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An important part of parenting involves knowing what to expect from your child at any given age. As they grow, children change and acquire skills, and they require different things from you. This section highlights some of the things you might expect to see in your adolescent. Adolescents present special challenges to parents, with issues including school and career decisions; friends and social relationships; and heightened safety concerns, particularly regarding alcohol and drug use, and risk-taking behaviors.
inside the adolescent mind

IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT AS YOUR CHILD BECOMES AN ADOLESCENT, HE OR SHE WILL BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT THINGS DIFFERENTLY FROM THE WAY HE OR SHE DID AS A CHILD. For example, some parents feel that their adolescents suddenly become more argumentative. However, it may be that they are simply becoming better at arguing. As children move into their adolescent years, their ability to think about more possibilities increases. When they are younger, they may be able to come up with only one or two reasons for not cleaning their rooms when their parents tell them to. As they get older, they are able to come up with many more reasons they shouldn’t clean their rooms, and those reasons become more complex. Because teenagers can argue more effectively, arguments will likely go on longer and be harder to counter.

Adolescents also tend to think that other people are intensely interested in their appearance and behavior. In other words, they often feel that they have an “imaginary audience” watching them. This results in the self-consciousness that is characteristic of adolescence. It may account for the long hours devoted to minor details in their appearance as well as the explosive and often out-of-proportion reactions when they feel their appearance is not “perfect.” Imagine what you would feel like if you thought the whole world would criticize you if your hair was not styled just right.

In addition, many adolescents feel that they are special and unique, so much so that none of life’s difficulties or problems will affect them, regardless of their behavior. Psychologists think this attitude might help explain some of the risks many adolescents take. Even knowing about the dangers of such risk-taking (e.g., driving too fast, smoking, having unprotected sex), they believe the negative consequences they learn about happening to others won’t happen to them. For example, a typical adolescent might believe, “Smoking causes cancer, but not in me.”

Finally, while younger children think about themselves and those around them in concrete ways, adolescents are capable of thinking about how things could be. For example, an adolescent can compare what he or she observes you to be and what an ideal version of you as a parent would look like. You may not measure up to that ideal, and your adolescent may come to see you as somehow “flawed.” The good news is that, for the most part, children grow to see that there is no such thing as an ideal parent, and they come around, once again, to accept parents as they are.

In addition to being able to conceive of an ideal parent, teenagers can conceive of an ideal self. In much the same way that they might compare their parents to their ideal versions of parents, they can compare themselves to ideal versions of themselves. And, again, they cannot measure up to ideals, so teens feel there is something wrong with them. Psychologists believe this comparison to ideals might be a factor contributing to the marked increase in depression rates seen during adolescence. But, again, there is good news. As teens emerge from adolescence, they become more comfortable accepting that while they can conceive of an ideal self, no one is perfect.
Physical and Mental Health of Your Teenager

There are many aspects of your teen’s physical health. One is nutrition, which will be discussed in the next section. Another is exercise and fitness. Medical experts recommend that all teenagers get 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical exercise per day. Not only does physical activity benefit the body, but it affects the mind as well. Exercise encourages the body’s production of endorphins, chemicals that cause a person to feel more peaceful and happy. In addition, exercise usually helps teenagers sleep better.

If a teen has a parent with a psychiatric disability, another concern is that the teen might inherit that psychiatric disability. While there is evidence that children of parents with psychiatric disabilities have an increased risk of developing social, emotional or behavioral problems, there is certainly no guarantee that this will be the case. If your teen is concerned about this issue, it might be helpful to talk about it and assure her or him of this fact. In addition, researchers have continually found that the environment a child grows up in is just as important as her or his genetic makeup. You can do a great deal to foster resilience in your child and help him or her stay well physically and emotionally. For example, you can teach your teenager by example that eating healthy foods, exercising, sleeping well and staying physically healthy are important for maintaining emotional and mental health.
Healthy Eating

Good Nutrition is Crucial to Your Adolescent's Development. Not Only Is Healthy Eating Important for Growth, But Getting the Right Nutrition Will Make Your Teenager Feel Good.

