

Tips for Parents: Adolescent Development

Introduction

Each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and special interests, likes, and dislikes. In general, however, there is a series of developmental tasks that everyone faces during the adolescent years.

A teenager's 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.

Early Adolescence - 12-14 years

Movement Toward 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 attention 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
- Peer group influences interests and clothing styles
- Increasing career interests
- Mostly interested in present and near future
- Greater ability to work

Sexuality

- Girls ahead of boys
- Shyness, blushing, and modesty
- More showing off
- Greater interest in privacy
- 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 - 15-16 years

Movement Toward 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 own body
- Feelings of strangeness about one's self and body
- Lowered opinion of parents, withdrawal from them

- Effort to make new friends
- Strong emphasis on the new peer group
- Periods of sadness as the psychological loss of the parents takes place
- Examination of inner experiences, which may include writing a diary

Career Interests

- Intellectual interests gain importance
- Some sexual and aggressive energies directed into creative and career interests

Sexuality

- Concerns about sexual attractiveness
- Frequently changing relationships
- Tenderness and fears shown toward opposite sex
- Feelings of love and passion
- Ethics and Self-Description

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 Toward Independence

- Firmer identity
- Ability to delay gratification
- Ability to think ideas through
- Ability to express ideas 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 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

Conclusion

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

How Parents Can Help Their Middle or High School Child

In high school young people are developing emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Parents can help their children be successful students by encouraging them in the following ways:

- Create a quiet space for homework to be completed. A place free from disruption and fully stocked with supplies (pencils, pens, paper, stapler, tape, calculator, etc.) is ideal.
- Communicate with students about their homework, and what large projects and tests are upcoming.
- Keep a family routine concerning dinner, homework, and TV.
- Remember that intrinsic motivation leads to greater creativity. Allow students to try a variety of activities in order to find their true interests.
- Encourage students to keep trying when faced with a challenge. Remind students that parents and teachers are available to provide extra help.
- Encourage children to read if they want to improve their scores on standardized tests. The best way to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary is to read a lot.
- Help children set realistic goals and work toward them systematically. Also, no matter what the goal (making a sports team, improving academic grades, or learning a new skill) remind children that the journey is as important as attaining the goal.
- Allow adolescents some freedom yet, stay involved in their lives. We all learn through experience and sometimes failure is the best teacher.
- Praise adolescents for their contributions to family, school, and community. This conveys a belief in their accomplishments and helps to build a positive self- image.

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