

Adolescence: Supporting the Journey from Childhood to Adulthood

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This guide for parenting during the adolescent years discusses the significance of peers, risk-taking, self-consciousness and decision-making in a rapidly changing adolescent's life. It lists tips for helping your child navigate adolescence and includes resources for further reading.

Adolescence is a time of rapid change for both the teen and the parents. Teens are striving to fit in with their peers and working to develop independence and an identity.

During adolescence, teenagers' ability to think moves from a concrete level to an abstract level, allowing them to question rules, values and beliefs. These, and other changes, can be challenging for parents. Teens will passionately argue their point with parents because they want the freedom to make their own choices and to be seen as mature enough to do so.

Adolescence is defined as the period of physical and psychological development that begins with the onset of puberty and ends with maturity. In general, puberty begins around the age of 11 for girls and 12 for boys. The time period defined as adolescence is longer today than it was a few generations ago, stretching beyond the teenage years.

Research has found that the adolescent brain is not fully mature until well into the twenties. Exactly when maturity is reached is based upon the individual's experiences and his or her physical and psychological development. In the United States, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be as long as fifteen years.

Contrary to popular thinking, most teens navigate the teen years with



little turbulence. A few, however, may have difficulty. Some teens are more resilient and have a greater capacity to confront and conquer the changes and challenges that can occur during the adolescent years. Others may need more support and guidance. Understanding the changes that are taking place during these years can help parents successfully guide and support their children.

The importance of peers

One of the first changes parents may notice is that teens begin to spend an ever-increasing amount of time away from the family, choosing instead to spend time with their peers. Although this desire to be independent from the family is normal adolescent behavior, parents may have difficulty experiencing this shift. It is not easy to see the child who idolized you drive off in a

car and spend what can seem like all of his or her free time with friends.

The desire to be liked and to belong to a group is human nature. Teenagers are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in socially. They will seek out friends to whom they feel they are similar and who enjoy their favorite activities. As peers in a group share experiences, they begin to create a history. Creating a narrative or story through risk-taking behaviors becomes their "collective culture."

Just as a family has rituals or customs that makes it unique, so does a peer group. Because of the desire to be a part of the group, teens can feel pressure to conform to the actions and ways of the group. They may change the way that they dress, the music that they listen to or even the way that they speak in order to feel

like they are a part of the group.

The peer group fulfills many needs of the maturing teenager. Some of these needs are:

The need to belong: Teens want and need to have friends.

The need to be liked: This can lead to conformity within the group -- like the style of clothing, style of hair, choice of activities and risk-taking behaviors.

The need to identify with a group: Finding a group that is similar to them protects teens from feeling isolated and alone.

The need for independence: Adolescents want to be free to make their own decisions and choices. They want to be treated like adults.

The need to try on different identities: Adolescents may try out different roles and identities as they search for who they want to be.

The need for a personal identity: Adolescents are trying to define who they are, what they believe and who they will become during these years.

The influence of the peer group is strongest during early adolescence and lessens during middle and late adolescence as the young person forms a sense of identity.

Risk-taking

Taking risks is normal adolescent behavior. Unfortunately, some of the experiences that teens seek out or become involved in with peers can be risky or even dangerous.

Adolescents are testing new abilities and collecting exciting and novel experiences. Parents can support this need to take risks by offering teens activities and experiences that are reasonably safe, yet challenging and exciting. Some examples are:

Team sports: Organized sports such as soccer, basketball, tennis, softball, wrestling, football.

Individual sports: Activities such as skiing, rock climbing, running, hiking and skateboarding.

Travel: The travel may be to another state or country or exploring a nearby town. Offer teens a chance to see other places and other ways of life.

Music: Encourage teens to learn how to play a musical instrument or play in a band.

Extracurricular activities: These might include drama, clubs, 4-H, or yearbook or newspaper staff.

Wanting to be “grown up” and independent

Just as young children engage in dramatic play to act out things that they have seen adults doing, so do adolescents.

Teenagers want to be seen as adults and often engage in what they perceive as adult behaviors -- such as drinking or smoking. Adults are role models for youth, and young people desperately want to appear grown up.

Parents need to talk to teens about the possible consequences of their behaviors. It may seem as though teens don't want the advice of adults. They may appear to not be listening (and they might not be) none the less, let the young person know your position on these behaviors.

Parents are responsible for keeping their children safe. When teens go out, be sure to ask where they are going, with whom, and establish an agreed-upon time for them to be home. *Do not hesitate to check up on them.* This may seem invasive to them but they will, ultimately, understand and appreciate the love and concern for their safety.

