

Never give a 10-year-old a phone and other advice for parents

Three new books tackle the challenges of raising tweenage girls and teenage boys, and being a guilty mum.



Parents worried about their primary school aged daughters being isolated from their friends during the COVID-19 lockdowns thought a phone seemed the right answer – wrong! **iStock**

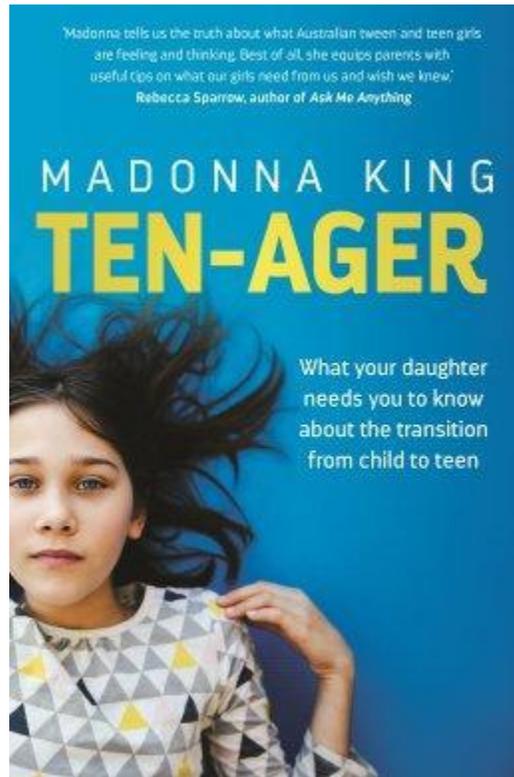
Theo Chapman

There is a certain irony that the only people I know who read parenting books are generally doing an OK job. Unlike almost any other area of study, [parenting](#) has no right answers, no universal methods and few agreed outcomes of success.

A friend says that he feels he's done all right since none of his kids ended up in jail. I consider my own parenting a success because both my kids left home when they got jobs (and haven't boomeranged back).

At the other end of the spectrum, some parents feel like failures if their progeny don't become doctors or lawyers while others feel shame if their children have a mental illness.

Into the [crowded marketplace](#) of tomes for [anxious and guilty parents](#) who want reassurance or to improve their skills are two books that tackle very different stages of child development in very different ways, and a book aimed at therapists and social workers that reframes one of the taboos of motherhood.



Madonna King takes a journalistic approach to the subject of 10-year-old girls in her book, *Ten-Ager*, and has based the content on a series of surveys and interviews with 500 10-year-old girls, their parents and their teachers.

Psychologist Megan de Beyer, herself a single mother of sons, has created a workbook for mothers struggling to connect with their newly hormonal and uncommunicative children in *How to Raise a Man*.

And psychotherapist Dr Margo Lowy (yes, wife of David and daughter-in-law of Frank) looks at why we need to talk about the fact that many women hate their children, albeit fleetingly in most cases, in *The Maternal Experience*.

Ten-Ager is King's third parenting book (she has tackled 14-year-olds and fathers and daughters previously) but she makes no claims about her own qualifications. "I'm not a parenting expert and my daughters would be very quick to agree," she says.

The main thrust of her work, which was written as the COVID-19 pandemic confined children and their parents, is that mobile phones should not be in the hands of tweens.

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"The birthday present du jour when the lockdown started last year, particularly at private schools, was a smartphone for a 10-year-old," King says. "That's earlier than their big sisters would have got it. Parents had done what they thought was right, they gave them phones so they could stay in touch with their friends."



King was inspired to write about 10-year-olds after feedback from parents who'd read her book on 14-year-olds.

The problem, she says is that 10-year-old girls are seeing vast amounts of adult content on their phones. "Ten is the new teens," she says.

At this age, children have fewer life experiences to apply to the material they are exposed to.

"Ten-year-olds will see a picture online and won't question whether it's real or has been doctored," King says. "They think that's what a beach looks like, what a teenager looks like. Adults have critical thinking skills to say that's fake."

