



Teen Growth and Development

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Adolescence is a time of many transitions for teens and their families. To ensure that teens and adults navigate these transitions successfully, it is important for everyone to understand:

- What is happening to the teen physically, cognitively, and socially?
- How do these transitions affect teens?
- What can adults do?
- What support resources are available?

growth for boys); **(3) voice changes** (for boys); **(4) growth of underarm hair**; **(5) facial hair growth** (for boys); and **(6) increased production of oil, increased sweat gland activity, and the beginning of acne.**

- **Continued brain development.** Teens' brains are not completely developed until late in adolescence. Studies suggest that the connections between neurons affecting emotional, physical and mental abilities are incomplete. This could explain why some teens seem to have trouble controlling their emotions, impulses and judgments.

Physical Development

What is it?

During the teen years, adolescents grow faster than any other time since infancy.

Physical development includes:

- **Rapid gains in height and weight.** During a one-year growth spurt, boys and girls can gain an average of 4.1 inches and 3.5 inches in height respectively. This spurt typically occurs two years earlier for girls than for boys. Weight gain results from increased muscle development in boys and body fat in girls.
- **Development of secondary sex characteristics.** During puberty, hormone changes plays a role in activating the development of secondary sex characteristics. These include: **(1) growth of pubic hair**; **(2) menarche** (first menstrual period for girls or penis

How do these changes affect teens?

- **Teens frequently sleep longer.** Research suggests that teens actually need more sleep to allow their bodies to do the internal work required for such rapid growth. On average, teens need about 9 ½ hours of sleep a night.
- **Teens may be clumsier because of growth spurts.** If it seems to you that teens' bodies are all arms and legs, then you may be right! During this phase of development, body parts don't all grow at the same rate. This can lead to clumsiness as the teen tries to cope with limbs that seem to have grown overnight. Teens can appear gangly and uncoordinated.

- **Teens may become overly sensitive about their bodies.** This concern arises because of the rapid weight gain associated with puberty. Boys may feel concerned about height or muscle differences. This might lead to increase time spent exercising. Sixty percent of adolescent girls report that they are trying to lose weight. A small percentage of adolescent girls (1-3%) become so obsessed with their weight that they develop severe eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Anorexia nervosa refers to starvation; bulimia nervosa refers to binge eating and vomiting.
- **Teens may be concerned because they are not physically developing at the same rate as their peers.** Teens may be more developed than their peers ("early-maturers") or less developed than their peers ("late-maturers"). Being out of developmental "step" with peers is a concern to adolescents because most just want to fit in. Early maturation affects boys and girls differently. Research suggests that early maturing boys tend to be more popular with peers and hold more leadership positions. Adults often assume that early maturing boys are cognitively mature as well. Because of their physical appearance, early maturing girls are more likely to experience pressure to become involved in dating relationships with older boys before they are emotionally ready. Early maturing girls are more likely to suffer from depression, eating disorders, and anxiety.
- **Teens may feel awkward about demonstrating affection to the opposite sex.** As they develop physically, teens are beginning to rethink

their interactions with the opposite sex. This includes relationships with parents of the opposite sex too.

- **Teens may ask more direct questions about sex.** At this stage, adolescents are trying to figure out their sexual values. Teens often equate intimacy with sex. Rather than exploring a deep emotional attachment first, teens tend to assume that if they engage in the physical act, the emotional attachment will follow. They may be curious to know how to abstain without embarrassment or how they will know when the right time is and what to do. They may also have specific questions about methods of birth control and protection from sexually transmitted diseases.
- **When they are in their rooms, teens may begin to lock their bedroom doors.** Locking doors is a way to establish privacy. As long as teens continue to interact with the family, locked doors are usually nothing to worry about and are a normal behavior among teens.
- **Teens may not want to be seen with their parents in public.** They may ask parents to drop them off a block from their friends' houses or from school. They may also not show the same affection with their parents, particularly in public settings, as they may have used to.

What Can You Do?

Knowing what changes and behaviors are normal during adolescence can go a long way in helping both teens and adults manage this transition successfully.

There are specific things adults can do to be supportive:

- **Don't criticize or compare teens to others.** Teens are already acutely self-conscious about the way they look. They don't need you to point it out to them.
- **Encourage teens to get good sleep.** Realize they may need an extra boost in getting out of bed for school in the morning. Also, try to understand when teens want to sleep until noon on Saturday.
- **Encourage and model healthy eating habits.** Keep plenty of nutritious foods and snacks in the house. Remember that teens need to take in more calories to fuel their growth. Monitor their eating habits accordingly and teach them about cooking.
- **Encourage and model physical activity.** Exercise will help teens burn excess energy, strengthen developing muscles, and supports better sleep habits. It may also help teens become more comfortable in their changing bodies and in meeting new peers.
- **Have conversations and provide honest answers to teens about sex.** Teens are in search of knowledge. If adults do not provide accurate information, teens are forced to rely on their peers or other potentially inaccurate sources. Foster a relationship with your teen that encourages curiosity and honesty.
- **Be understanding of their need for physical space.** Do not take it personally if your teen is not as physically affectionate as he or she was in the past. Do not force your teen to be more present than they may wish to be. Maintain healthy communication, but also respect their desire to withdrawal at times.
- **Be patient with excessive grooming habits.** Teens often spend large amounts of time grooming themselves and obsessing over skin care products. Often, this behavior merely reflects teens' attempts to maintain some sense of control over their rapidly changing bodies.
- **Continue to provide a structured environment.** Teens should be allowed to have more independence, but not enough to place them in jeopardy. Despite their complaints, teens rely on adults to provide them with the sense of safety and structure they need to deal effectively with all the developmental tasks of adolescence.

References

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This article was also adapted from information prepared by Angela Huebner, Extension Specialist, Family and Child Development, Virginia Tech

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