

PARENTING young teens

Young Teen Development



Parents can find themselves with a growing list of concerns as their children head into the teen years. Children also may be uneasy, awkward, or nervous during this time. Young teens vary greatly in the timing and rate at which they undergo the changes of growing up. Most preteens will show changes in their body, thinking, emotions, and relations with others. Following are some typical changes and individual differences.

Physical changes

Physical growth during the early teen years is more rapid than at any time since infancy. Youth begin to develop bodily characteristics that distinguish the male and female adult. Breast development in girls may start as early as 9 years old or as late as 13 years old. By age 12 years, half of the girls have begun menstruation. In boys, enlargement of the testes begins from age 9 to 13 years. Changes in sexual development usually happen before rapid increase in height. The sexual growth process also can cause skin changes, another source of teen discomfort.

Many pre-teens may feel extremely self-conscious, thinking they don't look right or that everyone is watching them. Girls may have concerns about menstruation and boys may need help understanding that "wet dreams" are normal.

It is important for parents to take their children's feelings seriously and let them know these changes are normal. It's also important for parents to talk with their children about physical changes before they happen.

Emotional changes

Teens show a wider range of moods than younger children or adults. Mood changes are not related to hormonal changes. Instead, areas of the brain that process emotion are changing during the teen years and cause changes in emotion. Stressful life events in the family, in school, or with friends have more impact on teen emotions than hormones or changes in the brain. Moods vary with changing activities and social interactions. For example, a teen may be happy to see his girlfriend, but five minutes later report being bored in math class.

Changes in thinking

By age 11 or 12 years, young teens are able to analyze situations and use reason. They are able to think in terms of what could be rather than merely what is. Teens are able to imagine and reflect more like an adult than as a child.

These abilities can create problems between preteens and their parents. Young teens are apt to question parental rules and values and are often quick to say that something is “unfair.” As a parent, you may find yourself wondering what happened to your happy-go-lucky child who got along well with you.

WHEN YOUR LITTLE GIRL STARTS TO GROW UP

Derrick and Glenda wonder what’s going on with 12-year-old Merea. Always an easy child, Merea got along well with her parents and her younger brother, except for a fight or two. Almost overnight, she has become combative, irritable, and angry at home. She spends hours in her room with the door shut or is constantly text-messaging her friends. What happened to the happy-go-lucky child her parents once knew? Is her behavior normal?

Social changes

Importance of friends. Most children by fourth or fifth grade enjoy spending much of their free time with friends. Friends become even more important during the early teen years. Parents may worry about peer pressure when, in fact, peers can provide a positive influence. Friends with similar values can help your child gain confidence to meet the changes and adjustments of this phase. Young teens at this age also may enjoy having “secret clubs” with no adults around and keeping secrets from parents. This is normal unless there are signs of dangerous behavior.

Some parents are sad that young teens spend less time with the family. While the family continues to be extremely important, some young teens actually seem to be embarrassed to be seen with parents. Parents may feel hurt when their child expresses this feeling, but it is usually a normal sign of independence. When young teens feel more confidence with friends, the feeling often goes away. It is important to let your child know that you still want and expect him or her to spend time with the family. At the same time, help your child know that becoming independent is important. It may be helpful to set aside certain times each week for family activities.

Loss of self-confidence. Some parents are surprised to find that it is common for young teens to lose self-confidence. Their child may appear self-assured or even cocky, but beneath the surface he or she may feel less positive. Not only do they feel physically awkward, but also young teens create ideal images of what they think

they must be. Falling short of that ideal, they worry: “Will I have enough friends?” “Will I make the team?” “Will my body look the way it’s supposed to?”

Individual differences

Just as timing and rate of change differ for any two young teens, a child’s personality and past behavior also affect the experience. A child who does not like change, for example, may have more difficulty with the preteen years.

Parenting tips

Most teens do not present serious problems to their families or get into real trouble. Parental influence remains strong in the teen years. In fact, research shows that young people typically return to the values of their families in young adulthood. The following ideas can ease your child’s transition to the teen years:

- Know that most changes you see in your child are normal.
- Listen to your child and take his or her feelings seriously.
- Work together for solutions when problems arise.
- Talk to parents of older children to gain perspective.
- Schedule regular time for family fun.
- View your child’s growing signs of independence as normal and healthy.

Normal for toddlers is to be curious; normal for preteens is to think for themselves and to do more with friends. The job for preteens is to test the rules, to challenge authority, and to begin to think for themselves. The job of parents is to have firm expectations and continue to show love and respect for their preteen, even when their child challenges their authority, tests their rules, and belittles them. This is no easy task! Reading, going to parenting workshops, and talking to other parents can make the job easier and more fun.

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