

Guiding Your Child Through Adolescence

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What Is Adolescence?

Technically speaking, adolescence is the ages from 11 to 21 years. It is a time of great physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth. The adolescent's central task is to develop a sense of personal identity. While some adolescents find the transition from childhood to adulthood stressful, most experience no more stress than at other times in their development. This handout aims to help provide brief guidelines as to how you might help guide your teen through this momentous time in their life.

Early Adolescence

From age 11 to 14 years, there is rapid physical growth and sexual maturation. Young teens are very sensitive to their changing bodies, often measuring their physical appearance and skills against idealized images. Conformity in behavior and physical appearance becomes much more important. Young teens develop an intense need to belong to a group; friendships become more intimate, with increased sharing of ideas, opinions, and activities. Young teens are notoriously self-centered, and find it hard to see another's point of view.

Middle Adolescence

From age 15 to 18 years, peer influences decrease somewhat, but achieving psychological independence from parents becomes especially important. Experimentations with alcohol, marijuana, sexual intercourse, or even illicit drugs increase sharply. At the same time, these teens are strongly motivated to do what is right, as their behavior matures, and as they acquire adult social skills. They are learning to control their impulsiveness, resolve conflicts, and say no to peer pressure. They are beginning to understand abstract concepts. Community service and meaningful work up to 20 hours per week can be quite healthy for the middle adolescent. They are becoming better able to consider the concerns of others, tolerate differences, and recognize their interdependence with others.

Late Adolescence

From age 18 to 21 years is a period of preparation to enter the adult world. The main tasks of this age are to establish clear vocational goals, and a sense of personal identity.

Reaching Physical Maturity:

Puberty usually begins around age 9 years for African-American girls, and age 10 for white girls. For boys, puberty usually begins around age 12 to 13 years. By age 16 years, most adolescent girls are physically mature, and their physical growth has slowed. Boys may not reach this point until age 17 to 18 years. Youth at these ages need lots of guidance about the normal physical changes their bodies are going through, especially young girls teens.

Health Risks Of Adolescence:

Teens today are healthier than ever. Motor vehicle accidents remain the most common cause of death between the ages of 15 to 24 years, followed by homicide and suicide. A teen who lives in a home with unlocked and accessible firearms has a five times greater risk of using a gun on themselves or on others.

Half of eight-graders have tried alcohol, one-third have tried cigarettes, and one-fifth have tried marijuana. Cigarette usage is increasing again in teens, usually beginning between the ages of 11 and 15 years.

Talk to your kids about drugs. Not in threatening tones, but in matter-of-fact language. If you ignore the subject of drugs, your child will get their information from others with strong opinions,

such as users and dealers. Inform teens that drugs are a way of hurting yourself, and that you love them too much to see them ever get involved in drugs. Speak from the heart, but don't do all the talking – let them tell you their feelings about drugs, and friends who use them.

More than half of teens have had sexual intercourse by age 18 years. The average age for initial intercourse is age 15 years for girls, and age 16 for boys. Early intercourse is related to an increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhea, Chlamydia, Hepatitis B, and HIV. Pregnancy rates are on the rise again among teen girls, and is higher in the US than in most any other developed country. Be certain your teen has been vaccinated against Hepatitis B, and that your teen girls has been vaccinated against HPV, the virus that causes cervical cancer.

By the age of 12 years, pre-teens should also have received their Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis booster vaccination, and a single vaccination against Meningococcus.

General Parenting Tips

Adolescents who receive supportive, authoritative parenting tend to have high levels of competence, self-esteem, moral development, impulse control, and independence. Such parenting is best begun when children are infants and toddlers, but it's never too late. Discipline based on asserting power – such as enforcing rules with harsh punishments – leads to anxiety, immaturity, and behavior problems when applied to teens. Teens respond better when parents allow disagreement, and appeal to their desire to be mature.

It is important to respond to your teen'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. Parents must set consistent and clear expectations for behavior, and provide consistent discipline. Parents must also remain involved, supportive, and interested. Monitor your teen's whereabouts without being over-protective, or violating the need for some privacy.

Start early in adolescence by treating your teen as an adult friend, developing the kind of relationship you envision having with them when they are adults. Your goal is mutual respect, support, and the ability to have fun together, and share relaxed, open conversation.

Remember to praise good behavior when ever possible. Listen long and well; avoid making judgmental comments. Listening doesn't necessarily mean having to fix all of your teen's problems. Describe pros and cons, and let your teen make his or her own decision, so as to learn from their own mistakes. Always let them see that there are choices; teens often think there are none. Tell them to "do what you think is best", while providing an ever-present support system that the teen can fall back on when they make a mistake. Don't give your point of view unless asked.

Finally, give them space when they're in a bad mood; this is a poor time to talk about anything, pleasant or otherwise.