The “imaginary audience”

During the adolescent years, young people tend to assume that they are “on stage” and always the focus of attention. Teens inaccurately assume that everyone is as concerned about their behavior and appearance as they are.

This assumption, also known as the “imaginary audience,” can cause young teens to try not to do anything that might be seen as different from anyone else. A pimple can be devastating! Not being asked to a dance, not having the “right” kind of shoes, or not talking to a friend for a few days can cause major emotional eruptions in this age group. What might seem unimportant to a parent may seem like a disaster to a teen.

It is important to remember that, to teenagers, small things can seem catastrophic. Try not to minimize their feelings. Instead, try to listen to them and empathize with how they are feeling. Simple comments like, “It sounds like you are having a bad day,” or, “It is hard to be left out,” can let your son or daughter know that you are trying to see his or her point of view. If you show that you honestly care about what your teen is going through, you will build trust. Teens who have learned to trust in their parents' emotional support may be more apt to share their feelings with a parent in the future.

Choosing battles

It is important to decide what is and what isn't worth arguing about with a teen. The old adage, “pick your battles” certainly applies here. Adolescents generally argue with their parents about issues of homework, keeping their room clean, hair style, clothing and music. Decide what issues are most important and what to let slide. Closing the door to the teen's room may be the best way to avoid a continuing argument of whether or not it is clean. Save the battles for more important issues.

Helping teens to make good decisions

As new opportunities and experiences emerge for the young person, parents who are democratic in their parenting are preparing the teen to eventually live independently. Negotiating rules with a teen, setting limits together and arriving at agreed-upon consequences for breaking rules are all components of democratic parenting.

Being firm about decisions, but flexible as situations arise, shows the teen that you are willing to see his or her requests as a possibility that can be negotiated fairly. For example, perhaps there is a concert that your 16-year-old would like to attend that ends at 12:30 a.m. You had agreed, together, that 11:30 p.m. was a reasonable curfew. Perhaps that extra hour, on this occasion, is warranted.

What can parents do to help their adolescents successfully navigate the teen years?

Find ways for teens to fill the need to take risks in a healthy manner. Provide opportunities for them to travel, ski, play organized sports, take challenging classes, sing in a choir, etc.

Listen to your teen. The car is a wonderful place to engage your teen in conversation. As neither of you is looking directly at the other, it is far less confrontational and conversation can be spontaneous. Listen to what your child is saying and try to understand his or her perspective. Share your feelings, but try not to put your teen on the defensive. You may think teens don't care about what you have to say, but, in reality, they do care and they will listen if your input is properly delivered.

Recognize that parenting teens is a process. Teens will make mistakes, they will talk back, they will get angry and they will grow up. Be patient and see these years as a growing, maturational process.

Talk to teens about the dangers of risk-taking. Teens need to know that it is our job, as parents, to keep them safe. Let them know the consequences that can occur when they take dangerous risks.

Model positive behavior. Remember that your child will watch and imitate your behavior. Try to serve as a positive role model and set good examples for your child.

Be proactive rather than reactive. Try to foresee problems and deal with them prior to their occurrence, rather than reacting after the fact. When we react, we may be more likely to do so with anger or contempt.

Make time to be with / talk to teens. Try to have dinner as a family regularly and find other times to just be with your teen.

Make small, frequent gestures of love and kindness. Tuck a nice note into their school book, buy them a bouquet of flowers, tell them how nice they look, leave a cute card on the bathroom vanity. No matter how difficult and challenging they can be, remember that teens still love you and need to know that you love them.

Set reasonable limits and consequences: Work with your teen to decide what is fair. Work together to determine reasonable consequences for misbehavior. Be sure to follow through with the consequences on a consistent basis.

Negotiate: Negotiating is an important social skill for everyone to learn. Sit down with your teen and express your position but let them express their position. Be sure to really listen to what they have to say and then negotiate a solution that works for both of you. As they grow older you will need to renegotiate boundaries because with age and maturity more freedom may be given.

Offer encouragement freely: When your teen behaves appropriately or abides by the mutually accepted rules, tell him or her that you are proud. Positive reinforcement will strengthen positive behaviors.

Think of adolescence as a shared experience...

The teen years can be challenging and exciting for youth and parents, and can serve as a valuable learning experience for both. As children begin to stretch their wings and move out into the larger community, adults need to be there to support them, offer advice, model for them and encourage them to try new things in a safe, healthy way.

As much as it may seem that teens do not want parents' time, guidance or advice, remember that they really do want support. They will make mistakes, as will their parents. Being a teen or a parent is not easy. What is important is that parents be there to listen to their children, guide them, and learn right along with them.

For further reading:

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