



Understanding Teens

Guide F-122

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This publication is scheduled to be updated and reissued 10/10.

NORMAL ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Teenagers are individuals with unique personalities and special interests, likes and dislikes. In general, however, there is a series of developmental tasks that they all face during the adolescent years.

Teen development can be divided into three stages—early, middle, and late adolescence. The normal feelings and behaviors of adolescents for each stage are described below (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Washington, D.C.).

Early Adolescence (12-14 years)

Movement Towards Independence

- Struggle with sense of identity
- Moodiness
- Improved abilities to use speech to express oneself
- More likely to express feelings by action than by words
- Close friendships gain importance
- Less affection shown to parents, with occasional rudeness
- Realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their faults
- Search for new people to love in addition to parents
- Tendency to return to childish behavior

Career Interests

- Peer group influences interests and clothing styles
- Mostly interested in present and near future
- Greater ability to work

Sexuality

- Girls ahead of boys
- Same-sex friends and group activities
- Shyness, blushing and modesty
- Show-off qualities
- Greater interest in privacy
- Experimentation with body (masturbation)
- Worries about being normal

Ethics and Self-Direction

- Rule and limit-testing
- Occasional experimentation with cigarettes, marijuana and alcohol
- Capacity for abstract thought

Middle Adolescence (14-17 years)

Movement Towards Independence

- Self-involvement, alternating between unrealistically high expectations and poor self-concept
- Complaints that parents interfere with independence
- Extremely concerned with appearance and with one's body
- Feelings of strangeness about one's self and body
- Lowered opinion of parents, withdrawal of emotions from them
- Effort to make new friends
- Strong emphasis on the peer group
- Periods of sadness as the psychological loss of the parents takes place

Career Interests

- Examination of inner experiences, which may include writing a diary
- Intellectual interests gain importance
- Some sexual and aggressive energies directed into creative and career interests

Sexuality

- Concerns about sexual attractiveness
- Frequently changing relationships
- Movement towards heterosexuality with fears of homosexuality
- Tenderness and fears shown toward opposite sex
- Feelings of love and passion

Ethics and Self-Direction

- Development of ideals and selection of role models
- More consistent evidence of conscience
- Greater capacity for setting goals
- Interest in moral reasoning

Late Adolescence (17-19 years)

Movement Towards Independence

- Firmer identity
- Ability to delay gratification
- Ability to think ideas through
- Ability to express feelings in words
- More developed sense of humor
- Stable interests
- Greater emotional stability
- Ability to make independent decisions
- Ability to compromise
- Pride in one's work
- Self-reliance
- Greater concern for others

Career Interests

- More defined work habits
- Higher level of concern for the future
- Thoughts about one's role in life

Sexuality

- Concerned with serious relationships
- Clear sexual identity
- Capacities for tender and sensual love

Ethics and Self-Direction

- Capable of useful insight
- Stress on personal dignity and self-esteem
- Ability to set goals and follow through
- Acceptance of social institutions and cultural traditions
- Self-regulation of self-esteem

Teenagers will naturally vary slightly from the descriptions above, but the feelings and behaviors listed for each area are, in general, considered normal for each of the three stages.

HOW TO USE THE INFORMATION ABOUT NORMAL ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Understanding the developmental tasks of teens can help parents and others understand why adolescents act the way they do and how to positively deal with their behaviors.

For example, between the ages of 12 and 14, teens often test limits and rules. Parents might set 6 p.m. as the time to come home for dinner. Teens at this age might test the limits and come home at 6:15. If nothing happens, they might continue to come home a little later each day until the parent confronts them on the limit. Understanding that this is normal for teens can help parents anticipate the rule-testing behavior. Parents will restate the rules, expect the rules to be followed, and follow through on consequences if the rules aren't followed. Teens want to know that parents are paying attention to the rules and that parents expect the rules to be followed.

