Parents know to take their children to the pediatrician for physical checkups, but mental health is as important as physical well-being.

A child’s teenage years can seem stressful. Teenagers enter high school, where they must make new friends. Increased academic and athletic competition can make teens feel inadequate or overwhelmed.

Parents can help their teenagers navigate these difficult years. First, parents should ask their pediatrician to evaluate their teenager’s mental well being. Pediatricians develop close relationships with their patients, so teenagers might feel more comfortable discussing sensitive subjects, like depression, stress and sex, with their doctors instead of their parents.

Teenagers need a trusted adult to speak with, whether that adult be parent, pediatrician, teacher or counselor. Make sure that your teenager knows that stress, sadness and anger are normal, and that talking about her feelings can really help her cope. Remind her of the people who can help her, and tell her that reaching out is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Second, parents should make sure that they’re not putting too much pressure on their teenager. Too-high expectations can often become damaging, but parents should still make sure that their teenagers have strong support systems at home.

“Kids tend to live up, or down, to the expectations of their parents,” says Dr. Renee Jenkins of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “Teens who understand what standards are expected of them stand a better chance of setting realistic goals for the future.”

Third, parents should help their teenagers feel empowered to change circumstances for the better. If your teenager says that she feels stressed, help her to identify the source of her stress. Ask your teen to brainstorm about possible solutions to her situation. Discuss the pros and cons of her suggested approaches, making sure to consider future ramifications. Decide on the best course of action.

Parents can help teens learn from their mistakes, gain better judgment and develop stronger senses of identity – the tools that will help them through the rest of their lives.

For more information on children’s and teens’ mental health, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org and search for “mental health tips.”