The increased emotionality of preteens and young teens makes these years very difficult for many parents and their children. Both parents and the teens themselves are distressed by the teens’ emotional outbursts but all have difficulty managing their feelings of distress.

Experts generally agree that the period of extreme emotionality begins at about age 11 or 12. Thirteen- and 14-year-olds are often irritable, excite easily, and are more likely to explode than succeed in controlling their emotions. Fifteen-year-olds, on the other hand, try harder to cover up their feelings and, therefore, are more apt to be moody and withdrawn. By the time teenagers reach about 16 or 17, they are more capable of taking a calmer approach to life and experience fewer worries and far less moodiness.

**Physical Changes and Emotions**

One source of increased emotionality in preteen and teenage children is physical change. The same hormones that set off physical changes at puberty also are responsible for affecting moods and general emotional responses in children. The young teen’s worries about physical changes—height, weight, facial hair, developing breasts in girls, etc.—are also a source of heightened emotions.

Other physical conditions that are not directly related to puberty also can be responsible for the heightened emotionality of teens. Many teenagers, for example, have unconventional meal patterns. Skipping breakfast and fasting to lose weight are common, especially among females. Lack of rest, too, may lead to moodiness and gloominess, irritability, and a tendency to fly-off-the-handle. Some parents have found that making sure their teens eat a well-balanced diet and encouraging adequate rest make emotionality less of a problem. In addition, by explaining the effect of hormones on emotions, some parents help their teens feel less worried about their feelings.

**Changes in Thinking**

Another source of emotionality in young teens is the strain caused by changes in their thinking. New ways of thinking make young teens convinced that everyone is concerned about the same things they are concerned about and everyone is looking at them and talking about them.

While it is fruitless to try to convince the young teen that not everyone is watching or that the feelings they are experiencing have been shared by others, as a parent you may find it helpful to tell your teen that you realize he or she is feeling badly and offer your support and encouragement. You might, for example, say “I’m sorry you’re feeling unhappy. If you would like to talk about what’s troubling you, would be happy to talk with you.”

**Changes in Expectations**

There are also changes in the expectations of people around teens. Any and all of these changes can leave the teen feeling insecure and more emotional. Children who begin to look more like adults also may be expected to behave like adults. The expectation of adult behavior can put tremendous pressure on young teens and lead to emotional outbursts.

During the early teen years, there is considerable concern about learning to behave correctly in social situations, what to talk about, and how to be popular with members of the opposite sex. While learning all this, the teen may be extremely nervous and generally excited. Any incident that makes teens feel like they’ve made a mistake is likely to result in an emotional outpouring complete
Parents who do not push their children toward a particular vocation, but instead offer support, encouragement, and help, can make these worries less troublesome for their child. Helping a teen explore various career possibilities, expressing interest in continued education, training programs, or apprenticeships, and discussing the pros and cons of various career interests are all ways in which you can show encouragement without “pushing” your child.

The emotional storminess of the teenage child is difficult for both the child and parents. Parents who are able to take a calm, sympathetic but firm approach find that they can maintain good relationships with teens most of the time. Parents who are able to say things like, “I’m sorry you are upset; I am getting upset, too, so let’s talk later,” find that they can continue to communicate with their teens without getting ulcers in the process. It is often useful to remind teenagers that it is easier to treat them as adults if they act like adults. And it is very useful to adult parents to remember that they were once teenagers themselves.

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