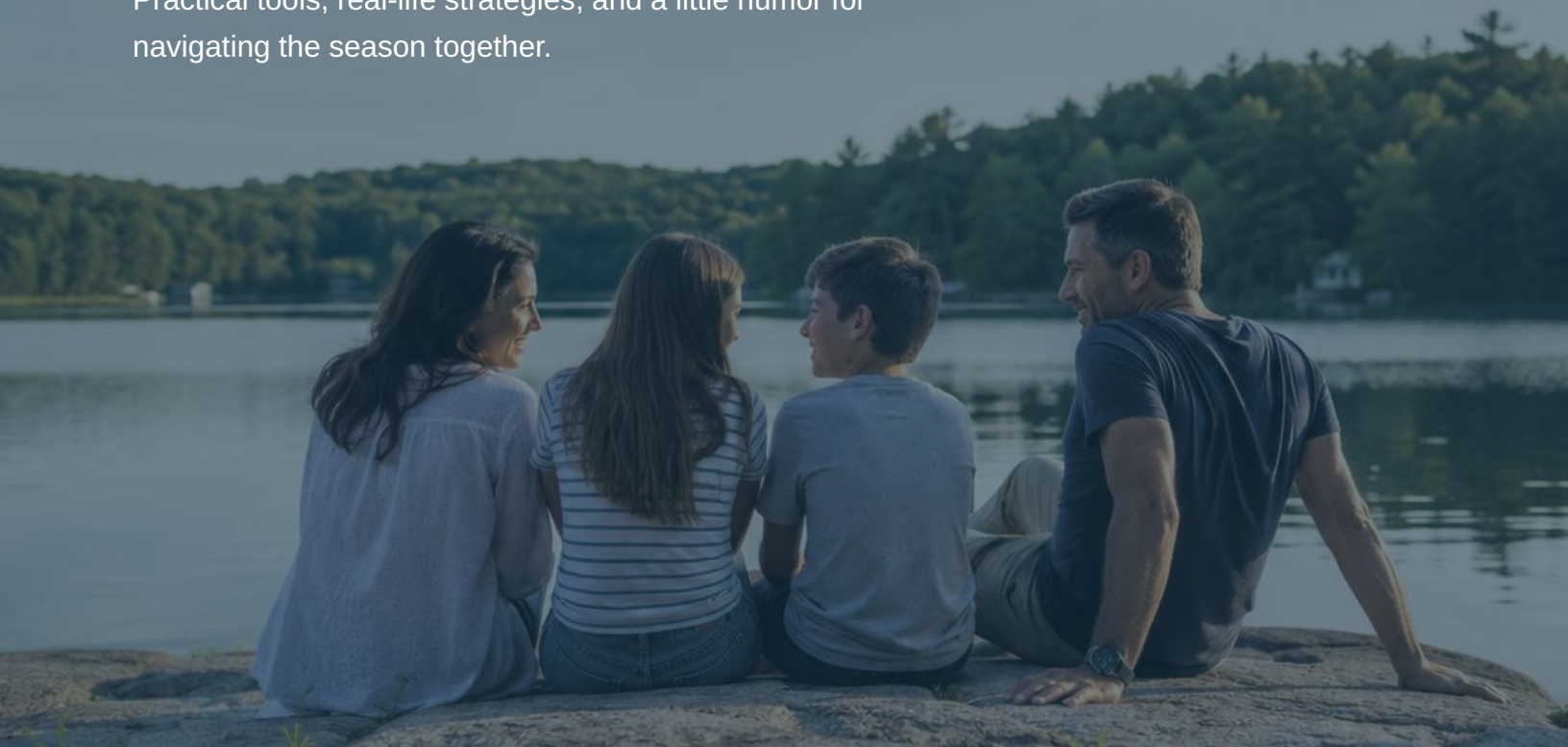




THE PARENT'S SUMMER SURVIVAL GUIDE

Supporting Your Teen Through Summer Without Becoming the "Fun Police"

Practical tools, real-life strategies, and a little humor for navigating the season together.



By Stephanie Howey LMSW, Co-Owner of River's Bend

Summer Was Supposed to Be Relaxing...

Instead, your teenager is sleeping until noon, eating everything in the pantry, and insisting there's "nothing to do" despite a calendar full of activities.

If you're trying to support your teen's mental health without becoming the family cruise director, social secretary, chauffeur, snack coordinator, and Chief Fun Officer...

You're in the right place.

This guide was created to help parents navigate the beautiful, messy reality of summer with adolescents. Inside, you'll find practical strategies, evidence-based information, conversation starters, fun family ideas, and reminders that you don't have to have all the answers.

Because supporting your teen doesn't require perfection.

It requires connection.

A LETTER FROM STEPHANIE

Dear Parents,

Can I let you in on a little secret? No one actually wants to be the Fun Police. Before summer starts, many of us have wonderful intentions.

- We'll have family game nights.
- We'll limit screen time.
- We'll take meaningful day trips.
- We'll create memories our children will cherish forever.

Then reality arrives.

- One child is bored.
- Another wants a ride somewhere.
- The dog needs to go out.
- Someone ate the snacks you just bought yesterday.

Your teenager emerges from their room at 1:00 p.m. asking, "What's for lunch?" despite technically being closer to dinner.

As a mother of two myself, I understand the juggling act. Summer can be wonderful, but it can also feel overwhelming. Between work responsibilities, changing schedules, technology battles, social pressures, and the emotional ups and downs that naturally come with adolescence, many parents are simply trying to keep everyone safe, healthy, and reasonably happy. And here's what I've learned, both as a mom and as a behavioral healthcare professional:

1. You do not have to create a perfect summer.
2. Your teenager does not need every moment scheduled.
3. You do not have to entertain them constantly. And you certainly do not have to do it all alone.

What teens need most isn't perfection.

They need consistency, connection, boundaries, opportunities to build confidence, and adults who notice when they're struggling and aren't afraid to ask for help.

This guide was created to support you through the real moments of parenting—the eye rolls, the late-night conversations, the snack and meal negotiations, and the opportunities to connect that often show up when we least expect them. I hope you'll find encouragement, practical ideas, and reassurance within these pages. Most importantly, I hope you'll remember this:

You are doing better than you think.

Wishing you and your family a summer filled with laughter, growth, and just enough structure to keep everyone emotionally regulated.

Warmly,

Stephanie Howey, LMSW Co-Owner, River's Bend

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Think of this guide as your summer companion. It's not a rulebook. It's not a checklist you'll inevitably lose under a pile of beach towels. And it's definitely not another thing to make you feel like you're falling short.

