



# Understanding Teens

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It's not easy being a parent, caretaker, or parental figure! As children grow into their teens, stress and conflict is common. It's a normal part of growing up. Teens experience many physical and emotional changes as their brains and bodies prepare to become adults. You will also notice your teen go through social changes, whether this be spending more time outside the house with friends, romantically dating, or taking on new responsibilities, like driving or working part-time. Understanding the changes your teen may be experiencing will help you better support your teen and yourself during this interesting, rewarding, and often challenging transitional period.

## Physical changes begin early.

Teenagers vary in their development even more than little children do. There is no "right" time for changes to occur. In general:

### Girls

- Can begin experiencing changes as early as 7 years old.
- Can begin menstruation as early as 9 years old.

### Boys

- Can begin experiencing changes as early as 9 years old.
- May experience a growth spurt as early as 11 years old and keep growing until they are 21 years old.

**Physical maturity often occurs before emotional maturity.**

Teens often do not know how to handle their new sexual maturity. Teens may think: "If I look like a grown-up, why can't I be treated like an adult?"

- Television, movies and peers tell teens to be sexually active; parents/parental figures, schools and churches do not.
- Songs and media portray and promote risky behaviors among teens, such as underage drinking and drug use.
- How and where can teens talk about the conflicts they see and feel?

### **Physical and hormonal changes can lead to physical and emotional changes.**

The hormones which are triggered into adolescent years impact mood. Similarly, hormonal changes can influence the way teens think, feel, and behave. You may notice your teen is happy and alert one day and the next day you may recognize they seem "down in the dumps". While external influences, like school, relationships, or family issues may contribute to fluctuations in mood among adolescents, hormones also play a significant role in abrupt emotional changes.

### Hormonal changes that influence adolescent brain development:

- **Adrenal Stress Hormones:** Adrenaline ("fight or flight" response) and cortisol (stress) are two hormones which significantly change into later adolescent years. These hormones can result in your teen experiencing heightened stress or anxiety compared to younger years.
- **Sex Hormones:** Increases in testosterone (males); increases in

estrogen and progesterone (females). These hormones can influence libido in adolescents.

- **Mood Regulation Hormones:** While changes in sex hormones impact mood regulation, changes in mood regulating hormones also impact sex hormones. Serotonin levels increase during adolescent years, which is primarily associated with arousal and mood changes in teens.
- **Growth Hormones:** An increased production of sex hormones (e.g. testosterone and estrogen) in adolescent years are commonly associated with growth spurts. However, the human growth hormone nearly doubles during puberty, which also contributes to significant changes in teen growth.
- **Sleep Hormones:** Melatonin levels typically decrease in adolescent years, which is the primary hormone associated with sleep in children, adolescents, and adults. This hormone regulates adolescent sleep-wake cycles. Decreased levels of melatonin among teens often results in staying up longer hours into the night and/or greater difficulty awakening in the morning.

### **More conflict may occur between teens and their parents, siblings, or peers.**

Here are some general guidelines for different ages.

- 11–12-year-olds can be very moody and emotional.
- 13–14-year-olds can be irritable, excitable, more likely to explode than to control their emotions.
- 15-year-olds may try to “cover up” their feelings—may present as moody or withdrawn.

- 16–17-year-olds often calm down and settle into more adult patterns of behavior.

When teens grow so quickly, they may get very tired and be more emotionally “touchy” — especially if they skip breakfast and eat mostly sugary foods. Tiredness can significantly impact teen mood regulation and brain function.

By about age 12, self-esteem takes a sharp drop for many adolescents, which tends to gradually climb back up by ages 18 or 19. Uneven growth in parts of their body or compared to their peers can lead to self-consciousness or clumsiness. Hands and feet may grow much faster than arms and legs.

Similarly, parts of the face grow at different rates, so when your teenager is sure that his/her nose is too big, he/she may be right—for a time. Soon, the rest of his/her face will catch up. Additionally, nearly all teens have skin problems (acne or “zits”), which are related to their hormone changes. This can also contribute to teens experiencing heightened levels of self-consciousness or withdrawing from others/public areas.

