



Teen Cognitive Development

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What is Teen Cognitive Development?

Most adults recognize that teens have better thinking skills than younger children. These advances in thinking can be divided into several areas:

- Developing advanced reasoning skills. Advanced reasoning skills include the ability to think about multiple options and possibilities. It includes a more logical thought process and the ability to think about things hypothetically. It involves asking and answering the question, “what if...?”
- Developing abstract thinking skills. Abstract thinking means thinking about things that cannot be seen, heard, or touched. Examples include things like faith, trust, beliefs and spirituality. This often shapes adolescent motivation, beliefs, morals, and values, which may differ from parents/family or caregivers.
- Developing the ability to think about thinking is a process known as “meta -cognition.” Meta-cognition allows teens to think about how they feel and what they are thinking. It involves being able to think about how one is perceived by others. It can also be used to develop strategies, also known as mnemonic devices, for improving learning. One example of a mnemonic device might include remembering the notes on the lines of a music staff (e, g, b, d and f) through the phrase “every good boy does fine”.
<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=cognitive-development-in-adolescence-90-P01594>
- Developing the ability and skills to think toward the future. Futuristic thinking involves systematically considering potential goals, aspirations, or desires for the coming months or years. It requires logical thought and

consideration toward how one’s actions, words, or decisions may influence future outcomes, impacting oneself or others. While younger children/early adolescents tend to focus on the past or present (e.g., “what happened in the past?”) what is happening right now?”) and act on impulse, teenagers begin to develop the ability and skills to think ahead (e.g., “what could happen?”), envisioning possible future or long-term effects of their choices or behaviors.

How Do These Changes Affect Teens?

- Teens demonstrate a heightened level of self-consciousness. Teens tend to believe that everyone is as concerned with their thoughts and behaviors as they are. This leads teens to believe that they have an “imaginary audience” of people who are always watching them.
- Teens tend to believe that no one else has ever experienced similar feelings and emotions. They may become overly dramatic in describing things that are upsetting to them. They may say things like “You’ll never understand,” or “My life is ruined!”
- Teens tend to exhibit the “it can’t happen to me” syndrome, also known as a “personal fable.” This belief causes teens to take unnecessary risks like drinking and driving (“I won’t crash this car”), having unprotected sex (I can’t possibly get pregnant), or smoking (I can’t possibly get cancer”).
- Teens tend to become “cause-oriented”. Their activism is related to the ability to think about abstract concepts. After reading about cruelty to animals, a teen may become a vegetarian and a member of “People for the Ethical

Treatment of Animals” (P.E.T.A.). Another teen may become active in “Green Peace” or “Save the Whales” campaigns.

- Teens tend to exhibit a “justice” orientation. They are quick to point out inconsistencies between adults’ words and their actions. They have difficulty seeing shades of gray. They see little room for error.
- Teens may become involved in many hobbies or clubs. In an attempt to find out what they are good at, teens may try many activities. Teens’ interests are also influenced and change quickly, depending on social pressure or trends. Today they are into yoga, and tomorrow they are into soccer.
- Teens may begin to interact with parents as people. Even though they may not want to be seen with parents in public, teens may begin to view parents more as people. They may ask more questions about how a parent was when he or she was a teen. They may attempt to interact with adults more as equals.

What can you do?

- Don’t take it personally when teens discount your experience. Try to empathize with their limited understanding and listen to their concerns. Enlist the help of an older sibling or friend to give good advice to the teen if needed.
- Get teens involved in discussing rules and consequences. Teens should take a more active role in determining how they should behave. Their advanced reasoning skills make it easier for them to generate realistic consequences for their actions. Listen to their ideas!
- If your teens like to take risks, consider providing opportunities to participate in controlled risky behavior. Get teens involved in properly supervised extreme sports, such as rock climbing. Such activities will allow teens opportunities to play out their “it can’t happen to me” mentality in an environment that won’t be deadly if they fail.

- Provide opportunities for teens to get involved in community service. Teens want to become active in things that have deeper meaning. Suggest they volunteer at a homeless shelter, walk dogs for the animal shelter, or take meals to the elderly. Talk with them about their experiences.
- Talk to teens about their views and be open to discussing your own. Find out what they think about news stories on television or in the paper; ask them about their political and spiritual beliefs. Teens are already thinking about these things, so give them a nonthreatening forum for discussing them. Honor their opinions in the same way you would a good friend. Show your respect for him/her as a person even when you disagree.
- Try to build a genuine relationship with teens. Let them know what you were like as a teen. Talk to them about your mistakes and vulnerabilities. Try to understand their feelings and express yours to facilitate understanding.
- Praise teens for their efforts as well as their abilities. This will help teens stick with activities instead of giving up if they are not immediately successful.
- Help teens explore career goals and options. Take teens to work so they can see what adults do. Set up opportunities for them to “job shadow” others. Ask them questions about their future career goals. Remember that figuring out what they don’t want to do is just as important as figuring out what they like!
- Give teens an opportunity to establish their behavior guidelines and consequences. Allow teens to have input into curfew and other family rules. Their advanced cognitive skills coupled with their need for autonomy, makes this a perfect time for them to provide suggestions and to demonstrate responsibility for their own behavior. Ask them for their reasons for what they think or how they feel and provide them with your reasons (perspective) if you disagree.

We all need to learn that failing is a really important part of learning. We should expect it and use the failed effort to plot our next move.

References

Stanford Medicine. (n.d.). *Cognitive development in adolescence*. Stanford Children's Health.
<https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=cognitive-development-in-adolescence-90-P01594>

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