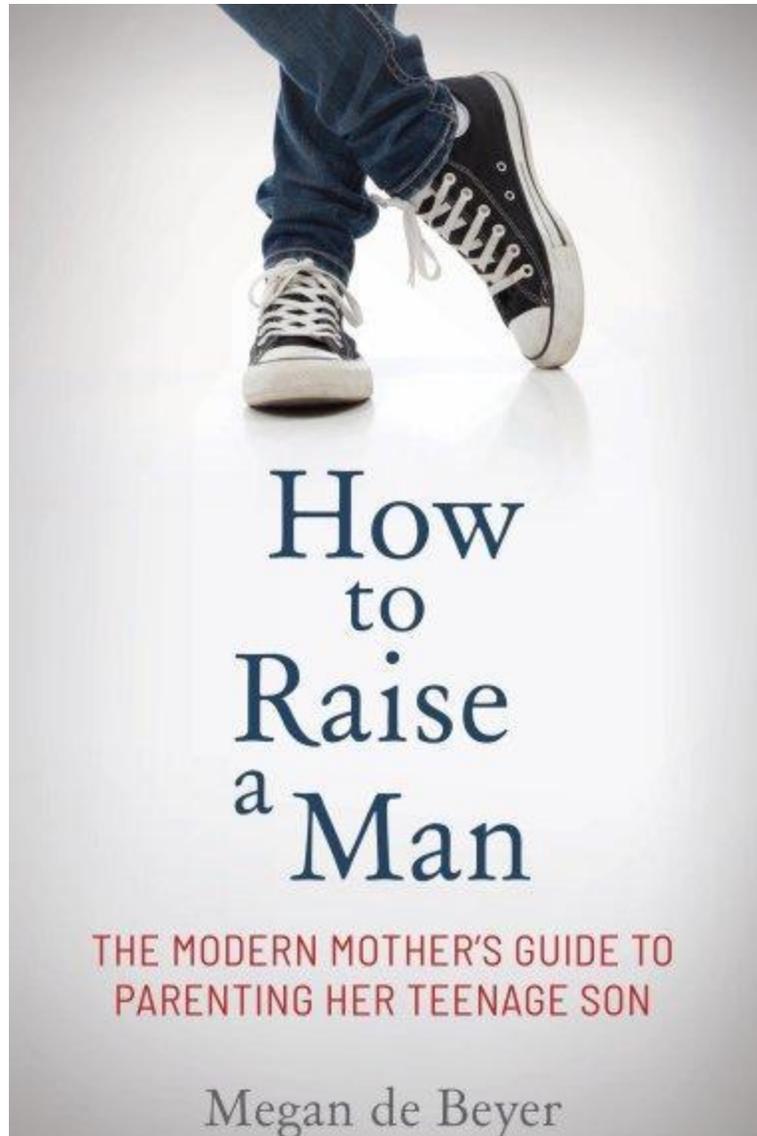
The book came about as a result of feedback from parents after publication of *Being 14* in 2017.

"A whole lot of people, particularly mothers, contacted me and said do you think my daughter could be reaching [this life stage] earlier? She's 11 and I'm getting that attitude, the eye roll and the door slam. That's what prompted me to look at it," King says.

The good news is that parents and schools are working together to teach critical thinking. The key thing, however, is that parents need to focus on helping their daughters build real-world friendships.

Another technique King used with her own daughters, who are now 16 and 17, was to look through their phones to see what they'd been up to. This was an agreed condition of them having a phone. That way she could talk to them about issues as they arose.

Megan De Beyer's *How to Raise a Man* also has communication at its heart. Rather than the issues of technology per se, she looks at how parents are often the problem when their children hit puberty.



For her, it's about getting mothers to reflect on their parenting style and to learn how to shift from the caregiver who, necessarily, did everything for their sons, to the coach who stands back and gives advice from the sidelines.

Before her sons hit their teens, de Beyer felt she was doing well. "And then the teenage years hit," she says. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing. How could I have these noisy, boisterous, loud, smelly, aggressive, uncommunicative boys?"

So she dived into the research literature and found that while it described the rejection of mothers by their teenage sons there was very little that looked at the issue from a mother's point of view.

So she worked on how she was responding to the changes in her children and spoke to other mothers about how they were navigating this period.

“I’ve come out the other end with a very stable, good and wholesome relationship with my young adult men and I wanted to share this with mothers because it’s very satisfying.”