Instead, use it in whatever way works best for your family.

Read It All at Once If You:

- Love having a game plan.
- Secretly enjoy color-coded calendars.
- Have already started shopping for school supplies.

(We see you.)

Read It One Section at a Time If You:

- Are currently hiding in the pantry eating snacks you don't want to share.
- Only have five uninterrupted minutes.
- Are reading this while waiting in the carpool line.

Come Back to It Throughout the Summer If You Need:

- Conversation starters.
- Ideas for handling boredom.
- Guidance on setting technology boundaries.
- A reminder that other parents are navigating this, too.
- Resources if concerns about your teen's mental health or substance use arise.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND INSIDE

Why Summer Can Increase Mental Health and Substance Use Risks

Learn why less structure doesn't always equal less stress—and how to recognize when normal adolescent behavior may signal something more.

Supporting Your Teen Without Becoming the "Fun Police"

Practical ways to provide guidance, accountability, and independence without constant conflict.

Technology Boundaries Without Starting World War III

Strategies for navigating screens, social media, and digital communication with less frustration.

Mental Health and Substance Use Warning Signs

Know what to watch for and when to seek additional support.

Conversation Starters Teens Might Actually Answer

Questions that foster connection instead of one-word responses. (Okay, maybe slightly longer than oneword responses.)

80s-Inspired Boredom Busters

Simple, fun activities that encourage creativity, confidence, and family connection. No Pinterest degree required.

The Summer Sanity Planner

Printable worksheets designed to help your family establish routines, expectations, and balance.

Michigan Resources and Professional Support

Local and statewide resources for families seeking additional guidance and care.

A Parent's Summer Permission Slip

Yup, you read that right.

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

Let's all agree on one thing:

If your teenager occasionally complains that you're ruining their life because you asked them to unload the dishwasher... You're probably doing just fine. The goal of this guide isn't to eliminate every challenge. It's to help you navigate those challenges with confidence, compassion, and the understanding that support is available when you need it.

Ready?

Let's get started.

SECTION 1 OF 8

Why Summer Can Increase Risk

The Science of Structure (Without Becoming Camp Director)

Picture this:

It's the second week of summer break. Your teenager has been asleep since approximately the Late Cretaceous Period. Their breakfast consisted of leftover pizza and a popsicle. They've declared themselves "bored" despite having access to streaming services, gaming systems, sports equipment, books, art supplies, and approximately 437 snack options.

Meanwhile, you're wondering:

"Should I be worried?" "Is this normal?" "Am I failing at this whole summer thing?" Take a deep breath.

The answer is probably: No, you're not failing.

What you're experiencing is something many families face when the structure of the school year suddenly disappears.

Why Structure Matters More Than We Realize

During the school year, teens operate within a fairly predictable framework.

They wake up. Go to school. Interact with peers. Participate in activities. Complete assignments. Eat meals at relatively consistent times. (At least theoretically.) Go to sleep. These routines do more than organize calendars. They help regulate the brain. Research suggests that predictable routines support:

- Emotional regulation
- Healthy sleep patterns
- Executive functioning
- Stress management
- Social connection
- Academic confidence
- Overall well-being

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, routines and consistency provide children and adolescents with a sense of security and predictability, both of which contribute to healthy development. When those routines shift dramatically—as they often do during summer—some teens adapt easily. Others struggle.

Wait...Summer Can Actually Be Stressful?

Surprisingly, yes. Summer often comes with unrealistic expectations. We're supposed to be making magical memories. Everyone should be relaxed.

No one should complain. And our children should emerge in August having learned a new language, mastered a musical instrument, and developed an appreciation for family board games. Reality, however, tends to look more like:

"Mom, can you drive me somewhere?" "There's nothing to eat." "Can I stay up until 3 a.m.?" "No, I don't know where my towel is."

For some teens, these disruptions can contribute to genuine emotional challenges.

Why Some Teens Are More Vulnerable

Summer can increase risk for teens who already struggle with:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- ADHD
- Trauma histories
- Social difficulties
- Eating disorders
- Substance use concerns
- Major life transitions
- Family stressors

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that adolescent mental health challenges remain a significant public health concern, with increasing rates of persistent sadness, hopelessness, and emotional distress among youth.

A decrease in protective factors, such as regular schedules, access to trusted adults at school, peer interaction, and extracurricular involvement, can sometimes intensify symptoms.

The Three Things Teens Still Need During Summer

Here's the good news:

You do not need to recreate school. (Your teenager just breathed a collective sigh of relief.) Instead, focus on maintaining three foundational elements.

1. Predictability

Humans thrive on knowing what to expect. Predictability lowers stress and helps teens feel secure. This doesn't mean every hour needs to be planned. It can be as simple as maintaining consistency around:

- Wake-up times
- Meals
- Family check-ins
- Chores
- Bedtime routines

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"No one has ever said, 'You know what made my childhood magical? The 47-item laminated schedule my mother updated hourly.'"

Aim for rhythm.

Not rigidity.

2. Responsibility

Summer is an opportunity for teens to build confidence. Giving them age-appropriate responsibilities helps foster:

- Independence
- Accountability
- Competence
- Self-esteem

EXAMPLES INCLUDE:

- Walking the dog
- Cooking one family meal each week
- Managing laundry
- Babysitting siblings

- Planning part of a family outing
- Volunteering

BONUS:

When teens contribute to family life, they often develop a stronger sense of belonging and purpose. (Will they thank you for this life lesson right now?) Probably not.

3. Connection

Perhaps the most important protective factor is connection. Research consistently demonstrates that supportive relationships with caring adults improve adolescent outcomes. Connection doesn't require grand gestures. It often happens in small moments:

- Driving to practice
- Walking the dog together
- Late-night conversations
- Running errands
- Sharing meals
- Laughing over a terrible family movie

Remember: Your teen may act like they don't want you around. Developmentally, they're supposed to seek independence. But they still need you. Even if they communicate this primarily through grunts.

The Myth of "Fun Police" Parenting

Many parents believe they have only two choices:

Option A: Become Best Friend Parent.

No boundaries. Unlimited freedom. No conflict.

Option B: Become the Fun Police.

Rules. Monitoring. Eye rolls. Constant battles. Fortunately, there's a third option. Healthy parenting lives in the middle. It's being warm and connected while maintaining expectations.

It's saying:

"I trust you."

AND

"My job is to keep you safe." It's allowing independence while providing guidance. It's being flexible while maintaining boundaries. It's understanding that saying "no" sometimes isn't ruining summer.

It's parenting.