Adolescents often experience a surge in appetite around age 10 in girls and age 12 in boys. This is a signal that puberty (and a corresponding growth spurt) is about to begin. It may seem that your adolescent is hungry all the time because during this time of early adolescence, her or his body requires more calories than it will at any other time of life. As your adolescent gets older, this hunger should diminish, and you should find that he or she is eating about the same amount as an adult would eat. But just as adults have challenges with healthy eating habits, your adolescent may as well. Be careful of the following:

- **Skipping Meals** — Adolescents are notorious for taking a little extra time to sleep in the morning and skipping breakfast. A way to handle this might be to find food your child can carry while going to school — a cup of yogurt, a hard-boiled egg or a bagel. You can prepare a breakfast-to-go the evening before.

- **Snacking** — Make sure to keep your kitchen stocked with healthy snacks instead of snacks such as chips and candy. Healthy snacks include cut-up carrots or celery, apples, grapes, yogurt and cheese sticks.

- **Eating at School or with Friends** — Now that your child is older, he or she will eat many meals outside the home. Without adult supervision, he or she may make poor choices about what to eat. Try talking to your adolescent about making healthy nutritional choices. Encourage your teen to be mindful of the choices he or she makes at the school cafeteria and at fast-food restaurants.
By now, your adolescent has been in school long enough to understand the expectations of his or her teachers and school. But school-related issues can still arise. Your adolescent might have difficulty concentrating in school or might not get homework done in a timely manner. There might be an issue with a particular teacher or classmate. There might be problems between your child and his or her peers. Addressing these issues quickly is the best way to keep them from escalating and prevent stressful situations.

Below are some tips for helping your teenager excel in school:

- **STUDY HABITS** — High school is a time for perfecting study habits in preparation for college or other post-secondary education. Make sure your teenager develops good study habits and gets homework done in a timely manner. Praise your teen when she or he does well, and point out that hard work pays off.

- **HOMEWORK** — Make sure your teenager has a quiet place where she or he can do homework. Keep the TV off during homework time, and try to monitor Internet use if your teen needs to work on the computer. Set aside a fair amount of time for homework, and have that be the same time every day if possible.

- **DEMONSTRATE INTEREST IN YOUR CHILD’S LEARNING EXPERIENCE** — From an early age, you need to emphasize the importance of learning and a love for knowledge. Once your child becomes a teenager, continue to encourage him or her to go to the library and the bookstore. If you can, buy or lease a computer so your child can do research and word processing for school.

- **BE INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOL** — You should not stop being involved in your child’s school just because he or she is older. It is still important to communicate with your child’s teachers and to attend back-to-school night and school conferences. If any notes about your adolescent come home from the school, make sure you are responsive and helpful. When your child sees that you are committed to his or her education, he or she will be as well.
As your child gets older, she or he likely will be involved in activities through school, a community center or your religious organization. It is important for kids to be involved in extracurricular activities, which provide outlets as children grow and develop. If your kids are involved in activities, you may have a little more free time. Be careful not to overschedule your child, though, because that only increases stress for you and your child.

If your adolescent is involved in sports or other activities, remember that the emphasis should be on having fun and getting exercise, not on competing and winning. Your child should never feel pressured to be involved in an activity or sport if he or she feels there isn’t enough time for it on top of homework and other responsibilities. That said, in most cases, having physical outlets helps adolescents concentrate on their homework later. There are many creative ways to achieve the necessary balance between schoolwork and extracurricular activities. One way is to talk to your adolescent’s coach about this issue to see if practices or other sports-related demands can be minimized.

Another way to get your adolescent excited about extracurricular activities is to get involved in the community or in a sport or fitness activity with him or her. Doing these activities together can help keep the momentum going when things get stressful.
During adolescence, children seek greater independence and often look for ways to earn money. If you can afford to give your child an allowance for taking care of some household responsibilities, this helps not only you but also your teenager. When your child is a young adolescent, you can teach her or him about the importance of saving money for special items she or he may want later. Allowing an older teenager to make financial decisions gives her or him a sense of control and independence.

Ideas for teaching money management skills:

- **GIVE A WEEKLY OR MONTHLY ALLOWANCE** — This requires your adolescent to budget money over a longer period of time.
- **PROVIDE AN INCENTIVE TO SAVE** — Give your teenager an incentive to save money by matching the savings in his or her account.
- **CONSIDER A CONTRIBUTION TO BILLS** — You might want your adolescent to contribute to a family bill or to pay for his or her own bills, such as those for car insurance and a cell phone.
- **TEACH BUDGETING** — Even if your child is too young to have a checkbook or a credit card, show him or her how to keep track of spending and savings.
- **OPEN A SAVINGS ACCOUNT FOR YOUR TEEN** — Allow him or her to be responsible for deposits and withdrawals, with some periodic monitoring, and encourage your teen to save for expenses such as a car or education.
When your adolescent was younger, you had to focus on safety measures such as childproofing your living space and making sure she or he had the right car seat. Now that your child is a teenager, you need to focus on issues over which you have less control — which websites your child visits; whether she or he will choose to use cigarettes, drugs or alcohol; and how safe she or he will be when driving a car. While it is important to allow your child the opportunity to be more independent as she or he grows, it is also important to teach skills so your teen makes safe and healthy choices.

