

The kids are alright: case studies

Adolescents come in all shapes and sizes, and so do their fathers and father-figures. We spoke to four fathers with experience of parenting adolescent children, to hear their stories and tips

Staying involved as an 'own household father'

Ash Patel (55), an IT project manager from Welwyn Garden City, has a 19-year-old son, Sam, who is currently studying at university in Nottingham.

Ash has never lived with Sam's mother, but he has been an involved father from birth onwards - both financially and as a caregiver.

Ash says living nearby to and sustaining a good co-parenting relationship with Sam's mother - and negotiating flexible working arrangements - have allowed him to build and maintain a close relationship with Sam throughout his childhood and adolescence.

"I've seen Sam at least 4-5 days a week, doing drop-offs and pick-ups, ferrying him around to after-school activities like Cubs, football, gymnastics and volleyball, and going away together on family holidays. Cooking and eating together as a family has been an important part of daily living, that's when teens take the time to talk to you!

"It's about being that constant presence, helping him find his place in the world as a self-sufficient individual, and building trust.



"We've always cooperated and presented a united front as parents, and I look at him now and reckon we've done a pretty good job."

Being a father and father-figure for LGBT+ adolescents

Graeme Urlwin, 58, projects officer with a Manchester LGBT+ youth charity, adopted a teenage son (Daniel, now 40) when he was in his thirties, and has more recently become a father-figure to several young care leavers.

“I first met Daniel when he was 15, through a scheme that matched young gay men with older role models. The first few years were tough, but I always knew he’d turn out OK and he’s proved me right.”

“At 17 he asked if I’d adopt him. I realised I loved him, so my answer was yes. Legally we were too late in fact, but he changed his surname to mine by deed poll. He’s absolutely my son.”

His experience of becoming a father to Daniel led Graeme to seek, and gain, approval as a supported lodgings provider for Manchester Council. Officially the role is that of a ‘caring landlord’ – someone who can house and help young care leavers (aged 16 to 21) develop practical life skills – but Graeme says the relationship has often resembled adolescent fostering.

“I meet these young people in the few years before they head off into the world alone, so for me it’s important to help them in whatever way makes most sense for them.

“I respond to each individual young person and what they need from the relationship – whether that’s just providing them with a safe place to live, being more like a role model or mentor, or something more like a parent. Some of these young people are with me for several years, and what develops is a close, emotional relationship.”

In one case, Graeme became ‘English dad’ to a young man newly arrived from overseas, who was placed with him at 19. “It was clear that he wanted a father-figure rather than someone to show him how to wire a plug. He went off to university and now lives on his own nearby, but we’re still very close: he’s become part of my family.”



Learning the power of listening

Kieran Anders, a 45-year-old charity project manager from Bolton, has three adolescent children: two daughters (Dharma, 24 and Erin, 17) and a foster son aged 14.

Kieran has a close relationship with both daughters and was highly involved as a caregiver throughout their childhoods. He and their mother split up five years ago, and the children have since spent half their time in each household.

Two years ago, as a lone father, he started fostering his son – who lives with him full-time but remains in contact with his birth parents.

Kieran is an ex-secondary school teacher who now runs a service that supports fathers in NHS maternity services. So he has spent lots of time with other teenagers, as well as his own, and has a good understanding of what children need from their parents.

He admits the early days with his foster son were challenging – but he says a common thread in his relationship with all three children has been his use of ‘active listening’ to help them develop their growing sense of self.

“With my eldest I found that she tended to go more to her mum for emotional support, and to me if she had a specific problem to fix – and I think that was partly because I’d set myself up in that ‘fixer’ role.



“Over the years what I’ve learned is how important it is to ‘hold’ their emotions and help them work things out with your support, rather than just providing solutions. You’re not their teacher, you’re there to be their safe space, as they engage more independently with the outside world. They need to know it’s ok to feel whatever they’re feeling - that’s part of how you help them to become themselves.”

Putting fatherhood first



Ashley Howl (47), a bus driver from Wolverhampton, has a 10.5 year-old daughter, Betty and is stepfather to Ivy (27) and Ruby (25), whom he first met when they were in their mid-teens.

Ashley took voluntary redundancy from his previous job as a printer, to become a stay-at-home father when Betty was a baby. He says he only returned to work on the buses later, because the shifts allow him to combine earning and childcare. "It had to work for us, or I wouldn't have done it."

"Where I grew up everyone came from broken homes and I knew I didn't want that for my child. Being able to take that time with Betty was fantastic, it really was. We built such a strong bond and we're still tight."

As Betty approaches secondary school age, Ashley admits to some worries: "We don't know yet what school she'll be going to and my own memories of the education system aren't great. My baby's growing up and I've sold her the idea that the world's a lovely place! Soon I'll have to get used to letting go more."

But thanks partly to his experience as a stepfather, he's happy to share some top tips for fathering teenagers: "Think before you speak, don't try to be the big authority figure, and be clear that they can tell you anything. They're on a big learning journey, you need to guide them and be kind, not just tell them what to do."