A Summer Structure Formula That Actually Works

Think of summer like a burger. Stay with us. The bun and patty: Non-negotiables.

- Sleep
- Meals
- Hygiene
- Safety expectations

The toppings: Healthy responsibilities.

- Chores
- Volunteering or work
- Family contributions

The sauces (fun stuff): Choice and flexibility.

- Friends
- Hobbies
- Screen time
- Summer adventures

Too much bun? Nobody enjoys it. Too many toppings? It's overwhelming. No structure at all? Everything falls apart and somehow someone ends up eating cereal for dinner while searching for a missing swimsuit.

Balance matters.

Try This: Your Family Summer Reset

Take ten minutes this week and ask:

1. What routines are helping us?
2. What's creating stress?
3. What expectations need adjusting?
4. What do we want more of this summer?

Write down one small change your family can make. That's it. You don't need a complete overhaul. Tiny shifts create meaningful change.

Looking Ahead

In the next section, we'll tackle one of parenting's most hotly debated summer topics:

Technology.

Because somewhere between TikTok dances, Snapchat streaks, gaming marathons, and group texts that somehow require immediate responses at midnight, many parents are left wondering:

"Am I setting healthy limits...or auditioning to become the villain in my teenager's memoir?" Spoiler alert: You can establish boundaries without starting World War III.

SECTION 2 OF 8

Technology Boundaries Without Starting World War III

Or: How to Parent in the Age of "But Everyone Else Is Allowed To"

Let's begin with a moment of silence for the parents who have uttered one of the following phrases:

- "How long have you been on your phone?"
- "Weren't you just on your phone?"
- "Please look at me when I'm talking to you."
- "Is that your actual friend you're talking to, or someone from another country you've

never met while playing an online game?" And, perhaps the most controversial parenting statement of all: "Time to put the phone away." If your teenager reacted as though you'd announced the end of civilization, you're not alone. Technology is one of the most common sources of conflict in families today. And honestly? It's complicated.

As parents, we're trying to raise children in a world that didn't exist when we were growing up.

No one handed us a manual titled: How to Parent Teenagers While Navigating Social Media, Group Chats, Gaming, Streaming Platforms, and a Device That Functions as a Phone Approximately 3% of the Time.

So let's start with this:

Technology isn't inherently good or bad. It's a tool. And like any tool, its impact depends on how it's used.

The Reality of Teen Technology Use

For today's teens, technology serves many purposes:

- Maintaining friendships
- Exploring interests
- Entertainment
- Learning
- Creative expression
- Building communities

- Staying informed

It can also contribute to:

- Sleep disruption
- Social comparison
- Increased anxiety
- Exposure to cyberbullying
- Family conflict
- Difficulty disconnecting
- Reduced physical activity

According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media may face increased risks for poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. The key takeaway? It's not about eliminating technology. It's about helping teens use it intentionally.

Why Boundaries Matter

Teen brains are still developing. In fact, the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control, decision-making, and long-term planning continue developing well into young adulthood. That means teens often need support in creating balance. Boundaries provide:

- Predictability
- Safety
- Opportunities to practice self-regulation
- Protection during vulnerable developmental periods

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Boundaries aren't punishments. They're the parenting equivalent of guardrails on a mountain road. Nobody wants them until they realize they really, really need them."

Five Technology Boundaries That Actually Work

1. Focus on Family Values, Not Fear

Instead of:

"Phones are ruining your life." Try:

"Our family values sleep, relationships, movement, and being present with one another." When boundaries connect to shared values, teens are more likely to understand the "why." Even if they don't immediately agree. (And spoiler alert: they probably won't.)

2. Create Tech-Free Zones

Designate certain spaces or times where everyone disconnects. Examples:

- Family meals
- Bedrooms overnight
- During important conversations
- Family activities

Notice the word "everyone." Parents included. Nothing undermines credibility faster than asking your teen to unplug while you're scrolling through Facebook Marketplace looking at patio furniture you'll never actually buy.

3. Prioritize Sleep

Sleep is one of the strongest protective factors for adolescent mental health. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that teenagers ages 13–18 get 8–10 hours of sleep per night. Late-night scrolling, gaming, and endless group chats can interfere with healthy sleep patterns. Try:

- Charging devices outside bedrooms
- Establishing a technology "curfew"
- Using Do Not Disturb settings

Will they love this?

No. Will future well-rested versions of themselves appreciate it?

PROBABLY.

4. Stay Curious Instead of Critical

Ask questions like:

"What's your favorite thing to do online right now?" "What accounts make you feel good?" "Are there things online that stress you out?" "What's something adults don't understand about your digital world?"

Approaching conversations with curiosity builds trust. Approaching them like a detective conducting an interrogation usually doesn't.

5. Teach Digital Citizenship

Technology boundaries aren't just about time limits.

They're also opportunities to teach:

- Respect
- Privacy
- Kindness
- Critical thinking
- Safety

Discuss topics such as:

- What to do if someone is being bullied online
- How to recognize misinformation
- Why digital footprints matter
- What healthy online relationships look like

The goal isn't to raise teens who fear technology. It's to raise teens who know how to navigate it wisely.

The Family Technology Agreement

Instead of making rules in the heat of frustration, create expectations together. Ask:

What feels fair? What helps everyone stay healthy? What happens if agreements aren't followed?

Include areas such as:

- ☐ Screen-free times
- ☐ Overnight charging expectations
- ☐ Social media guidelines
- ☐ Gaming expectations
- ☐ Privacy and safety
- ☐ Consequences

Opportunities to revisit the agreement

When teens have input, they're more likely to buy into the process. More likely. Not guaranteed. Let's not get carried away.

A Reality Check for Parents

You will not get this right every time. Some days you'll be flexible. Some days you'll discover your child stayed up until 4:00 a.m. watching videos of strangers organizing their refrigerators. You may overreact.

You may second-guess yourself. That's okay. Parenting isn't about perfection. It's about consistency, repair, and trying again tomorrow.

Stephanie's Summer Challenge

This week, try one small shift:

- ☐ Move devices out of bedrooms overnight.
- ☐ Establish one tech-free family activity.
- ☐ Ask your teen about their favorite online creator.
- ☐ Review privacy settings together.
- ☐ Eat one meal without screens.

Start small. Small changes are often the most sustainable.

Looking Ahead

Next, we'll explore how to recognize when typical teenage ups and downs may signal something more serious. Because there's a difference between:

"Teenager who just had a rough day..." and "Teenager who may need additional support." We'll walk through the mental health and substance use warning signs every parent should know—without sending you into a panic every time your teen rolls their eyes.

