

HOT TOPIC

PERSONAL HYGIENE

Q In recent months our 12 year old son has stopped wanting to shower or wash at all. It was never a problem until recently and he used to love bath time. This wouldn't be an issue, except that his body odour is strong and unpleasant. We've tried gently encouraging him to wash and to use anti-perspirant but this can quickly escalate into a battle. I know that other people have noticed and I worry that it is going to cause him hurt.

I feel guilty admitting this, but I find the smell repellent and feel myself withdrawing from him when it's really strong. When we're out, I'm really quite embarrassed about it.

What can we do to help our son with his personal hygiene? And should I work on accepting things as they are?

A Well, firstly, we all have the right to make our own decisions and this is never so clear as in the teenage years. There is a constant battle between young person and parent about right and wrong, what's good for you versus what isn't and to shower or not to shower. And even though it can feel like a 'simple' thing (please shower!), these situations are always mixed up with so many conflicting emotions.

For example, in your letter you tell me about feeling embarrassed about being with your teen in public and I imagine you are wondering what others around you make think of him. These feelings start in our own early life – our experiences of our parents and their expectations but also, and most importantly at this vulnerable time in adolescence, the expectations of our peers. Perhaps you remember being a teen and what it was like to notice our own body odour, or worse, the body odour of a teacher or friend. Perhaps you also remember the feelings of being teased about this or seeing others being teased. Your sense of embarrassment as a parent might well be linked to your son's and as he might be in denial about his body changes, you are feeling this more strongly for him.

Of course, body changes are normal at this point in life. Your son is moving from being looked after by you and your family to a sense of independence and maturity. Being independent and mature means looking after your own needs and maybe this is a stumbling block for your son. Knowing that you are soon to be fully responsible for yourself can feel pretty scary and your son may be trying to hide those feelings; feeling shameful for his uncontrollable body changes and what this means for him now. When we don't want to admit something to ourselves, we often deny the feelings and hope that they will go away. With your son not listening to your advice on body hygiene, this may be present for him. Added to this sense of shame and denial that your son might be feeling are the feelings of 'battling' with you, as you explain in your letter. This battle can be heightened by the difficult feelings you and your son are having, and it can be hard for either of you to back down or find a solution to manage this.

So, I think a good thing for you is to take a step back for a moment. Try and separate your feelings from the past, the present and think about the reason why your son is not able to cooperate or look after himself. Is he feeling pressure at school? Is he worried about his changing body? Has something else changed that he can't talk about? Does he have someone to talk to outside of your home that would relieve some pressure.

Once you have thought about the situation without some of the emotion, you can add some practical actions to help him.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Did you know that during the teenage years, children are most motivated by rewards? Encourage your son to take charge of his own routine and reward him for it with pocket money or special treats such as more electronic device time or time with his friends.
- Support him to make a list of his daily habits – shower, brush teeth, change clothes, add deodorant – and he may feel empowered to take control.
- Adjust your expectations a little – he probably won't cooperate with everything you ask (!) so I always think three out of five things is enough for success!
- Having said that, some things can be non-negotiable. Encourage your son to think about the reason why they have to be done. Brushing teeth and washing hands, for instance.
- Make personal hygiene a clear part of your daily routine – wake up, get dressed, wash face and brush teeth. Or have dinner, watch TV, take a shower and put clothes in the wash. Would your son respond to something visual, like a tick list, or is there something he can create on his phone or tablet?
- If your son does find it hard to look after his personal care, think about the possible reasons why. What is his behaviour trying to tell you? What does he need help with now?
- Offer little spaces during your week where you can talk to your son. This might be in the car on the way to school or doing a chore together. 'Sideways' talk is a great way to help you both to feel less pressure and to, hopefully, find the words to say what is important to you both in that moment.
- Remember to breathe – your son will figure this out with support and encouragement. And you will be able to deal with this more positively with a clear mind.

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