By the time teens are 17-19 years old, their sexual identities are formed. Waiting until this time to talk about sexuality, parent expectations, dating, and relationships doesn't help them. These discussions need to take place long before teens turn 17. Note that between 14 and 17, teens may begin to withdraw from parents emotionally. If parents don't realize that this is normal development and take the behavior too personally, parents might blame the child needlessly and withdraw attention the child still needs.

QUESTIONS/ANSWERS

Parents, grandparents, teachers, and youth leaders who live with or work with teens are often confronted with real-life issues that they need help in solving. They wish they had an instruction book to guide them through the teen years. The following are questions actually asked by real parents and youth leaders on a variety of topics.

Money

Question: How do I teach my teen to be happy with generic brands of clothes? He feels deprived, because we cannot afford name brands, which are more expensive.

Answer: There are two separate questions to answer, one question deals with values and the other deals with money. First, we cannot teach children to be happy or content with anything. In fact, we don't want to teach contentment or satisfaction. By being discontented or unhappy, teens may be motivated to work for things in the future that they can't have now.

What you may be talking about is a sense of respect for your doing the best you can to give him as much as you can afford. If he does not appear to appreciate you, it hurts. The only way to get teens to show appreciation is to model the behavior and tell them what you want. For example, "When you throw the no-brand jeans that I bought you on the floor, it really hurts." All you can do is control your behavior; you cannot control the way your son feels.

The second question is about spending money on clothes. A clothing allowance is a good solution to the problem. Your son may be willing to settle for one pair of expensive, name-brand jeans instead of several pairs of less-expensive, no-brand jeans. Decide how much money you are willing to spend on clothes for six months. Set up a budget and let him decide how to spend it. This not only keeps you from getting upset about your son's values about clothes, but it also teaches him about budgeting money. He will be responsible for the clothes he wears, not you.

Adult-Child Emotional Relationships

Question: How far can my daughter be trusted?

Answer: Teens can be trusted until they prove otherwise. When your daughter lies about where she is going or who she will be with, she cannot be trusted to tell the truth. On the other hand, you have to look at why she did something that made you not trust her. Are your rules or expectations so strict that your teen can't talk to you or get you to meet her halfway? Did you set her up to lie? For example, when you ask a child if she broke the vase in the living room, knowing full well that she did, you set her up to lie.

When teens lie or do something else that makes them untrustworthy, work out ways that they can make amends. We all make mistakes and need a chance to make up for those mistakes. Ask your teen how she is going to make up for her mistake of lying and how she will prove she can be trusted.

Question: When my teen is in pain or anger, she rejects any love or attention I try to give her. How can I reach her?

Answer: There is probably a reason for your teen's actions, but you may never know why she reacts this way. It may be that she is modeling her behavior after someone who also responds this way. When people reject comfort, a letter or note is a good way to reach them. For example, a note might say, "I love you even when you're mad at me." or "It looks like you're hurting, and I feel bad for you."

Sometimes humor or singing is another good way to reach teens. For example, a teen lets a friend drive her car, and the friend gets a ticket. You can play the Beatles song, "Baby, You Can Drive My Car," to open up a discussion on the subject. This way you are communicating with your teen in a less stressful way.

Anyway, if a kind touch or note does not work when your teen is angry or in pain, pick another way to reach your teen that fits your personality and her personality.

Question: How do you deal with a teen who is rude to adults?

Answer: A lack of respect or rudeness to adults upsets most of us and makes us angry. Chances are that this behavior did not start overnight and has been going on for a long time. Look at the situation and see how much respect he gets from other family members. Is this the way people in the family treat each other? Is the teen mimicking what he sees someone else do?

If you feel comfortable that people in your family treat each other with respect, confront the situation head on. If he treats you rudely, ignore him. Then tell him that if he wants to communicate with you, he will have to speak kindly and you will respond. At the same time, you must also treat the teen with respect and speak kindly to him.

Work on building a good relationship by listening to his needs and wants to show you care about him. Do some of the things he likes to do, such as going to a movie or listening to some of his music. At the same time, ask him to listen to your music and see a movie of your choice.

Question: How do you convince your two teen sons that you are not favoring one over the other?