SECTION 3 OF 8

Is This Normal Teen Behavior... or Something More?

Mental Health & Substance Use Warning Signs Every Parent Should Know

Let's start by acknowledging something important: Teenagers are weird.

We say that with love.

One minute they're passionately explaining why a certain playlist changed their life. Next, they're devastated and accusing you of never listening because you bought the "wrong" brand of cereal. They may spend hours in their room and then suddenly decide you're the only person they want to talk to at 11:47 p.m. Mood swings. Eye rolls. Sleeping in. Wanting more independence. These are all common parts of adolescence.

The challenge for parents is figuring out when changes are part of normal development—and when they might signal that a teen is struggling.

The "Different" Test

Instead of asking: "Is this behavior normal?"

Ask: "Is this different from my child's usual self?"

You know your teen better than anyone. Trust your instincts. A normally social teen who suddenly withdraws from everyone. A highly motivated student who no longer cares about activities they once loved.

A teen who seems persistently sad, anxious, or angry. These changes deserve attention. You don't have to panic. But you shouldn't ignore them either.

Typical Teen Behavior vs. Possible Warning Signs

Usually Typical:

- Sleeping later during summer break
- Wanting more privacy

- Occasional irritability
- Spending more time with friends
- Testing limits
- Becoming more independent
- Being embarrassed by their parents in public (Again, this one is developmentally expected.)

Worth a Closer Look:

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Persistent sadness lasting more than two weeks | • Difficulty functioning in daily life |
| • Withdrawal from friends and family | • Declining academic performance |
| • Significant changes in sleep patterns | • Physical complaints without medical explanation |
| • Major appetite changes | • Increased secrecy |
| • Increased anger or emotional outbursts | • Risk-taking behaviors |
| • Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities | • Substance use concerns |
| | • Expressions of hopelessness |
| | • Talking about death or suicide |

Anxiety Doesn't Always Look Like Worry

Many parents expect anxiety to sound like:

"I'm nervous." In reality, teens experiencing anxiety may appear:

- Irritable
- Perfectionistic
- Avoidant
- Easily overwhelmed
- Physically uncomfortable
- Angry
- Resistant to new situations

They may complain of:

- Headaches

- Stomachaches
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating

According to the CDC, mental health challenges among adolescents can affect emotional, social, and academic functioning. Early recognition and intervention improve outcomes and support long-term wellbeing.

Depression Doesn't Always Look Like Sadness

Depression in teens can be easy to miss. It doesn't always look like tears. Sometimes it looks like:

"I'm just tired." "Nothing matters." "I don't care." "Leave me alone."

OTHER SIGNS CAN INCLUDE:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| • Low energy | • Changes in appetite |
| • Increased irritability | • Changes in sleep |
| • Difficulty concentrating | • Loss of motivation |
| • Feelings of worthlessness | • Social withdrawal |

If these symptoms persist or interfere with daily functioning, it's important to seek professional support.

What About Substance Use?

Experimentation can occur during adolescence. That doesn't mean parents should dismiss concerning behaviors. Risk factors can increase during summer months due to:

- Increased free time
- Reduced supervision
- Peer influence
- Desire for novelty
- Attempts to cope with emotional distress

POTENTIAL WARNING SIGNS INCLUDE:

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| • Changes in friend groups | • Increased secrecy |
| • Bloodshot eyes | • Declining motivation |

- Mood swings
- Missing alcohol or medications
- Sudden changes in behavior
- Attempts to mask odors

According to SAMHSA, early conversations about substance use significantly improve prevention efforts and encourage help-seeking when concerns arise.

Stephanie's Summer Note

"There's a difference between catching your teen making a questionable fashion choice and noticing that they don't seem like themselves anymore."

One deserves a family photo for future embarrassment. The other deserves curiosity and support.

The Power of Saying Something

Many parents worry they'll overreact. They don't want to embarrass their teen. They don't want to make things worse. But checking in sends a powerful message:

- I notice you.
- I care about you.
- You don't have to handle this alone.

Even if your teen responds with:

"I'm fine." Keep the conversation open. Connection often happens through repeated invitations, not one perfect discussion.

When to Seek Professional Help

Consider reaching out to a healthcare provider or behavioral health professional if your teen:

- Experiences symptoms lasting more than two weeks
- Is struggling to function at home, socially, or academically
- Engages in self-harm
- Uses substances to cope
- Expresses hopelessness
- Talks about suicide
- Shows behaviors that concern you, even if you can't explain exactly why

You do not need to wait until things become a crisis. Earlier intervention often leads to better outcomes.

If There Is Immediate Concern

Seek immediate support if your child:

- Expresses thoughts of wanting to die
- Talks about suicide
- Has a plan or intent to harm themselves
- Is experiencing a behavioral health emergency

Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

If there is an immediate safety concern, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department.

Remember This

You are not expected to diagnose your child. You are expected to know them. To notice. To ask.

To listen. To seek help when needed. And perhaps the most reassuring truth of all: Asking for help isn't an admission that you've failed as a parent. It's one of the most loving things you can do.

Looking Ahead

Now that we've covered what to watch for, let's talk about one of the most powerful tools parents have:

Knowing how to start conversations that teens might actually answer. Because while we can't promise your teenager will suddenly become an open book... We can help you move beyond:

"How was your day?"

"Fine."

And into conversations that strengthen connection, trust, and resilience.

SECTION 4 OF 8

Conversation Starters Teens Might Actually Answer

Because "How Was Your Day?" Isn't Cutting It

Let's be honest. If parenting teens came with a soundtrack, there would be a lot of doors closing and one recurring line:

"Fine."

How was your day?

Fine. How are your friends?

Fine. How's summer going?

Fine. Are you okay?

Fine. Meanwhile, you're thinking:

"Are they actually fine?" "Do they know any other words?" "Did I somehow raise a teenager who communicates exclusively through sighs and TikTok references?" If this sounds familiar, welcome. You're in excellent company.

The good news?

Research consistently shows that strong parent-teen relationships are one of the greatest protective factors for adolescent mental health. Teens who feel connected to trusted adults are more likely to seek support, engage in healthy behaviors, and demonstrate resilience during difficult times. The even better news? Connection doesn't require the perfect conversation. It requires lots of small ones.

The Goal Isn't Information Gathering

Many parents accidentally approach conversations like detectives. Who? What? Where? When? Why? Who else was there? Did their parents know? Were there boys? Was there alcohol? Do you have your location on? Your teen hears:

"I am under investigation."

Instead, think of yourself as a curious tour guide trying to understand their world. The goal isn't extracting information. The goal is maintaining connection.

