

# Facts for Families

## Normal Adolescent Development Part I

No. 57; Updated June 2001

### **Middle School and Early High School Years**

Parents are often worried or confused by changes in their teenagers. The following information should help parents understand this phase of development. Each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and special interests, likes and dislikes. However, there are also numerous developmental issues that everyone faces during the adolescent years. The normal feelings and behaviors of the middle school and early high school adolescent are described below.

### **Movement Towards Independence**

- Struggle with sense of identity
- Feeling awkward or strange about one's self and one's body
- Focus on self, alternating between high expectations and poor self-esteem
- Interests and clothing style influenced by peer group
- Moodiness
- Improved ability to use speech to express one's self
- Realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their faults
- Less overt affection shown to parents, with occasional rudeness
- Complaints that parents interfere with independence
- Tendency to return to childish behavior, particularly when stressed

### **Future Interests and Cognitive Changes**

- Mostly interested in present, with limited thoughts of the future
- Intellectual interests expand and gain in importance
- Greater ability to do work (physical, mental, emotional)

### **Sexuality**

- Display shyness, blushing, and modesty
- Girls develop physically sooner than boys
- Increased interest in sex
- Movement toward heterosexuality with fears of homosexuality
- Concerns regarding physical and sexual attractiveness to others
- Frequently changing relationships
- Worries about being normal

### **Morals, Values, and Self-Direction**

- Rule and limit testing
- Capacity for abstract thought
- Development of ideals and selection of role models

(OVER)

- More consistent evidence of conscience
- Experimentation with sex and drugs (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana)

Young teenagers do vary slightly from the above descriptions, but the feelings and behaviors are, in general, considered normal for each stage of adolescence.

From the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry website: [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org).

# Facts for Families

## Normal Adolescent Development Part II

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### Late High School Years and Beyond

Parents are often worried or confused by changes in their teenagers. The following information should help parents understand this phase of development. Each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and special interests, likes and dislikes. However, there are also numerous developmental issues that everyone faces during the adolescent years. The normal feelings and behaviors of the late high school adolescent are described below.

### Movement towards Independence

- Increased independent functioning
- Firmer and more cohesive sense of identity
- Examination of inner experiences
- Ability to think ideas through
- Conflict with parents begins to decrease
- Increased ability for delayed gratification and compromise
- Increased emotional stability
- Increased concern for others
- Increased self-reliance
- Peer relationships remain important and take an appropriate place among other interests

### Future Interests and Cognitive Changes

- Work habits become more defined
- Increased concern for the future
- More importance is placed on one's role in life

### Sexuality

- Feelings of love and passion
- Development of more serious relationships
- Firmer sense of sexual identity
- Increased capacity for tender and sensual love

### Morals, Values, and Self-Direction

- Greater capacity for setting goals

(OVER)

- Interest in moral reasoning
- Capacity to use insight
- Increased emphasis on personal dignity and self-esteem
- Social and cultural traditions regain some of their previous importance

Older teenagers do vary slightly from the above descriptions, but the feelings and behaviors are, in general, considered normal for each stage of adolescence

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# Facts for Families

## When To Seek Help For Your Child

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Parents are usually the first to recognize that their child has a problem with emotions or behavior. Still, the decision to seek professional help can be difficult and painful for a parent. The first step is to gently try to talk to the child. An honest open talk about feelings can often help. Parents may choose to consult with the child's physicians, teachers, members of the clergy, or other adults who know the child well. These steps may resolve the problems for the child and family.

Following are a few signs which may indicate that a child and adolescent psychiatric evaluation will be useful.

### **YOUNGER CHILDREN**

- Marked fall in school performance.
- Poor grades in school despite trying very hard.
- Severe worry or anxiety, as shown by regular refusal to go to school, go to sleep or take part in activities that are normal for the child's age.
- Hyperactivity; fidgeting; constant movement beyond regular playing.
- Persistent nightmares.
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than 6 months) and provocative opposition to authority figures.
- Frequent, unexplainable temper tantrums.

### **PRE-ADOLESCENTS AND ADOLESCENTS**

- Marked change in school performance.
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities.
- Marked changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.
- Frequent physical complaints.
- Sexual acting out.
- Depression shown by sustained, prolonged negative mood and attitude, often accompanied by poor appetite, difficulty sleeping or thoughts of death.
- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs.
- Intense fear of becoming obese with no relationship to actual body weight, purging food or restricting eating.
- Persistent nightmares.
- Threats of self-harm or harm to others.
- Self-injury or self destructive behavior.
- Frequent outbursts of anger, aggression.
- Threats to run away.
- Aggressive or non-aggressive consistent violation of rights of others; opposition to authority, truancy, thefts, or vandalism.
- Strange thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or unusual behaviors. (OVER)

If problems persist over an extended period of time and especially if others involved in the child's life are concerned, consultation with a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other clinician specifically trained to work with children may be helpful.

### **Excerpts from *Your Child on When and Where to Seek Help***

Parents are often in the best position to recognize when their child is having a problem. Even when parents do recognize that their child is having trouble, it is not always apparent that professional help is necessary.

The first step in assessing the cause of your child's difficulty is to ask him. Sometimes, gently asking your child questions *Why are you constantly sad? Why did you steal that toy from Annie's house? You seem upset, is something bothering you? Why are you so mad?* - will reveal the issues with which he's struggling. Giving him adequate time to respond is necessary; talking honestly with your child about his feelings may also be helpful.

Consulting your child's physician or teacher, or your minister, priest, or rabbi may help you identify problems-both in the child and within the family - that could be causing the upset. Frequently, a teacher will notice your child's trouble and call you in. Working together, you can often get the child back on track before schoolwork or social interaction is affected.

As a rule, it is the combination of parents' growing concerns and the observation of outsiders such as teachers, physicians, and family members, that lead parents to consult a clinician for their child. There are a few signs, when present over an extended period time, that indicate that your child has problems which could benefit from treatment.

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## Tips for Parents

1. Learn all you can about typical development of an adolescent. Know what to expect during each stage of development.
2. Learn to listen to your child. What are the meanings behind the words? What feelings is the child trying to convey?
3. When your child shows emotion, listen and restate what he/she said. Then together seek solutions. Model problem solving by brainstorming about possible solutions and getting more information.
4. Take time to do things together. Through activities, adolescents will often open-up and share their thoughts and feelings.
5. Allow privacy but check on your adolescent. Stick your head in their room door. Ask if they want to join you in a game of cards, a walk, a bowl of ice cream.
6. From time to time, try to find a way to relate to what they enjoy (even if you don't like it) like shopping, video games, sports or *their* music.
7. Disallow television sets and computers in spaces that are not available to all family members. Monitor by looking, watching, and paying attention to what sorts of activities your child is involved in during alone times.
8. Make time to connect. Either at mealtime, at bedtime, in the car, or sometime each day, find a little time to look into each other's eyes, show you care, and make yourself available.
9. Talk about your values. You can do this through the daily news, through television shows, or reading together. Talk about those things you believe to be important and want to pass on to your child.
10. Model coping skills. Talk about how you solve problems in front of your child. Some ways may be to take a 15 minute break to calm down, use of exercise, reading, writing in a journal, talking things through, talking to friends, or getting more information to make a decision
11. If there is a sudden dip in grades, mood, or general well-being, find a way to connect with your child and the school. If after a time, this is not successful, seek help..