Answer: Most children think that mom or dad likes their brother or sister better than them. One way to handle it is not to fight it. Treat it with humor, while giving the children information. For example, when you spend time with one child on his homework and the other child gets jealous, say, "Get in line, you're next." Or, you could remind him that two weeks ago you spent an hour washing his clothes.

Another way to deal with it is to ignore it. Children feeling jealous of one another is their problem, not yours. You can acknowledge their feelings by saying, "You get angry when I spend time with your brother," but you don't have to agree or try to justify your actions.

Try to treat children as individuals instead of giving them exactly the same things or trying to treat them exactly the same. Praise individual accomplishments. "Jess, you did a good job washing the car." "Turk, you brought your grade up to a C in Algebra." Don't feel you have to treat them the same, because they are not the same. They are unique individuals.

Question: I am divorced and treat my kids with love and try to do the best for them. Their dad treats them like dirt, yet the kids keep trying to get their dad's love and approval and treat me badly. They have lots of anger and pain.

Answer: Whoever initiates the divorce, no matter what the reason, is the parent that usually receives children's anger and hostility for breaking up the family. Because children feel safe with the parent they live with, they often take their anger out on him or her. They want to feel loved by both mom and dad and might feel abandoned by the parent who lives outside the home (in this case the dad). You have little control over how your children feel, but you do have control over how you feel. You will be amazed at how much better your relationship with your children gets when you back off from needing your children to feel a certain way about you or their dad.

You may want to get help in this matter (counseling), because it is a hard thing to work through alone. However, there are some things you can do. Start enjoying one little thing about your kids and ignore, for now, hurtful things they may say and do. Build on those little things you share or enjoy together. Make the fun times longer than the bad times. It takes some time but it works, and it builds relationships that will last as your children grow into adulthood.

Rules and Limits for Teens

Question: How do I handle a teen who has her mind made up to do something that may hurt her?

Answer: This is a question about power and anytime you get into a power struggle with children of any age, nobody wins. Parents are more successful if they say "yes" to as many things as possible and "no" to only a few things that they know will be bad for their kids. Try to compromise. For example, if your daughter wants to go out with friends that you do not want her to be with, suggest that she can see her friends if they come to your house to watch a movie or listen to music. If she doesn't like this solution, ask her to come up with a solution that will work for both of you.

Question: How do I handle a teen who has not done what he was asked to do?

Answer: Lots of times teens (like adults) are spaced out. That is, they look like they hear you, but their minds don't register what you said. Making a short list on paper with a space to mark off completed chores works for some people. What you have to decide is if you really want the chore done or if you want control over your teen. If you want complete obedience and control, you are asking for something that is not healthy for the parent or the child.

Here is another way to handle chores. Write each chore on a slip of paper and have everybody pull one or two slips from a box. When all the chores are completed, reward yourselves with a treat like ice cream, a movie or a walk.

Question: How do I meet my teen halfway?

Answer: What you're talking about is compromise. In meeting halfway, both parents and teens have to listen to each other and be willing to accept each other's solutions to problems. For example, your teen may want to stay out after 10 p.m. on a school night. While you must say no to this because kids need their rest for school, you could offer a compromise by allowing her to stay out a little later on the weekend (assuming she is at an event or activity that requires staying out later). If she will not accept this, ask her to come up with another solution. Go back and forth with suggestions and solutions until you work out a compromise that works for both of you.

Question: How would you reason with a teenager who insists on wearing absurd clothing?

Answer: Why does the unusual clothing bother you? Did you ever wear miniskirts or bell bottom pants? Most teens want to be individuals, which really means they want to be as different from their parents as possible, not different from their friends. Wearing clothing that is very different from what you wear is one way they identify with their peers and look different from you.

Parents need to decide if the clothing is really unhealthy and unsafe or if it just represents personal freedom. For example, if the clothing is associated with a violent gang, then there is reason for

concern and intervention. Do everything you can to get the teen away from this environment so that he can hang out with a different group of friends and stay safe. But, perhaps, the clothing represents a need for the teen to make a statement like, "This is who I am!" In that case, try to live with it and appreciate the fact that your teen is an interesting person with opinions and feelings all his own.