Timing Matters

Want to know the worst time to have an important conversation? Usually:

- The second they walk through the door.
- During an argument.
- Five minutes before they're leaving.
- While they're wearing headphones.
- From another room while they pretend not to hear you.

Want to know the best times? Often when you're side-by-side rather than face-to-face. Try:

- Driving in the car.
- Walking the dog.
- Grocery shopping.
- Folding laundry.
- Waiting in line.
- Making dinner.
- Late at night when they suddenly become philosophers.

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Teenagers are a lot like cats. The harder you chase them for affection, the more suspicious they become. Sit quietly nearby and eventually they'll wander over on their own terms."

Questions That Invite Real Answers

Instead of:

"How was your day?" Try:

About Their World

- What was the best part of your day?
- What was the weirdest part?
- What made you laugh today?

- If today had a title, what would it be?
- What's something you're looking forward to this week?

About Friends

- Who have you enjoyed spending time with lately?
- Who makes you feel like yourself?
- Is there anyone in your friend group who seems like they're having a hard time?
- What do you wish adults understood about friendships today?

About Stress

- What's been taking up the most space in your brain lately?
- What feels harder than it should right now?
- Is there anything you've been avoiding because it feels overwhelming?
- On a scale of 1–10, how stressful has this week been?
- What would make this week feel even 10% easier?

About Summer

- What's been your favorite summer moment so far?
- What's one thing you're excited about?
- What's one thing you're secretly ready to be done with?
- What should we do before summer ends?

About Technology

- What accounts make you genuinely happy?
- Is there anything online that stresses you out?
- What's something adults get wrong about social media?
- If you could delete one app forever, which would it be?

About Mental Health

- How do you know when you're stressed?
- What helps you feel better when you're overwhelmed?
- Who would you talk to if you needed help?
- How can I support you better?

What If They Say, "I Don't Know"?

First of all... That's a valid answer. Adolescents are still developing emotional awareness and language. Sometimes they genuinely don't know how they're feeling.

Instead of pushing, try: "That's okay. If you figure it out later, I'd still love to hear about it." or "You don't have to answer right now. I just wanted you to know I'm here." Sometimes planting the seed matters more than getting the immediate response.

The Magic of "Me Too"

One of the greatest gifts we can give our teens is normalizing emotions. Without making the conversation about ourselves, we can say things like:

- "I remember feeling nervous about that too."
- "That sounds really hard."
- "I've had days like that."
- "You don't have to have everything figured out."

Validation doesn't mean agreement. It means acknowledging their experience. And when teens feel understood, they're more likely to keep talking.

Things Teens Say...

...and What They Might Mean

"I'm fine." → I don't know how to explain it. "You wouldn't understand." → I'm afraid you'll judge me.

"Leave me alone." → I need space, but I also need to know you're still here. "It's not a big deal." → It feels like a big deal and I'm not sure what to do with it.

"You worry too much." → Thank you for caring, even if I find it deeply annoying.

Stephanie's Summer Conversation Challenge

Try one question each day this week. That's it. One. Not twenty.

Not a full interview. One genuine question. And then listen. The pressure to have "the big talk" often keeps parents from having the hundreds of small conversations that build trust over time.

Connection isn't built in a single moment. It's built through consistency. Through showing up. Through asking again tomorrow.

A Few Things Worth Saying More Often

Even to teenagers who pretend not to hear you. Especially to teenagers who pretend not to hear you.

- I'm proud of who you are.
- You can always call me.
- Thank you for telling me.
- You don't have to handle this alone.
- I love you.
- We'll figure this out together.
- I trust that we can talk about hard things.
- Nothing you say will make me stop loving you.

The Conversation Jar Activity

Want to make this fun? Grab a mason jar or any container, really. Write conversation starters on slips of paper. At dinner, in the car, or during family movie night, take turns pulling one out.

You'd be surprised what teenagers will share when it feels less like an interrogation and more like a game. Some family favorites:

- If our family had a reality show, what would it be called?
- What's one thing adults worry about too much?
- If you could relive one day from this summer, which would it be?
- What should every parent know about being a teenager right now?

Fair warning:

You may not love every answer. But you'll be getting the real ones.

Looking Ahead

Now that we've talked about meaningful conversations, it's time for something a little lighter. Because summer shouldn't be all serious discussions and technology agreements. Next, we're diving into:

80s-Inspired Boredom Busters

Because while we can't bring back the days of disappearing until the streetlights came on and the television having to ask parents if they knew where their children were... We can borrow a little of that creativity, freedom, and fun to help our teens build confidence, connection, and memories they'll actually remember.

SECTION 5 OF 8

80s-Inspired Boredom Busters

Because Summer Memories Don't Have to Cost a Fortune (or Require a Pinterest Degree)

Let's be honest. Most parents begin summer with visions of family togetherness. We'll unplug. We'll make memories. We'll go on adventures. We'll become the family from those vacation commercials. Then June turns into July.

Someone is bored. Someone else is hungry. You're not entirely sure why there are six wet towels on the kitchen floor when you get home from work. And your teenager has somehow cycled through every available activity before noon and concluded:

"There's literally nothing to do."

If you grew up in the 1980s, you may remember a different kind of summer. There were no smartphones. No social media. No location tracking. Many of us had one instruction (with no time given):

"Be home for dinner."

While we're not recommending quite that level of freedom in 2026, there is something to be said for reclaiming the creativity, independence, and simple joys that made summers memorable. The goal isn't constant entertainment. It's connection. Curiosity.

Competence. And maybe keeping everyone from declaring boredom every seventeen minutes.

The "I'm Bored" Bucket List

Here's your challenge:

Pick one activity each week. Not all of them. Remember, we're trying to avoid becoming Camp Director Mom.

The Great Neighborhood Scavenger Hunt

Create a list that includes:

- ☐ A pink flamingo

- ☐ A garden gnome
- ☐ A funny mailbox
- ☐ A tree bigger than your car
- ☐ Someone walking a dog wearing clothes
- ☐ The biggest dandelion you can find
- ☐ Something that reminds you of your childhood

Take photos. Award prizes. Argue passionately about the official scavenger hunt rules. Build memories.

The 80s Summer Olympics

Host backyard competitions featuring:

- Water balloon tosses
- Frisbee golf
- Hula hoop contests
- Sidewalk chalk masterpieces
- Three-legged races
- Obstacle courses
- Dance-offs

Bonus points for tube socks, homemade medals, and dramatic opening ceremonies.

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"If your teenager agrees to participate in a family dance-off, cancel your plans and document the moment immediately."

