Teen Social and Emotional Development

Written by: Pat Tanner Nelson, Ed.D, Revised by: Sydney Bouder

April 2025

What Is Social and Emotional Development?

There are five major social and emotional "issues" that teens deal with during their adolescent years. These include:

- Establishing an identity. This has been called one of the most important "tasks" of adolescent development. The question of "who am I" is not one that teens think about at a conscious level. Instead, over the course of time, teens begin to integrate the opinions of influential others (e.g., parents, other caring adults, friends, etc.) into their own likes and dislikes. The eventual outcome is people who have a clear sense of their values and beliefs, occupational goals, and relationship expectations. People with secure identities know where they fit (or where they don't want to fit) in the world.

- Establishing autonomy. Autonomy doesn't mean becoming completely independent from others. It also doesn't mean teen "rebellion." Rather than severing ties, establishing autonomy means becoming an independent and self-governing person. Autonomous teens have gained the ability to make and follow through with their own decisions, live by their own set of rules about what is "right and wrong", and are less emotionally dependent on parents or caregivers. Autonomy is necessary for teens to become self-sufficient in society.

- Establishing intimacy. Many people, including teens, equate intimacy with sex. In fact, intimacy and sex are not the same. Intimacy is usually first learned within the context of friendships, then expands into romantic relationships. Intimacy refers to close relationships in which people are open, honest, caring, and trusting. Friendships provide the first setting in which young people can practice their social skills with their equals. It is with friends that teens learn how to begin, maintain, and terminate relationships, practice social skills, and become intimate.

- Becoming comfortable with one's sexuality. The teen years mark the first time that young people are both physically mature enough to reproduce and cognitively advanced enough to think about sexual preferences. Given this, the teen years are the prime time for the development of sexuality. How teens are educated about and exposed to sexuality will largely determine whether or not they develop a healthy sexual identity. Nearly half of high school seniors report being sexually active. Many experts agree that the mixed messages teens receive about sexuality contribute to growing health concerns among this population, such as teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

- Achievement. Our society fosters attitudes of competition and success. Because of cognitive advances, the teen years are a time when young people can begin to see the relationship between their current abilities and plans and their future vocational goals. Teens need to figure out what they want to achieve--what they are currently good at and areas in which they are willing to strive for success.

How Do These Changes Affect Teens?

- Teens begin to spend more time with their friends than their families. It is within friendship groups that teens can develop and practice social skills. Teens may be quick to

conform to the opinions of their peers. But it is important to remember that even though teens are spending increased amounts of time with their friends, they still tend to conform to parents' ideals when it comes to decisions about values, education, and long-term plans.

- Teens may begin keeping to themselves more, shutting out their parents, siblings, or even friends. This may occur sporadically or for extended periods of time. A crucial part of achieving identity is taking the time to think about one's thoughts and feelings. Teens taking this time may be crucial to working through their feelings.

- Teens may become elusive about where they are going or with whom. When asked what they'll be doing for the evening, teens may reply, "nothing" or "hanging out." When asked who they'll be with, teens reply, "just some friends."

- Teens may become more argumentative. Teens may question adults' values and judgments. When teens don't get their way, they may say, "you just don't understand!"

- Teens may develop mental health issues. Teens experience significant changes and pressures that they may struggle to manage. This can increase the risk of developing mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, or eating disorders. (credit: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-7-things-to-know)

- Teens may spend more time on social media. While these platforms can help them stay connected with friends and family, excessive use can negatively impact their social and emotional well-being. Teens who spend more time on social media are at greater risk of having mental health issues, body image concerns, and exposure to cyberbullying. Social media use can also contribute to feelings of isolation and the spread of misinformation.

(credit: https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/youth-mental-health/social-media/

https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437

What Can You Do?

- Support your child's involvement in groups or activities in school. Quality after-school programs can help kids improve their social skills. Teens are seeking "fun and friends, voice and choice." During their out-of-school time, teens seek places where they can gather with friends and interact with adults on a relatively equal footing, be recognized for their efforts and skills, and make choices about what they will do and how they will do it.

- Realize that teens are trying to gain a sense of achievement—a sense of being uniquely good at something. Don't get frustrated if they frequently change their minds or want to try new things. Encourage them to stick with a project or activity long enough to establish some skills.

- Establish rituals to mark significant passages. Few rituals in our modern society mark the passage of teens to adulthood. Have a mother/daughter lunch when the daughter gets her first period. Have a father-son outing when the son begins to shave. Have a family celebration when the teen moves from junior high to high school. Celebrate the teen's first driver's license and his or her ability to vote.

- Be aware of who your teen's friends are and what they are doing. Parental monitoring should not end when youth enter their teen years. Despite teens' objections, make sure you know who their friends are and where they are going. Meet the parents of your teen's friends. Provide fun things to do at home to encourage teens to "hang out" at your house

so you'll know where they are and what they are doing while still respecting boundaries.

- Look out for signs that your teen could be struggling with their mental health. Signs may include changes in sleep, academic struggles, social withdrawal, signs of self harm, changes in eating habits, etc. Offer your teen support and provide a safe space for them to open up to you about their struggles. Reach out to a mental health professional or pediatrician for assistance if needed. (credit: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx)

- Have open conversations with your teen about safer social media use. Encourage them to avoid sharing personal information with strangers, treat others with kindness online, and come to you if they encounter something upsetting or need support. Monitor their accounts regularly, enable privacy settings, and set reasonable screen time limits as needed to promote balance and safety. (credit: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437

References

Lang, D., Cone, N., & Beyer, A. (2022). *Social and Emotional Development In Adolescence*. Iowa State University. https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/individualfamilydevelopment/chapter/social-and-emotional-development-in-adolescence/

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

Quinn, J. When need meets opportunity The Future of Children When School is Out Vol. 9 • No. 2 http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/09_02_08.pdf

Suggested citation: Huebner, A. Teen social and emotional development in Nelson. P.T. (Ed) (2012) Families Matter! A Series for Parents of School-Age Youth. Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of Delaware.