

Navigating the Teen Years: Tips for Parents

Adolescence is the time between childhood and adulthood that children go through many physical and emotional changes. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents navigate adolescence. Teen is used in this publication to refer to adolescents, teenagers, preteens, and tweens.

Start of Adolescence

The physical changes of adolescence begin with puberty, which usually starts between 8 and 13 years of age (girls) or 10 and 14 years of age (boys). Although these years can be challenging, it is rewarding to watch teens transition into independent, caring, and responsible adults.

Navigating the Teen Years

Keep in mind that every teen is different. It may take time to learn the best way to support your teen during adolescence. Here are some tips to help guide you.

- **Spend family time with your teen.** Although many teens may seem more interested in friends, this does not mean they lack interest in family. Let your teen pick a family meal or family activity. It is OK to require your teen to participate in family activities, provided this is balanced with allowing them private time and time with friends.
- **Spend time alone with your teen.** Even if your teen does not want time alone with you, remind them often that you are available to listen or talk. Create opportunities for one-on-one time, like offering car rides, going to your teen's favorite restaurant, or doing a hobby together.
- **Pay attention to your teen.** Set a time without distractions that is good for both of you. Watch as well as listen. Try not to interrupt. Ask for more details if you don't understand.
- **Respect your teen.** It's OK to disagree with your teen, but disagree respectfully. Don't dismiss their feelings or opinions. You may not always be able to help when your teen is upset about something, but it is important to say "I want to understand" or "Help me understand." Don't be afraid to share mistakes you've made as a parent or as a teen.
- **Be willing to negotiate and compromise.** This will teach problem-solving in a healthy way. Your teen may offer a solution to a conflict that you had not considered. Remember to choose your battles. Let go of the little things that may not be worth a big fight.
- **Comment on a behavior, not an attitude.** For example, say "I worry about your safety when you're late. I trust you, but when I don't hear from you and don't know where you are, I worry. What can we do together to help you get home on time and make sure I know where you are or when you're going to be late?" instead of "You're late. That's so irresponsible. And I don't like your attitude."
- **Be patient and positive when your teen doesn't do what you ask.** Your teen needs to know how you feel when they are not doing what you want them to do. Remember to offer guidance when needed. Direct the discussion toward solutions. Be sure to mix in positive feedback—for example, "I'm proud you are able to hold a job and get your homework done. I also need your help with the dishes after meals."
- **Let your teen be a teen.** Give your teen some leeway with clothes, hairstyle, music, and other forms of expression. Many teens go through a period of self-exploration. They want to express themselves in ways that differ from those of their parents. However, be aware of the messages and ratings of the music, movies, and video games your teen is exposed to.

- **Be a parent first, not a friend.** Your teen's separation from you as a parent is a normal part of development. Don't take it personally. When rules are needed, set and enforce them. Don't be afraid to be unpopular for a day or two. Believe it or not, teens see setting limits as a form of caring.
- **Ask for advice.** Talk with your teen's doctor if you need advice on how to talk with or get along with your teen.

Importance of Well-child Visits

Well-child visits (annual health supervision visits) are especially important during adolescence. Aside from all the physical changes, including growth spurts and sexual maturation, adolescents also are developing intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Your teen's doctor will make sure your teen is on a healthy track and suggest necessary changes to get on track and how to stay on track. Annual well-child visits also ensure that your teens are up-to-date with their immunizations. For instance, 3 routine vaccines given at the 11- or 12-year well-child visit are human papillomavirus (HPV), tetanus-diphtheria–acellular pertussis (Tdap), and meningococcal vaccines.

- HPV vaccine prevents infection against viruses associated with many cancers, including cervical cancer.
- Tdap vaccine helps protect against diphtheria, tetanus (lockjaw), and pertussis (whooping cough).
- Meningococcal vaccine protects against very serious bacterial diseases that affect the blood, brain, and spinal cord.

Also, teens who did not receive all their routine immunizations when younger need catch-up vaccines.

For More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org

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