**INTERNET SAFETY**

- Limit the amount of time your teenager uses the computer each day.
- Keep the computer in a common area of the home so you can more easily monitor your adolescent’s online activities.
- Use software to help you track your teenager’s Internet use.
- Talk to your teenager often about Internet safety, and tell your teen to come to you if he or she encounters anything online that seems suspicious.
- If there are sites your teenager is not allowed to visit, make that clear.
- Keep Internet guidelines near the computer, and review them with your teenager.
- Guidelines should include that your teen should never reveal personal information such as her or his address, phone number, birth date, school name or location. She or he should use only a screen name. She or he should never agree to meet in person with anyone she or he spoke with in a chat room.
- Learn about the computer so you are knowledgeable about the sites your adolescent visits.
- Learn how to block objectionable material, or ask for a friend’s help in doing so.
- If your teen is ever harassed or threatened online, she or he should know to write down any identifying information about the harasser but should not respond to the message. She or he should tell you or another trusted adult about harassment or threats. You should report the incident to the Internet service provider and then to the CyberTipline of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which will forward the report to the appropriate federal law enforcement agency. Reports can be made at [www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline](http://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline) or by calling (800) 843-5678.
MOST TEENAGERS CAN’T WAIT TO GET THEIR DRIVER’S PERMITS OR LICENSES. But experts have expressed concern that developmentally, some teenagers may not be ready to drive. Statistics show disproportionately high rates of automobile accidents, injuries and fatalities among teenagers. This poor safety record is most likely due to lack of experience driving, particularly in difficult conditions, such as bad weather. But it could also be associated with teenagers’ stage of development. It may be that teenagers do not have the motor coordination or the judgment to drive effectively. You can take steps to teach your teenager to be safe on the road:

• **PRACTICE DRIVING WITH YOUR TEENAGER (A LOT!)** — Most school and private driving programs provide about six hours of driving time, but the amount of experience necessary to achieve proficiency is more like 50 hours.

• **USE A GRADUATED SYSTEM FOR YOUR CHILD’S LICENSE** — The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend that teenagers have unrestricted licenses until they are 18 even though some states allow unrestricted licenses sooner. Other states have provisional or restricted licenses for 16- and 17-year-olds. For instance, when it is dark, an adult must be in the car with them. If your state does not have a restricted system, you can develop one with your teen.

• **BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL** — As a parent, you are an important role model for your teenager in how to be a good driver. Whether your teen is in the car with you or not, don’t text or talk on the phone while driving, always wear your seat belt, don’t drink alcohol and drive, don’t speed, and don’t commit road rage.
CIGARETTES: Studies have shown that 90% of adult smokers started smoking when they were adolescents. Even though many adolescents know about the risks of tobacco use, it is imperative that parents continue talking with them about the dangers and discourage smoking. What else can you do as a parent?35

• Be a role model for your child. If you smoke, admit to your child that you have made a mistake, and quit. While quitting may take time and support, your teenager will undoubtedly be encouraged by your efforts.
• Encourage your kids to get involved in activities that prohibit or discourage smoking, such as sports programs.
• Talk about ways to handle peer pressure to smoke, and encourage your teen to question friendships with people who don’t understand his or her decision not to smoke.
• Develop rules for your household that ban smoking and other tobacco use.