### **Even though they look “grown up,” young teens cannot think like adults.**

The part of the brain that helps teens’ plan, set priorities, and make good decisions is still being built. In fact, accidents are the biggest cause of death among teenage boys, often due to lack of good judgment and maturity.

Before age 11, youth are convinced that whatever they believe is true, is true. Winning an argument with preadolescence can be quite tricky! They are absolutely sure they are right about everything. Do not worry...this is common among teenage boys and girls alike.

However, around age 11, youth begin to think in a new way. They begin to see that there are many different views on any one subject. Sometimes they

might just need to talk through different perspectives/ideas or to be reminded that “not everyone thinks the same way you do”.

This new way of thinking may result in pre-teens/teens rejecting the values and beliefs of their parents or family members, at least for a little while. They want to spend time with friends rather than their family and are often most influenced by their friends and peers, and this consuming desire “to fit in”. Rest assured! Most teens return to their parents’ values after they go through this transitional stage in their life. Be patient and be understanding of their curiosity of new ideas, values, or beliefs.

Teens often believe they are protected from any bad in the world. They believe they will also be healthy and safe, believing they can “get out of” any situation that may occur. This can often lead to unhealthy or risky behaviors.

Many parents find that giving teens more responsibility in non-dangerous areas (shopping for their own clothes, responsibilities around the house) while keeping control over more important and potentially harmful situations helps teens grow into responsibility. However, remember that adolescent brains are still developing and are highly influential during the teenage years. While it is important to respect your teenagers personal space and privacy, setting boundaries is also very imperative.

**Due to changes in their thinking, teens want to:**

- know the whys behind rules.
- negotiate rules.
- “push” boundaries.

**By the age of 16, most teens begin to start thinking like adults.**

- Abstract ideas — such as honesty, love, and justice, are newer thoughts for 16-year-olds
- The more teens have the chance to talk about their own ideas and listen to/learn

from others (especially other teens), the sooner they tend to mature in their thinking.

See the link below for more information about what to expect about adolescent development and behavior:

<https://www.udel.edu/content/dam/udelImages/canr/factsheets/understandingteens-chart.jpg>

**Struggles between parents and teens are normal. They happen in every family. Parent expectations and teen willingness or inability to live up to them can be major sources of conflict.**

**Parents**

- Want their teens to turn out well. Many parents often express, “I want better for my child than I had for myself.”
- Feel embarrassed and/or disappointed when teens regress in behavior (e.g. acting like children) or acting “above their age”.

**Teens**

- Need opportunities to show they can be responsible and are trusted.
- Know they have to be “in charge” of their lives before they can become adults.
- Often think their parents over-control and over-protect them.
- May experience embarrassment when their parents aren’t as “rich”, “beautiful” and “cool” as TV stars or their friends’ parents.

**What do parents and teens need?**

- To set realistic expectations of one another.
- Strong self-concepts.

- Take ownership of wrongdoings.
- Constructively communicate.
- Foster a supportive environment.
- Adolescents need stable, well-structured, and predictable guidelines because they are feeling so unstable themselves.
- Teens experience less stress when their parents are consistent, clear, firm and fair. Give your teen a say when appropriate, but ultimately make the decision you believe is best for your child.

**Because their brains are still “under construction”, teens need help from their parents in:**

- Providing routines and structure.
- Helping them sort through priorities and making plans.
- Helping them organize their time and their thoughts.
- Helping them weigh the “pros” and the “cons”.
- Helping them think through hard decisions (even when they say they don’t want your help).
- Helping them balance, maintain, and develop new relationships.
- Helping them sort out new ideas and learn more about their unique interests.

Harvard Medical School. (2011). *The Adolescent Brain: Beyond raging hormones*. Harvard Health Publishing.  
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/the-adolescent-brain-beyond-raging-hormones>

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## References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *Tips for Understanding and Adapting to the Teen Years*. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/parenting-teens/tips-understanding-and-adapting/index.html>