The "Can You Survive the 80s?" Challenge

Invite your teen to spend one hour:

- ☐ Without Wi-Fi
- ☐ Without GPS
- ☐ Without food delivery apps
- ☐ Without streaming services
- ☐ Without asking Alexa questions
- ☐ Without checking social media-

Possible outcomes:

- Increased resilience
- Creative problem-solving
- Discovering your teen believes life before smartphones involved daily wilderness survival

Either way, it's educational.

Mystery Road Trip Day

Rules:

1. Pick a direction.
2. Drive for 30–45 minutes.
3. Stop somewhere you've never explored.

Ideas:

- Small-town diners
- Local parks
- Ice cream shops
- Flea markets
- Nature trails
- Historic sites
- Roadside attractions

Take ridiculous selfies. Create inside jokes. Allow imperfection. Research consistently shows that shared experiences strengthen family bonds and promote emotional well-being.

Teach a "Lost Art"

Challenge your teen to learn:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • How to play cards | • How to garden |
| • How to bake a family recipe | • How to read a paper map |
| • How to sew on a button | • How to change a tire |
| • How to write a thank-you note | • How to balance a checkbook |

- How to fold a fitted sheet

(Okay, maybe no one has mastered that last one.) These moments build:

- Confidence
- Independence
- Problem-solving skills
- Family identity

The Family Movie Drive-In

Transform your backyard into an outdoor theater. You'll need:

- ☐ Blankets
- ☐ Lawn chairs
- ☐ Popcorn
- ☐ Snacks
- ☐ String lights
- ☐ A favorite movie

Everyone gets to pick one movie throughout the summer. Even if that means enduring a three-hour superhero marathon. Family traditions don't have to be elaborate to become meaningful.

Volunteer Together

Helping others can improve:

- Empathy
- Self-esteem
- Purpose
- Social connection

Ideas:

- Animal shelters
- Food banks
- Community clean-ups
- Senior centers

- Charity walks
- School supply drives

Research suggests that acts of service contribute to positive mental health outcomes and strengthen community connection. Plus, it reminds teens that they have something valuable to offer the world.

The "Yes Day" (Within Reason)

Once this summer, let your teen plan the day. Set a budget. Establish safety expectations. Then say yes.

Within reason. No skydiving. No tattoos. No adopting exotic animals. But maybe:

- Pancakes for dinner
- Mini golf
- Thrift shopping
- Hiking
- Ice cream before lunch

Giving teens opportunities to make decisions fosters autonomy and confidence.

The Summer Memory Jar

Keep slips of paper nearby. Whenever something funny, meaningful, or memorable happens, write it down. At the end of summer, read them together. Examples:

"Remember when Dad got lost using GPS?" "The dog stole six hotdogs." "You actually beat Mom at cards."
"You admitted Monopoly is not fun."

These ordinary moments often become the stories families treasure most.

The Real Goal

Let's say this louder for the parents in the back:

You do not need to entertain your children every moment of summer. You are not responsible for manufacturing a magical childhood experience 24 hours a day. Boredom is not an emergency. In fact, manageable boredom can encourage:

- Creativity
- Initiative
- Problem-solving
- Flexibility

- Self-discovery

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is helping your teen experience:

- Connection
- Joy
- Responsibility
- Rest
- Independence
- Confidence
- Fun

Sometimes that looks like a family adventure. Sometimes it looks like laughing over burnt cookies. Sometimes it looks like sitting quietly together on the porch. And sometimes, if you're very lucky, it looks like hearing your teenager say:

"That was actually kind of fun."

You'll want witnesses. No one will believe you.

Your Summer Fun Challenge

Before moving on to the next section, ask your family:

What are three things we'd love to do before summer ends?

Write them here:

Then pick one. Put it on the calendar. And let "good enough" be enough. Because the best summers rarely happen because everything went according to plan.

They happen because we showed up for one another—even in the messy, funny, towel-on-the-bathroom-floor moments.

SECTION 6 OF 8

The Summer Sanity Planner

Because Surviving Summer Counts as a Win

First things first:

This is not a color-coded schedule requiring twelve markers, three planners, and an advanced degree in project management.

If that works for your family? Fantastic. If not? Welcome. This planner was created for real families living real lives.

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is creating enough structure to support everyone's well-being while leaving room for spontaneity, rest, and fun. Because somewhere between "Let's make magical memories!" and "Please stop eating popsicles before breakfast," most families land somewhere in the beautifully messy middle. And that's exactly where this planner lives.

The Summer Sanity Formula™

Think of summer as balancing four essential ingredients:

☀️ **REST**

☀️ **RESPONSIBILITY**

☀️ **RELATIONSHIPS**

☀️ **FUN**

Too much of any one category tends to throw everyone off. All fun and no structure?

Chaos. All responsibility and no joy?

Burnout. All rest and no movement?

Cabin fever. The sweet spot is balance.

Weekly Summer Reset

Set aside 10–15 minutes once a week. Maybe Sunday evening. Maybe Monday morning.

Maybe Wednesday the following week because Sunday never happened.

No judgment. Gather the family and answer these questions:

What worked well this week?

What felt stressful?

What do we want more of?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Family time | ☐ Outdoor activities |
| ☐ Time with friends | ☐ One-on-one connection |
| ☐ Downtime | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Physical activity | |
| ☐ Better sleep | |

What do we want less of?

- ☐ Fighting
- ☐ Screen time battles
- ☐ Overscheduling
- ☐ Boredom complaints
- ☐ Late nights
- ☐ Rushing
- ☐ Other: _____

One thing we'll try differently this week:

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Small adjustments are often more successful than complete overhauls. You don't have to reinvent your family every Monday morning."

The "Good Enough" Summer Schedule

Instead of scheduling every minute, identify your family's anchors. These are the routines that help everyone function.

Our Family's Summer Anchors

Wake-up range:

Meals:

Breakfast: _____

Lunch: _____

Dinner: _____

Bedtime range:

Chore time:

Family connection time:

Movement or activity:

REMEMBER:

Anchors create rhythm. They aren't handcuffs.

The "I'm Bored" Plan

Raise your hand if you've heard:

"There's nothing to do." Now keep it raised if you were standing in a house containing:

- Board games
- Sports equipment
- Art supplies
- Books
- A backyard or porch
- Friends
- Approximately 14 streaming services

Exactly. Instead of becoming the Activities Coordinator every time boredom strikes, create a family plan.

Before Saying "I'm Bored," Have You Tried...

