



PARENTING & CHILD DEVELOPMENT

# Your Teenager

**MANY PARENTS WHO HAVE RAISED TEENAGERS** say the two hardest times in life came when they were a teenager and when they raised a teenager. Adolescence, the period from 13–17 years of age, is a time of energy, passion and emerging identity. During this stage, teenagers’ bodies and minds are growing. As they grow, heredity, culture, health and nutrition will influence developmental changes. Parents and caregivers need to accept that maturing is a natural process. This process helps youth grow toward independence so that as adults, they will be prepared to manage their own feelings, thoughts and actions. Parents often struggle with how to deal with their adolescents. Although your child seems to want little to do with you right now, teenagers still need nurturing, support and guidance to become independent adults.

**Sleep** Even if your child used to wake up fresh and energetic to start the day, you may have noticed that your young teen now finds it difficult to fall asleep at night and is extremely drowsy and difficult to wake in the mornings. Researchers have found that this is because the biological clock of teens shifts forward, creating a “forbidden” zone for sleep around 9 or 10 p.m.

Putting good sleep habits into practice is difficult for teenagers, but not impossible. Sleep experts say getting lots of daylight in the morning and exercising during the day, then dimming the lights at night and sticking to a routine bedtime of 10 p.m., can help to reset the body clock. It may also help to sleep in a cool environment and turn off all electronic devices at least two hours before going bed. While an extra hour of sleep on the weekends can be helpful, if a student is used to getting up at 6:30 a.m., they shouldn’t sleep until noon on the weekend because that will simply confuse their bodies and disrupt their sleep pattern for the following week.

**Nutrition** The body demands more calories during early adolescence than at any other time of life. Calorie needs vary widely based on size and activity level. On average, boys require about 2,800 calories per day and girls require about 2,200 calories per day. Typically, the ravenous hunger starts to decrease once a child has stopped growing, though not always. Kids who are big and tall, or who participate in physical activity, will still need increased amounts of energy into late adolescence. These calories should come from nutrient-rich foods, including grains, fruits, vegetables, protein and dairy products. The amount of fat, especially saturated and trans fat, and sugar should be limited.

Specific nutrients, like iron and calcium, are especially important during the teen years because of the special roles they play in development. Lack of iron can lead to anemia and sluggish feelings during the day, negatively affecting alertness in school, at work and even during athletic participation. Iron intake is especially important for teenage girls, as menstruation depletes iron. Calcium is important for building bone mass during the teen years, which will help prevent osteoporosis and other health problems in the future.

Practicing teen vegetarians can still get adequate nutrition. Calcium sources include calcium sulfate-processed tofu,

leafy green vegetables and soy milk and orange juice fortified with calcium. High-iron vegetables include broccoli, spinach, watermelon and raisins. Vegans should find a vitamin B-12 supplement, although some soy milk has this fortification. You may want to have your teen meet with a nutritionist to learn how to plan well-balanced vegetarian or vegan meals.

**Physical Development** occurs at different rates for everyone. In early teens there is a rapid increase in physical growth. Typically, females mature two years earlier than males. By late teens, both male and female bodies are close to adult size.

▶ As puberty begins, girls have body growth along with the growth of breasts, pubic hair, and underarm hair and may also start menstruating. Boys will have body growth along with the growth of testes, penis, underarm/facial hair, and will have a change in their voice.

**Social and Emotional Development** occurs as teens build a sense of themselves. Typically, teens build relationships with others outside of the family. Teens normally feel great pressure to identify with their peers. To help prevent poor choices due to peer pressure, parents and teens need to be aware of this influence. Research shows that as time spent with family decreases, the amount of conflict with parents increases (Larson & Richards, 1994). Conflict with parents stays high for a few years. Do not take this personally. This is a natural step to independence.

▶ Teens feel greater pressure to develop social relations with peers, and when these social relations happen, teens move further away from their parents, which can create conflict and tension at home  
▶ Struggle with self-doubt such as “What am I good at?”

