings).
- ◆ Offensive (e.g., T-shirt slogans that use profanity or advertise illegal substances).
- ◆ A sign of allegiance to a particular group or gang.
- ◆ Prohibited by your teen's school.
- ◆ Likely to affect your teen's employment status.

Discuss your boundaries with your teen and give her or him the chance to tell you what she or he thinks of the fairness of these limits. **Be flexible on the ones that aren't harmful or permanent**—after all, pink hair can be brown again tomorrow.



BUILD SELF-ESTEEM

Emphasize your teen's positive character traits—honesty, kindness, intelligence, creativity, humor—**rather than appearance or your embarrassment or criticism of her or him**. If you see that your daughter or son is basing self-worth on desirability, and is extremely preoccupied with sexually alluring fashion, **discuss the difference between dressing attractively and dressing provocatively**.

LOVE THEM NO MATTER HOW THEY LOOK

Even if you don't like the way your teen dresses or adorns himself or herself, be sure to offer your love and respectful regard. Do your best to see past whatever bothers you and to recognize his or her genuine inner beauty. With your support, your son or daughter will more easily develop a strong and healthy personal identity.