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Read for 20 minutes | ☐ adventure |
| ☐ Walked the dog | ☐ Picked something from the Summer Bucket List |
| ☐ Called a friend | ☐ Drank a glass of water |
| ☐ Built something | ☐ Taken a shower |
| ☐ Tried a new recipe | ☐ Asked to help with dinner |
| ☐ Played music | ☐ Played cards |
| ☐ Worked on a hobby | ☐ Journalled |
| ☐ Organized your room | ☐ Exercised |
| ☐ Helped someone else | ☐ Done absolutely nothing for fifteen minutes and survived |
| ☐ Gone outside | |
| ☐ Started a creative project | |
| ☐ Planned tomorrow's | |

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Contrary to popular belief, boredom has never been listed as a medical emergency."

Summer Bucket List

Because anticipation is half the fun. Choose a few activities that matter to your family. Not fifty. Just a few.

Things We'd Love to Do This Summer

1.

2.

3.

The Family Meeting Cheat Sheet

Need to discuss expectations? Keep it simple.

This Week's Priorities:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Sleep | ☐ Chores |
| ☐ Respect | ☐ Flexibility |
| ☐ Safety | ☐ Kindness |
| ☐ Fun | ☐ Communication |

Reminders:

Upcoming Plans:

Anything Anyone Needs Support With?

One-on-One Check-In

One of the strongest protective factors for teen mental health is connection with trusted adults. Use this page for quick individual check-ins. Ask:

High:

What was the best part of your week?

Low:

What was the hardest part?

Looking Ahead:

What are you excited about?

Support:

How can I help this week?

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Sometimes the most meaningful conversations happen in the car, over ice cream, or while folding laundry. Don't underestimate ordinary moments."

The Parent Reality Check

Please read this carefully. You will forget things. You will lose patience. You will say yes when you meant no.

You will say no and then reconsider. Someone will complain. Someone will roll their eyes. You may occasionally hide in the pantry to eat snacks in peace.

None of this means you're doing it wrong. Summer isn't a parenting performance review. It's a season. Some days you'll thrive.

Some days you'll simply survive. Both count.

Celebrate the Small Wins

At the end of each week, write down three victories. They can be tiny. Really tiny.

This Week's Wins:

1.

2.

3.

Examples:

- Everyone made it to their appointments.
- No one forgot sunscreen.
- My teenager voluntarily spoke to me (can count as two).
- We laughed together.

- We ate dinner as a family.
- I didn't lose my mind over wet towels.
- We got through a hard conversation.
- We asked for help when we needed it.

Because resilience isn't built through perfect summers. It's built through showing up for one another, again and again. And that's worth celebrating.

SECTION 7 OF 8

When You Need More Than a Summer Survival Guide

Michigan Resources & Professional Support

Let's start with something every parent needs to hear:

You are not expected to have all the answers.

- You are not supposed to be your child's therapist.
- You are not expected to diagnose mental health conditions.
- You are not failing if your teen needs more support than you can provide at home.

You are, however, one of the most important people in your teen's life. You notice the little changes. You hear the shifts in tone. You recognize when your child doesn't quite seem like themselves.

And sometimes, despite your best efforts, love and good intentions aren't enough. Sometimes families need additional support. That's not weakness. That's wisdom.

Knowing When to Reach Out

Every family experiences stress. Every teenager has difficult days. But if your teen's struggles begin interfering with daily life, it may be time to seek professional guidance. Consider reaching out if your teen is experiencing:

Emotional Changes

- ☐ Persistent sadness lasting more than two weeks
- ☐ Increased anxiety or excessive worry
- ☐ Irritability that seems out of character
- ☐ Mood swings that significantly impact functioning
- ☐ Expressions of hopelessness
- ☐ Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed

Behavioral Changes

- ☐ Withdrawal from family and friends
- ☐ Increased secrecy
- ☐ Risk-taking behaviors
- ☐ Sudden changes in friend groups
- ☐ Declining academic performance
- ☐ Increased conflict at home
- ☐ Difficulty managing responsibilities

Physical Changes

- ☐ Significant sleep disturbances
- ☐ Major appetite changes
- ☐ Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- ☐ Low energy or fatigue
- ☐ Changes in personal hygiene

Substance Use Concerns

- ☐ Smell of alcohol or marijuana
- ☐ Missing medications
- ☐ Bloodshot eyes
- ☐ Changes in behavior after social events
- ☐ Increased defensiveness
- ☐ Finding vaping devices, substances, or paraphernalia

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"As parents, we often second-guess ourselves. But if something feels different, it's okay to trust your instincts. You don't have to wait until you're certain before asking for help."

What If My Teen Refuses Help?

This is one of the questions we hear most often. And the answer is frustratingly human:

It depends. Many teens are hesitant at first. They may worry about:

- Being judged
- Being "different"
- Losing independence
- Talking to strangers
- What therapy will actually involve
- Whether treatment means something is "wrong" with them

Often, parents benefit from support and consultation even before their teen is fully on board. Start with curiosity. Try saying:

"I've noticed you've seemed overwhelmed lately, and I want to make sure you have support." "You don't have to figure everything out alone." "Would you be willing to meet with someone once and see what you think?" Remember:

The goal isn't forcing your teen into immediate vulnerability. The goal is opening the door.

Understanding Your Options

One of the biggest barriers families face is simply not knowing where to start. Let's simplify it.

Traditional Outpatient Therapy

Often appropriate when teens:

- ☐ Need support managing stress
- ☐ Are experiencing mild to moderate symptoms
- ☐ Can function in daily activities
- ☐ Benefit from weekly sessions
- ☐ Need a consistent space to process emotions and build coping skills

Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP)

May be appropriate when teens:

- ☐ Need more support than weekly therapy provides
- ☐ Experience worsening symptoms
- ☐ Struggle with emotional regulation
- ☐ Need structured coping skill development
- ☐ Are experiencing both mental health and substance use concerns
- ☐ Need support while remaining connected to home, school, and community

Partial Hospitalization Programs (PHP)

May be appropriate when individuals:

- ☐ Need intensive treatment and stabilization
- ☐ Require daily therapeutic support
- ☐ Need a higher level of care without inpatient hospitalization
- ☐ Are transitioning from inpatient or residential treatment
- ☐ Would benefit from comprehensive programming while returning home each evening

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"Needing a higher level of support doesn't mean anyone has failed. It simply means we're matching care to the level of need—just like we would for asthma, diabetes, or any other health condition."

The River's Bend Continuum of Care

At River's Bend, we understand that emotional well-being is complex—and healing isn't one-size-fits-all. Our evidence-based services are designed to meet individuals and families where they are, providing the right level of support at the right time.

