Understanding adolescence

Adolescence can be a difficult stage in life—for both teens and their parents. From age 13 through 18, we change physically, emotionally, intellectually and sexually. It can be an exciting, emotionally charged time, but also an exhausting one. Here is some of what you and your teen can expect:



Early to mid-adolescence

Changing relationships. Adolescents often become critical of parents and a bit withdrawn as they feel their way towards greater independence. Friends become more important, and peer group acceptance and support begins to replace family/parental influence.

Sexuality. Estrogen levels are increasing in girls and testosterone in boys, leading to changes in body shape and structure. Although girls are often ahead of boys in sexual development, both become concerned about their sexual attractiveness. It's also normal for boys and girls to experiment sexually—both alone through masturbation, and with partners.

Identity/self-image. This is a time of struggle with identity issues. Adolescents are developing social and civic skills, and trying to define themselves in relation to their community, culture and family. Unfortunately, they often have unrealistic expectations of themselves, which can lead to poor self-esteem.

Physical development/body image. This is a time of major growth and change. Height can increase by 25 per cent and weight by 100 per cent. This often makes adolescents concerned or self-conscious about their appearance.

Testing the limits. As adolescents rebel, they push the limits and often experiment with smoking, alcohol and drugs. The average age for taking up smoking is between 12 and 14, and more than 30 per cent of both girls and boys report being drunk at least once by age 13.

Late adolescence

Changing relationships. As teens mature, they are less self-involved and have greater concern for others. They become better able to compromise and can make decisions independently.

Sexuality. They are more concerned with serious relationships, have a clear sexual identity, and usually have the capacity for tenderness and sensual love.

Identity/self-image. At this stage, most teens are becoming more comfortable with their identity.

Intellectual maturity. As they get closer to adulthood, teens are better able to think ideas through and express their ideas in words.

Helping to ease the transition from childhood to adulthood

Children generally make a healthy transition through adolescence if they have:

- A positive, secure sense of identity
- Strong interpersonal skills
- An interest in learning
- The ability to adapt to change

Parents can help children develop these skills by providing a supportive and stable home environment. Here are some tips on supporting your teen:

- **Don't take it personally.** Withdrawal, moodiness and resistance are normal as teens attempt to separate and individuate.
- **Provide a safe haven.** A warm, supportive environment where adolescents feel the door is always open and someone will always listen will make them feel loved and connected. This builds trust and enables co-operation.
- **Maintain positive communication.** Encourage adolescents to verbalize their feelings and really listen. It's important that teens have a chance to share their feelings and ideas in an accepting, non-judgmental atmosphere.
- **Help your adolescent develop self-esteem.** Encourage and praise often. Try not to dwell on the negative. Promote and support participation in sports and community activities, which have a positive effect on self-esteem.
- **Work with your adolescent to establish boundaries.** They should feel independent but know you are there for guidance. Find a balance between your expectations.
- **Help your child become self-disciplined.** Teach him or her that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand. Give your child more responsibility for his or her personal well-being and that of the family.
- **Connect.** Find time to spend doing what your adolescent enjoys. It’s important to find time to connect one-on-one.
- **Help your teen stay focused on school.** Show an active interest in his or her school subjects, projects and events. Stress the importance of learning and set high, but achievable standards.

What to watch for

All adolescents go through a certain amount of "teen angst" and rebellion. But it’s important to watch for signs that your child is having trouble coping, such as:

Adolescence is a time when children develop their sense of identity. It’s a major transition—first from childhood to adolescence, then from teen to adulthood. It can be emotionally charged and scary for both children and parents. That’s why it’s important that adolescents have a safe, stable and supporting family environment.

- Spending a lot of time in isolation from family and friends
- Sudden changes in school performance
- Drastic mood swings or changes in behaviour
- Changes in your child's peer group or separation from long-time friends
- Lack of interest in hobbies or social and recreational activities