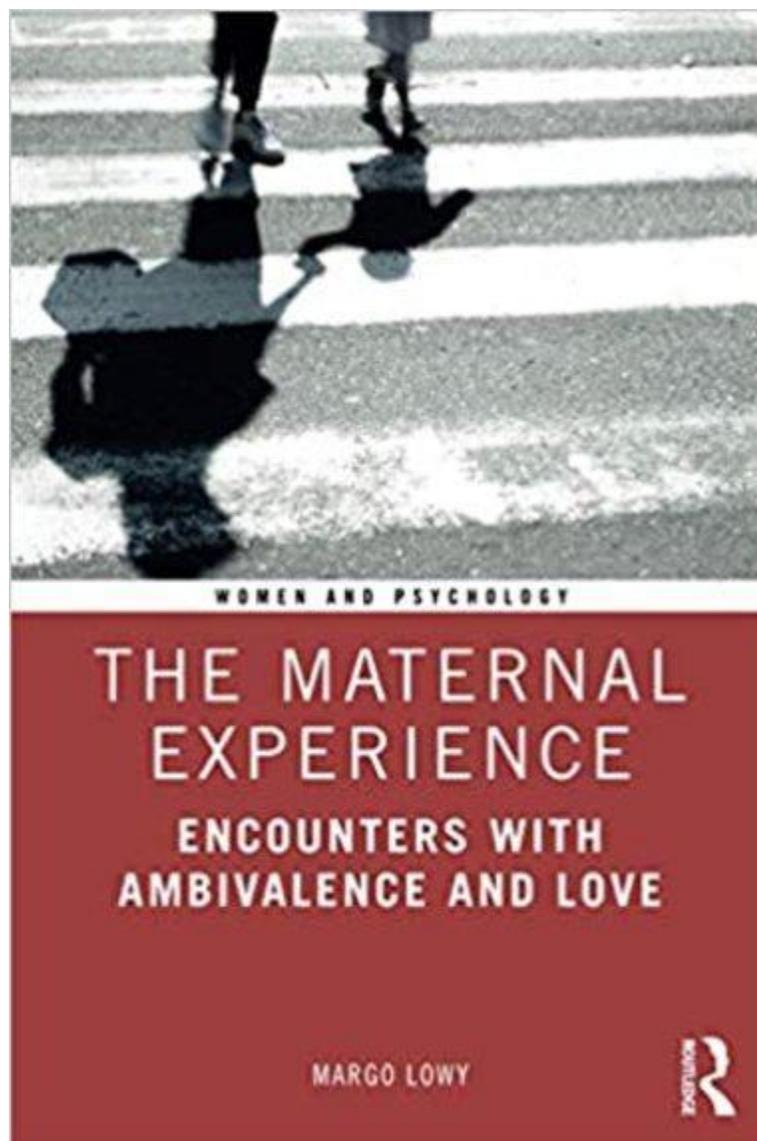


“I’ve come out the other end with a very stable, good and wholesome relationship with my young adult men,” says Megan de Beyer. **Frederick von Heyer**

For her, the measures of her success are that her sons are supportive, caring kind and functional, and continue to have a relationship with her.

She says the book is about celebrating masculinity, a word that has become tainted by the focus on toxic, hyper masculinity.

Dr Margo Lowy's book *The Maternal Experience* also encourages self-reflection but she wants professionals, as well as parents, to think about ambivalence: those love-hate feelings humans have about people and things.



Her book is part of a growing body of academic study that shows motherhood as the complex interplay of often conflicting emotions that it is, rather than the simplified ideal portrayed in popular culture.

In western cultures, mothering is presented as a joyous surrendering of self with a child's benefit as the only focus of a woman's activity. This is a source of pain for many women who find that children trigger lots of negative emotions: resentment, rage, anger and even hatred.

It's that capacity to feel love and hate towards one's children that became an area of intellectual interest for Lowy, and one informed by her own experiences raising three children.

"In my work, one of the most important things is the ability to sit with different types of feelings whether it's love, hate, enjoyment, despair, anger, frustration, and to be able to tolerate them without getting rid of any," she says. "For me, ambivalence is an evolved state: when someone can bear to sit with all those conflicting feelings and struggle with them and deal with them, that to me is an evolved person. It's something that's healthy."

In her book, she gives the example of the mother of a teenager having to collect their inebriated child from a party even though the teen had promised not to drink. The parent will experience a mix of feelings, including hatred, as well as concern and love.

Lowy's book evolved from her PhD thesis, which took her six years to complete since she was also busy looking after her youngest child at the time.

"It's a very paradoxical experience, mothering," she observes.

Although the book has a strong academic feel, Lowy hopes parents will also read it. To make her ideas more accessible, she uses examples from films.

"The relationship between the maternal and cinema came together for me as a Jewish woman when I viewed *Sophie's Choice* (1982) in 1983," she writes. "The pivotal scene was the moment when Sophie, a young Polish woman, flanked by her two children, is interrogated by a Nazi officer about whether she is Jewish or Polish.

"He sneers at her contemptuously while forcing her to choose between the life of her young son or daughter. When she refuses to choose, the officer threatens to sentence both children to death, and Sophie cries to him to take her baby. As the little girl is taken away screaming, Sophie's shattering occurs. At that moment, a perpetual link between cinema and the maternal was forged for me."

Lowy hopes that her book will help mothers: “I hope that this work disrupts the taboos and stigma [of feeling hatred towards one’s children] and hope it helps women feel that they’re enough and not to be swamped by the ideals around them.”

[Ten-Ager](#) by Maddona King (Hachette); [How to Raise a Man](#) by Megan de Beyer (Hachette); [The Maternal Experience](#) by Margo Lowy (Routledge).