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL: By the time your child is a teenager, he or she is likely to know kids who use alcohol or drugs.36 Drugs and alcohol are available in every school, from the richest districts to the poorest. Recent studies show that the average age of first drug use is 13 and that the average age of first alcohol use is 12. In addition, more than 50% of high school seniors have tried drugs, and 33% of them have tried a drug other than marijuana.37

• There are many reasons kids use drugs and alcohol, such as a lack of motivation, unhappiness, dissatisfaction, depression and anxiety, boredom, socialization problems, peer pressure, and experimentation.38 How can you as a parent help your adolescent deal with these pressures so he or she does not turn to substance abuse?
• Get involved with your adolescent, his or her friends, and his or her school. Many kids who try drugs and alcohol do so because their friends are also using substances. Get to know your child’s friends’ parents as well.39
• Pay attention to how your adolescent is feeling, and listen to him or her in a nonjudgmental way. Encourage open communication between all members of your family, and answer your teen’s concerns and questions as honestly as possible.40
• If you suspect that your child is making friends with kids who use drugs and alcohol, encourage new friends and new interests. Try not to put down or criticize old friends; just encourage your teen to make new friends.41
• Treat any emotional or addiction problems by seeing a mental health professional, especially one who encourages your teen to allow some sessions and communication with you.42
• Be a good role model. Make sure you aren’t modeling substance abuse behaviors for your child by engaging in them yourself.43
your adolescent’s privacy needs

AS YOUR CHILD BECOMES AN ADOLESCENT, IT IS NORMAL FOR HER OR HIM TO WANT MORE PRIVACY. You may find that your teen would rather spend more time talking with friends than with you. Your teenager may also become more private about her or his developing body.

It is important to respect your child’s need for privacy. Encourage your teenager when she or he does want to talk to you about school, sports or activities, friends, or whatever is on her or his mind, but do not push your child to disclose things she or he may not be comfortable discussing. Also, be careful not to create overly rigid rules for your adolescent — she or he might end up rebelling.

If you treat your teen with respect but continually stress that you are there for her or him and show genuine interest, your relationship should have fewer problems.
All children, no matter how old they are, are affected by their peers. But as children become teenagers, changes occur. Even though teenagers are growing more independent, they also do not want to appear different from their peers. A desire to fit in may lead your teen to feel pressured to do something he or she might not want to do. Obviously, this kind of situation creates stress in your household. The more positive peer influences you can promote with your child, the less stress you and your teen will experience.

Peer influence can be positive.

- Peers can set good examples for one another — for example, doing well in school, aspiring to go to college, playing sports or playing instruments.
- Peers can offer feedback and advice.
- Peers can help one another try out their socialization skills.
- Peers can be encouraging and help one another get involved in new activities.

What can you do to help your teenager when peer influence is not healthy?

- Help your teen come up with other activities she or he enjoys. For instance, instead of allowing your teen to go to a big party where she or he thinks there will be drinking, encourage her or him to invite a small group of friends over to watch a movie.
- Use role playing to help your child practice being assertive.
- Suggest to your teenager that true friends don’t put pressure on one another and that she or he should not be afraid to lose a destructive friendship.
- Encourage your teen to stand up for what he or she believes in and to trust his or her instincts.
As your Adolescent Nears Age 18, it is Important to Help Him or Her Focus on Plans for the Future. Does your teen want to continue his or her education in a college or university? Does he or she want to join the armed forces? Work at a job or attend a vocational training program? There are many important decisions for your teen to make at this age, and they depend heavily on your teen’s skills and abilities, your teen’s interests, and your financial situation. Teens at this age often need guidance from their parents in identifying their vocational strengths and in learning how those strengths could be translated into continued education or careers. Spend some time talking to your teen about what interests him or her and how he or she might be able to translate that interest into a career path that is financially secure. If you need assistance, you should consult with the guidance counselor at your adolescent’s high school. Consultants who work outside the school, and charge fees, can also advise you about getting your teen into college and can do career counseling with your teen, focusing on her or his interests and skills.

If your teen is a strong student, it may be wise for him or her to take Advanced Placement classes in high school. If your teen scores high on Advanced Placement exams, he or she might be able to receive college credit. If your teen has difficulty in school, the teen years are a time for him or her to seek tutoring and other support for learning. This will be helpful if your teen continues his or her education past high school, and it will help alleviate some stress during high school.
Parenting adolescents can be both extremely demanding and extremely rewarding. Every day brings something new and exciting, but it also brings new challenges for parents. Helping adolescents balance family, school and peers while developing a sense of independence can set the stage for tackling new decisions as they arise. Taking time and understanding the unique needs of children in this age group will undoubtedly help you enjoy this special time of life and handle the challenges with confidence.
homework

1. What do you think are your child’s strengths?

2. What makes him or her unique?

3. Which of the topics covered in this section provided new and/or helpful information for you?

4. What do you think is the most challenging aspect of parenting your child?

5. List at least three activities you might engage in to help promote your child’s positive development?
endnotes


http://tusupportsmoms.org/