

## Parenting Your Teen

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Adolescence is a time of emotional and physical upheaval, which may strain even the closest of family ties. When parents and teenagers sit down to talk, sometimes they reach an impasse. To the adolescent, it is just another example that adults do not understand what being a teenager today is all about. At times like this, parents may find themselves wondering whether or not they really do understand.

Generally seen to begin at about age 13, at puberty, and continuing through the late teens, adolescence is the process of becoming an adult--physically, emotionally, and socially. One of the first signs of adolescent change is usually physical, with teens discovering a sexually maturing body replacing the immature one with which they had come to feel comfortable. Interest in the opposite sex is also aroused during this time, and sexual preoccupation and experimentation is common. Today's sexual explicitness creates additional stresses for teens to cope with and choices for them to weigh.

Accompanying the vast physical changes is an increase in the intensity and diversity of the teen's emotional feelings. Such rapid physical and emotional development often produces a sense of confusion and bewilderment in the young adult. This may be compounded by society's expectations that the adolescent begin to take on responsibility for self and others. The adolescent often experiences a sense of disorganization, for it is now necessary for she or he to rework the organization of childhood into a new system of adult identity and behavior.

Faced with inconsistency in both their internal and external worlds, teens crave the stability their parents can provide in terms of limit-setting and security. This need, however, is usually subconscious and beyond their actual awareness. What the teen is aware of, though, is her or his need for an identity separate from that of her or his parents. This is the most compelling of all adolescent drives: the establishment of a personal identity. The question of "who am I?" is at the forefront of the young teen's tasks; it creates a push-pull struggle between the need for parental security and the desire for personal independence.

Seemingly rebellious behavior may occur, enabling the adolescent to define individual values apart from parental influence. This rebellion can take place in such non-harmful ways as the choice of one's music, friends, clothing and appearance, condition of one's room, and time spent away from the family. More destructive rebellion, however, can be acted out in terms of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, school truancy, or breaking the law. Parents need to be aware of what is typical and healthy acting out, and

what is indicative of professional intervention.

To outsiders, adolescents caught up in this identity crisis may appear fickle and easily changeable on a day-to-day basis. Mood swings are common. Prolonged periods of depression or social aloofness, however, are "red flags" that should alert parents to more serious psychological problems.

With teenagers trying to separate from the family, parents may feel more like observers than participants in their adolescents' lives. The influence they once had on their children seems to slip through their fingers with each passing day. This can generate mixed feelings in parents. Wanting their child to be more independent, they may, at the same time, be reluctant to allow their daughter or son to make choices that differ from their own. Parents may fear that their adolescent might embarrass them with non-traditional behavior or dress, or that their child's newfound sense of responsibility will make them feel older and less needed. At the same time, adolescents also experience uncertainty about their newly-discovered independence. When either parents or teens are unclear as to the degree of independence appropriate, conflict can arise, with the teen testing limits or acting out.

Diminishing parental influence is in part replaced by the emergence of the peer group. Teens have a strong need to be accepted, liked, and even loved, by their peers. Such relationships are important in that they have a certain liberal quality generally not found with parents. Peer relationships encourage experimentation with new identities, while typically the family does not. However, if adolescents rely too heavily on others in attempting to formulate their sense of self, they will fuse a group identity instead of an individual one. This merely postpones resolution of the "who am I?" question.

Parents do play an important-- albeit different-- role enhancing, rather than impeding, the life tasks faced by their adolescents. To do so they must be willing to stretch their parental relationship in new directions. The family system that worked when their teens were children, needs to shift gears in order to hold up under the strain of adolescent disorganization. Parents must learn to emphasize skills in active listening, limit-setting, trusting, allowing for experimentation, and tolerating differences. It is a difficult challenge to meet, but one with great rewards. If adolescents are given support to ask-- and answer-- their own questions, they will move toward establishing a stable sense of individual identity.

Experimentation is the key. By trying things out, accepting what fits and discarding what does not, the emerging adult begins to find activities, attitudes, values, and people that fit her or his unique sense of self. This leads to the resolution of adolescence, the consistent answering of the "who am I?" question and the development of confidence in oneself and one's way of life.