

Guiding Your Child Through Adolescence

Popular images of adolescents as troubled, unstable, depressed, uncooperative, ill-mannered, drug addicted, and promiscuous do not accurately describe most teenagers. While some find the transition from childhood to adulthood stressful, many experience no more stress than at any other period in their development.

Adolescence, which spans the years from around 11 to 21, is a period of great physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth. The adolescent's central task is to develop a sense of personal identity by adapting to these changes. In the process, adolescents may challenge family rules and values.

This guide will help you understand the changes that occur during adolescence and guide your teenager as he or she moves toward adulthood. Information on specific topics, such as the physical changes of puberty, is also available from our office. Please feel free to bring any questions you may have to your child's doctor.

The Three Stages of Adolescence

Adolescence is usually divided into three stages – early, middle, and late. Each stage has its own developmental characteristics, but these vary widely within the group and even within individual teens. Physical, social, and psychological maturation often proceed at different rates, so that the age and physical maturity of a teen may bear little relationship to maturity in other ways.

Early adolescence is characterized by rapid physical growth and sexual maturation. Younger teens are especially sensitive to their changing bodies. They often measure their physical appearance and skills against idealized images and are not always tolerant of differences from the "norm". Boys are more likely to be satisfied with their body shape and size or wish to gain weight while girls tend to be less satisfied and want to lose weight.

As their social focus shifts from family toward peer groups, younger teens develop an intense need to belong to a group, usually of the same sex. Friendships become more intimate with increased sharing of ideas, opinions, and activities. Conformity in

behavior and physical appearance becomes more important.

Middle adolescence finds peer influences still controlling most adolescent behavior, but achieving psychological independence from parents becomes especially important. Experimentation with alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and sexual intercourse increases sharply around 15 or 16 years of age. At the same time, however, middle adolescents are strongly motivated to do what is right as their behavior matures and they acquire social skills. They are learning to control their impulsiveness, resolve conflicts, and deal with peer pressure. They also experience rapid intellectual growth and can increasingly understand abstract concepts.

Community service and meaningful work may help middle adolescents grow. Working more than 20 hours per week, however, can lead to unhealthy behaviors and attitudes.

Late adolescence, commonly occurring after high school, is a time of preparing to enter the adult world. The main tasks of this period include establishing personal and sexual identity, making sensible and realistic career plans, developing and refining a sense of morals, values and ethics, and defining a mature relationship with family members.

Reaching Physical Maturity

The physical changes of puberty are already underway for most girls by the time they enter adolescence. Puberty usually begins at around 10 1/2 - 11 years of age in white girls and as much as one to two years earlier in African-American girls. Most girls have their first menstrual period about 2 years after beginning puberty at which time growth is nearly complete. For boys, puberty begins at around 12 years of age and proceeds at a slower pace than for girls. By 16 years, most adolescents are sexually mature and their physical growth has slowed. It is important to remember, however, that the timing of puberty and growth can vary greatly from one teen to another.

Youth need information about the normal physical changes their bodies are going through and how the timing of those changes varies from one person to

another. This is especially true for girls who enter puberty early and for boys who enter late.

Social and Emotional Growth

During adolescence, peer relationships become more like relationships between adults. The social support of peers helps teens learn to form intimate relationships based on mutual sharing of thoughts and feelings. Girls typically value intimacy more than boys do.

Younger adolescents are self-centered and find it hard to see things from another's point of view. As they mature, they are better able to consider the concerns of others, tolerate differences, and recognize their interdependence with others.

Parents often worry that peers may negatively influence their child. In fact, adolescents perceive less pressure from peers for misconduct than many adults assume. Peer pressure does not affect all adolescents equally. Its impact is greater among younger teens and those less confident of their social skills. Nor is peer pressure the only factor that determines behavior. Parents remain the primary influence on major decisions regarding life goals and values.

Adolescents typically choose friends with basic values similar to those of their parents. If they are attracted to friends with behavior problems or unconventional social values, it may be because of emotional problems or inadequate social skills.

Health Issues

Although the average adolescent is healthier today than in the past, disease, injury, and death are more closely linked to personal behaviors such as drinking and driving, sexual activity, and substance abuse. Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among 15 to 24-year-olds, followed by homicide and suicide, mostly involving firearms. The acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is the sixth leading killer.

Half of eighth graders and a majority of high school and college students have tried alcohol, and use of illicit drugs

such as marijuana is fairly common. Cigarette smoking continues to increase among teens, who are most likely to start smoking daily between the sixth and ninth grades.

More than half of teens have had sexual intercourse by 18 years of age. Of those who become sexually active during their teenage years, the mean age for first intercourse is 15 years for girls and 16 years for boys. Early intercourse is linked to other health risk behaviors and a higher risk for sexually transmitted diseases. Pregnancy rates for US teens have decreased over the past decade, but remain higher than other developed countries.

Parenting adolescents: Steady as you go

Adolescents who receive supportive, authoritative parenting tend to have high levels of competence, self-esteem, moral development, impulse control, and independence. They are also more involved in school and have higher expectations of success.

Discipline based on asserting power – such as enforcing rules with harsh punishments – leads to anxiety, immaturity, and behavior problems when applied to teens. They respond better when parents allow disagreement and appeal to their concern for others or to their desire to be mature.

It is important to respond to your teenager's need for increasing responsibility and decision-making power while maintaining family closeness, warmth, and communication. Adolescents need their parents' praise, support, availability, interest in their daily activities, and unconditional positive regard.

Although the balance of power in the parent-teen relationship becomes more equal as adolescence progresses, you must continue to set clear expectations for behavior and provide consistent discipline. Remain involved in your teenager's daily life, provide information and help where needed, and monitor your teen's whereabouts without being overprotective or violating the need for some privacy.

REMEMBER: WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU WITH ANY CONCERNS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT YOUR TEEN'S GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR.