



adolescent development

Adolescence can be a difficult time for both teens and their parents. During adolescence, a teenager experiences not only physical changes but emotional changes as well. Parents can help their teens through this time of transition by better understanding the changes their teens are experiencing.

Physical Changes in Adolescents

When teens are experiencing physical changes they are often referred to as “going through puberty.” This is when “internal changes begin—organs grow and adult hormones appear” (Philipp and Small, p.1; 1993). Puberty can begin as early as age 8 for girls and age 10 for boys. Girls continue growing until ages 17-18 and boys continue growing until ages 20-21 (Philipp and Small, p.1; 1993).

It is important to note that youth begin going through puberty at different ages and while some rush through it, others may take longer and this is completely normal. In addition, it is critical for parents to understand that “puberty does not mean maturity” (Philipp and Small, p.1; 1993). So while your teen may look like an adult, understand that they are unable to act like an adult.

What physical changes can you expect your teen to experience during puberty:

- An increase in height and or weight
- Possible picky and or unhealthy eating habits: skipping meals or fasting (Philipp and Small, p.1, 1997)
- Development of acne (effects about 85% of all teenagers)
- Clumsiness associated with growth spurts
- Facial and body hair in boys and breast development in girls
- Menstruation in girls and nocturnal emissions for boys
- (Philipp and Small, p.1-3; 1993).

Parents can help make the physical changes their teens experience less frightening and stressful by preparing their teens before the changes actually occur: “Children need to know about puberty before it begins” (Philipp and Small, p.2; 1993).

Other ways to help your teen deal with their physical changes: 1) Be available to talk with your teen as *issues arise* without making a big deal about them; 2) Try *bringing up important topics* when there is a good opportunity, for example your teen shares a story about a student at school who is rumored to be sexually active (Philipp and Small, p.4; 1993).

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Emotional Changes in Adolescence

Emotional changes that adolescents experience are related to the biological, cognitive and social changes that they experience (Philipp and Small, p.1, 1997). Teens are often described as “moody” and this behavior can be stressful for parents. Increased emotionality in teenagers can be attributed to:

- Physical changes associated with puberty;
- Changes in the way they think (i.e. cognition): they are more able to think abstractly and consider hypothetical situations;
- Teens often think that everyone is concerned about the same things they are;
- Teens are convinced that others are looking at them and talking about them;
- Teens must deal with the expectations of others, which can be confusing: For example: 1) Being required to pay adult movie ticket fares but not allowed to watch R-rated films until they are 17 or older; 2) Being able to drive at age 16, fight for their country at age 18, but not able to drink alcohol until they are 21 (Philipp and Small, p.1, 1997).
- Teens must deal with their social environment, i.e.: pressure to act more mature or take on more responsibility; they may become interested in dating and may act in certain ways to attract someone they want to date (Philipp and Small, p.1-2, 1997).

It is important to understand that “The expectations of adult behavior along with the restrictions for childhood may put tremendous pressure on young teens and lead to emotional uncertainty” (Philipp and Small, p.2, 1997).

So, what can parents do to help their teen with emotional changes?

- Understand that while your teen may have very different preferences in music and clothing, they look to you for direction in developing values – so express your values clearly.
- Keep in mind that parents who begin allowing their children to make decisions appropriate to their age (i.e. choosing outfits to wear at age four and deciding when to do chores at age eleven) are less like to have teenagers demanding “freedom.”
- Keep lines of communication open; offer support and assistance when the teen requests it (Philipp and Small, p.3-4, 1997).

While adolescence can be a challenging time, “parents who are able to take a calm, sympathetic but firm approach usually find that they can maintain good relationships with their teens, most of the time” (Philipp and Small, p.4, 1997).

Compiled from the following resources:

Living with Your Teenager: Understanding Physical Changes, by Mark C. Philipp and Stephen A. Small, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, NCR118, Rev. August 1993.

Living with Your Teenager: Understanding Emotional Changes by Mark C. Philipp and Stephen A. Small, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, NCR 120, Revised 1997.

Prepared by Jinnifer P. Gibbs, MS, CFLE, Children, Youth and Family Extension Educator at Michigan State University Extension, July-2005

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