Question: How do you deal with a defiant teen who argues with every decision you make?

Answer: Instead of taking power away from children, channel the power in a positive way. For example, children who always want their own way or argue with every decision you make may be real assets on the school debate team or in a part-time job where they sell something. This way they are using their "power" or force for good and channeling it away from making your life miserable.

Question: How do you deal with a teen who continually defies his curfew?

Answer: You really need to find out what's going on. Is your son the one who has to drive everyone else home and, thus, gets home later than he planned? Does he not give himself enough time to get where he's going and back in time for his curfew? Does he just lose track of time, because he doesn't wear a watch? Is his curfew very different from that of his friends'? The reason for breaking curfew will determine the way to handle the situation.

Setting a curfew together is a good way to learn to compromise and meet teens halfway. Curfews also can vary depending on the activity. Teens who go out at night need to be going to a specific event or activity. They shouldn't just be "hanging out," unless they are at someone's house with adult supervision. Some curfew problems can be avoided by making sure teens study and rest for the next day on school nights. Reserve weekend nights for socializing.

Teen's Relationships with Friends

Question: How can I help my child? His friends are calling him names, and it makes him feel like he's being punched.

Answer: You can help your child by listening to how he feels about the problem, but you can do

little to keep other kids from calling him names. When he talks about the name calling, say “It really hurts when kids do that. You probably feel like crying or getting back at them. It is a terrible thing to do to another person.”

Unless it is a really abusive situation at school, you cannot get in the middle of it. Otherwise, when the kids get your son alone, the name calling will get even worse. People usually stop behavior when it is not reinforced. If your son can ignore the name calling and hang on for as long as it takes, it will stop. If this is a bullying situation, contact school officials to intervene and stop the behavior.

Parenting and Society

Question: What, if any, is the responsibility of the community to help raise children today? What can we do for troubled youth?

Answer: We all have a responsibility for our children. Adults can lend emotional support to parents who are raising children by listening to them and offering suggestions and solutions to problems. Our society can do many things, such as provide support groups, counseling, and parent education opportunities. Lending support to parents will help prevent some of the problems that youth face today.

Question: What are some ways that parents can relax or reduce stress so that they can do a better job of parenting?

Answer: It is very important that parents take good care of themselves physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally. The way you relax is up to you. Think about what you like to do, which may be hard if you spend a lot of time taking care of everyone else. If you like to read, that can be relaxing. But read what YOU want, not what you think you should read. Listening to music, walking, deep breathing, leafing through cookbooks, dancing, watching movies are all possible ideas. There is nothing wrong with spending time on yourself for yourself. You really are a better parent for it, and you show your kids how to take good care of themselves.

Question: How can I reach my teenager and get him to understand me?

Answer: Parents are more successful when they try to get in the shoes of the teen they are trying to reach. What are teens concerned about? Usually they are concerned about their personal development—who they are, where they are going, who they are going there with. They usually like the latest trends in music and clothing. Learn something about their friends. Use these ideas to approach teens. Observe them to see what their interests are and use their interests to reach them.

FOR FURTHER READING:

DeBord, Karen. (1997) *Parenting Teens*. North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Publication. Raleigh, N.C.

Nelsen, Jane and Lynn Lott. (1991) *I'm On Your Side: Resolving Conflict with Your Teenage Son or Daughter*. Prima Publishing: Rocklin, Calif.

Pruitt, David B., Editor. (2000). *Emotional, Behavioral and Cognitive Development from Early Adolescence Through the Teen Years*. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Tralle, M. (1997) *Monitoring Tips for Parents*. Minnesota Extension Service.
www.extension.umn.edu/Documents/D/E/Other/6961_11.html

The following World Wide Web site has practical, research-based information for parents and professionals on the topics of child, youth, parent and family, and community: CYFERNet (Children, Youth, and Family Extension Resources)
www.cyfernet.org/parents.html

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Revised October 2005

Las Cruces, NM