**Cognitive development** is the ability to think and reason. The part of the brain that deals with decision making while considering options, facts and setting goals continues to grow and mature into our 20s. Teens may not always make the best decisions. Decision making is a skill learned over time. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. Teens often learn by watching others. Teens need good guidance and direction from their support system. They can use step-by-step planning and are able to learn from mistakes. This allows them to make changes to their plans. Involvement in positive activities can help reduce risky behaviors. At this age, teens:

- ▶ Think more flexibly
- ▶ Think through several solutions to a problem
- ▶ Suspend judgement until receiving all information
- ▶ Learn how to seek information
- ▶ Anticipate the probable consequences of alternative actions before choosing them
- ▶ Have a tendency to misinterpret the behavior and motives of others
- ▶ Tend to exaggerate or oversimplify matters
- ▶ Engage in argumentative and rebellious behavior
- ▶ Have trouble with indecisiveness
- ▶ Find fault with authority figures



## SAFETY TIPS FOR TEENS

Parents and caregivers should be aware of special health and safety concerns facing teenagers, such as eating disorders, depression and suicide, and motor vehicle safety.

### **Eating Disorders**

Many teens try to lose weight by eating very little, cutting out whole groups of foods (like “carbs”), skipping meals, and fasting. These methods can leave out important foods their bodies need and negatively impact their health and development. Other weight-loss tactics like smoking, self-induced vomiting, or using diet pills or laxatives can also lead to health problems.

In some cases, eating disorders develop because a teen participates in an activity that values extreme thinness—gymnastics, ballet, or swimming, for example. In other cases the eating disorder is a manifestation of underlying psychological issues, including low self-esteem, poor self-image, family problems, stress, or feelings of not being in control.

Signs of eating disorders include unusual weight loss, preoccupation with food, peculiar eating habits, and menstruation that ceases for three or more consecutive months. These disorders are difficult to treat, often because the person denies that anything is wrong and hides the behavior from friends and family. Nutritional and psychological counseling are required. The earlier treatment is begun, the better the chances for recovery.

## Depression and Suicide

It can be difficult to tell the difference between the ups and downs that are just part of being a teenager and teen depression. Talk with your teen. Try to determine whether he or she seems capable of managing challenging feelings, or if life seems overwhelming. Some signs that your teen may be struggling with depression include:

- ▶ Feelings of sadness, which can include crying spells for no apparent reason
- ▶ Irritability, frustration or feelings of anger, even over small matters
- ▶ Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- ▶ Loss of interest in, or conflict with, family and friends
- ▶ Feelings of worthlessness, guilt, fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame or self-criticism
- ▶ Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure, and the need for excessive reassurance
- ▶ Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- ▶ Ongoing sense that life and the future are grim and bleak
- ▶ Frequent thoughts of death, dying or suicide
- ▶ Tiredness and loss of energy
- ▶ Insomnia or sleeping too much
- ▶ Changes in appetite, such as decreased appetite and weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain
- ▶ Use of alcohol or drugs
- ▶ Agitation or restlessness—for example, pacing, hand-wringing or an inability to sit still
- ▶ Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- ▶ Frequent complaints of unexplained body aches and headaches, which may include frequent visits to the school nurse
- ▶ Poor school performance or frequent absences from school
- ▶ Neglected appearance— such as mismatched clothes and unkempt hair
- ▶ Disruptive or risky behavior
- ▶ Self-harm, such as cutting, burning, or excessive piercing or tattooing

If these symptoms continue or begin to interfere in your teen's life, talk to a doctor or a mental health professional trained to work with adolescents. Your teen's family doctor or pediatrician is a good place to start. Or your teen's school may recommend someone.

Depression symptoms likely won't get better on their own—and they may get worse or lead to other problems if untreated. Depressed teenagers may be at risk of suicide, even if signs and symptoms don't appear to be severe. Take all talk of suicide seriously.

*If your teen is having suicidal thoughts, get help right away. Here are some steps you can take:*

- ▶ Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) or TTY800-799-4889 to reach a trained counselor, or encourage your teen to do so.
- ▶ Seek help from your doctor, a mental health provider or other health care professional.
- ▶ Reach out to family members, friends or spiritual leaders for support as you seek treatment for your teen.