Adolescent Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

Adolescence is complicated enough without having to separate emotional struggles from substance use concerns.

Many teens experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, school stress, or family conflict may also experiment with or rely on substances as a way to cope. Likewise, substance use often exists alongside underlying mental health challenges.

River's Bend's Adolescent IOP provides integrated treatment for adolescents experiencing co-occurring mental health and substance use concerns through a developmentally appropriate, evidence-based approach.

The program helps teens:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Develop healthy coping skills | ☐ Strengthen communication skills |
| ☐ Improve emotional regulation | ☐ Build healthy peer relationships |
| ☐ Understand the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors | ☐ Increase resilience and confidence |
| ☐ Address substance use within the broader context of their emotional health | ☐ Engage families as partners in the healing process |

Because teens aren't just a diagnosis. They're whole people deserving of whole-person care.

Mental Health Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

Providing structured support for adults experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, grief, mood disorders, and other mental health concerns through evidence-based therapeutic interventions. Participants build practical coping skills while remaining connected to their daily lives, responsibilities, and support systems.

Substance Use Disorder Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

Offering compassionate, nonjudgmental treatment for adults seeking recovery from substance use disorders. Services focus on relapse prevention, emotional wellness, skill development, and creating a sustainable foundation for long-term recovery.

Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP)

Delivering intensive therapeutic support for individuals who require a higher level of care than traditional outpatient services but do not require inpatient hospitalization. PHP offers comprehensive treatment while allowing participants to return home each evening and remain connected to their communities.

In-Person and Virtual Options

Because healing should be accessible. River's Bend offers flexible treatment options that recognize the realities of work schedules, family commitments, transportation needs, and the demands of everyday life. Support shouldn't require choosing between getting help and managing life's responsibilities.

STEPHANIE'S SUMMER NOTE

"One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is helping them understand that asking for help isn't something to be ashamed of. It isn't weakness. It's courage. And sometimes, it opens the door to healing they didn't know was possible."

Michigan Resources for Families

Sometimes support starts with a conversation. Sometimes it starts with a phone call. Keep these resources handy.

Crisis Support

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or Text: 988

Available 24/7

For anyone experiencing emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, substance use crises, or mental health emergencies.

Michigan Crisis and Access Line (MiCAL)

Call: 1-844-44-MICAL (64225)

Available 24/7

Connects Michigan residents with behavioral health resources and local services.

NAMI Michigan

National Alliance on Mental Illness Offers:

- Education programs

- Parent support groups
- Community resources
- Advocacy

Website: www.namimi.org

Face Addition Now (FAN)

Offers:

- Family support meetings
- Educational programs
- Recovery resources
- Community events

Website: <https://faceaddictionnow.org/>

National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA)

Children and teens who grow up in families affected by substance use often carry invisible burdens—including worry, confusion, shame, and the belief that they have to manage challenges on their own.

The National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA) provides education, advocacy, and resources to help children and families understand the impact of addiction while promoting resilience, hope, and healing. NACoA reminds young people of the "Seven C's," which can be powerful conversation starters for families:

- I didn't CAUSE it.
- I can't CURE it.
- I can't CONTROL it.
- I can help take CARE of myself by:
 - Communicating my feelings,
 - Making healthy CHOICES, and
 - Celebrating myself.

NACoA offers resources for parents, caregivers, educators, and professionals seeking to support children affected by a loved one's substance use.

Website: www.nacoa.org

"One of the most important messages we can give children is this: You didn't cause someone else's struggles, and you don't have to carry them by yourself. Kids deserve to be kids—even when life feels complicated."

When It's an Emergency

Seek immediate help if your teen:

- ☐ Talks about wanting to die
- ☐ Expresses suicidal thoughts
- ☐ Has a plan to harm themselves
- ☐ Is experiencing psychosis
- ☐ Has overdosed

- ☐ Cannot be kept safe

Call 911. Call or text 988. Go to the nearest emergency department.

Trust your instincts. It is always better to seek help and discover it wasn't needed than to wait too long.

A Final Word From Stephanie

If you've made it this far through the guide, I suspect one thing is true:

You care deeply about your child. The very fact that you're reading this tells me you're trying. You're paying attention. You're showing up.

Please remember this:

Asking for help isn't giving up your role as a parent. It's expanding your team. No one expects you to navigate adolescence alone. Not your friends.

Not your pediatrician. Not your child's future self. And certainly not us. At River's Bend, we believe healing happens in relationships.

Families matter. Hope matters. And support should always be within reach. Whatever this summer brings, know this:

You don't have to carry it by yourself.

We're here when you need us.

SECTION 8 OF 8

A Parent's Summer Permission Slip

You didn't ask for it, but you probably need it - where do you think your teens got their stubbornness from?

Dear Parent,

If no one has told you this lately, consider this your official permission slip. This summer, you have permission to...

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Let "good enough" be good enough. | ☐ Ignore the pressure to create a picture-perfect summer. |
| ☐ Say no to activities that leave everyone exhausted. | ☐ Put down your own phone and be present. |
| ☐ Order pizza without guilt. | ☐ Protect family time. |
| ☐ Laugh when things don't go according to plan. | ☐ Rest. |
| ☐ Change your mind. | ☐ Let your kids be bored sometimes. |
| ☐ Have boundaries. | ☐ Remember that boredom isn't an emergency. |
| ☐ Enforce consequences with love. | ☐ Enjoy the moments that surprise you. |
| ☐ Apologize when you lose your patience. | ☐ Believe that connection matters more than perfection. |
| ☐ Try again tomorrow. | ☐ Recognize that your teenager doesn't need a flawless parent. |
| ☐ Ask your teenager the hard questions. | |
| ☐ Not have all the answers. | |
| ☐ Take your own mental health seriously. | |
| ☐ Ask for help when your family needs support. | |
| ☐ Celebrate tiny victories. | |

They need you.

The one who shows up. The one who keeps trying. The one who drives them places, worries about them, laughs with them, embarrasses them, and loves them through every stage of becoming who they're meant to be. The one reading this guide because you care enough to learn.

That matters more than you know. One day, your teenager may not remember exactly what you packed for lunch, what camp they attended, or whether you allowed one extra hour of screen time. But they'll remember how home felt.

Safe.

Steady.

Loving.

Human.

So this summer... Lower the pressure. Celebrate the ordinary moments. Take the picture.

Eat the ice cream. Have the conversation. Ask for help when you need it. And remember:

You're doing better than you think. With warmth,

Stephanie Howey Co-Owner, River's Bend



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In-person and virtual options available. If there is an immediate safety concern, call 911 or call/text 988.