If you think your teen is in immediate danger of self-harm or attempting suicide, make sure someone stays with him or her. Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately. Or if you think you can do so safely, take your teen to the nearest hospital emergency department.

## Motor Vehicle Safety

In the United States, car accidents are the leading cause of death in teenagers. Parents and caregivers should make sure that teens wear safety belts at all times whenever they travel in a car, and should set a good example by wearing their safety belt as well.

### **The following tips can help reduce the risk for a serious or fatal crash involving teenagers:**

- ▶ Consider enrolling your teen in an additional driving instruction program.
- ▶ Limit unsupervised driving for the first six months after your teen gets his or her license (e.g., restrict teen passengers, night driving, and driving in adverse conditions).
- ▶ Provide plenty of opportunities for your teen to practice driving with supervision under different conditions (e.g., parking lots, side streets, busy streets, highways, daytime, nighttime or light rain) and continue to ride with your teen to monitor his or her progress.
- ▶ Institute a zero tolerance policy for drinking and driving. Tell your teen never to ride with a driver who is impaired by alcohol or other drug use. Instead, instruct him or her to call you for a ride. Let your teen know that they can call you for a ride at any time.

- ▶ Avoid distractions while driving including:
  - **Texting** Texting on a cell phone or a handheld device is the most alarming practice because it involves all three types of distraction: visual, mental and manual.
  - **Talking on cell phones** Research shows even drivers who use hands free devices have dramatically reduced field of vision and slower response times while driving.
  - **Talking to passengers** For teen drivers, the more passengers in the car, the higher the chances of distraction.
  - **Teens should also avoid:**
    - Grooming (e.g., putting on makeup, shaving, combing your hair, etc.)
    - Eating and drinking (e.g., a cup of coffee, sandwich, etc.)
    - Reading, including maps
    - Using a PDA or navigation system, such as a GPS
    - Changing the radio station, CD, or Mp3 player
    - Listening to a video playing in the backseat



## Positive Parenting Tips that Promote Good Behavior in Teens

Teens need positive, caring adults to provide consistent support, guidance, praise and encouragement, as well as a safety net. By supporting them as they mature, you allow teens room to develop their own sense of identity. Teens will gradually gain confidence in their ability to make decisions, but they need to know they can still turn to you for advice.

### To help your teen develop and grow independent, parents and caregivers should:

- ▶ Listen to their teens and try to understand their feelings
- ▶ Talk to teens in a friendly open way
- ▶ Help teens set and achieve realistic goals
- ▶ Expose teens to diversity and demonstrate how to accept differences
- ▶ Help identify possible issues while encouraging teens to practice their decision making skills by:
  - Encouraging teens to consider the consequences of their actions, both good and bad
  - Discussing pros and cons of specific decisions
- ▶ Help teens bounce back from poor choices

It is vital to have good communication with teens. Good communication builds strong relationships. It takes effort to communicate so that everyone is understood. Research from Penn State shares the acronym **RECIPE** for better communication with adolescents:

**R - REFLECTIVE LISTENING.** Truly listen to what the other person is saying. Repeat back what you think they said, either exactly or in your own words. By repeating or rephrasing what the speaker said, the speaker knows they have been heard.

**E - ENCOURAGE AND UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.** Consider what they are trying to express to you by putting yourself in their “shoes.”

**C - COMPROMISE AND COOPERATE WITH EACH OTHER.** Find ways to work together rather than argue.

**I - “I” MESSAGES KEEP PEOPLE FROM FEELING BLAMED.** They help you express your own feelings rather than focusing on the behavior of the other person. For example: “I get very worried when you don’t answer your phone when I call” is better for maintaining healthy communication than “You NEVER answer your phone when I call”.

**P - PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!** Good communication is difficult to learn. Expect it to take time to get it right and allow other family members to get it right as well.

**E - ENGAGEMENT.** Pay full attention to the person speaking to you. It is difficult to hear what is really said if you are doing something else. (Can you really watch television and listen to someone?)

### HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources on pages 72–78** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.