



The Teen Years: Developmental Overview

Change is rapid in the years of development between childhood and adulthood, called *adolescence*, when every part of a child's body is affected by a surge of growth. During early adolescence (ages 10 or 11 through age 14), children worry about how they look, have mood swings due to hormonal changes, and are highly focused on friendships. By middle adolescence (ages 15 and 16), teens are more comfortable with themselves but may push family boundaries with new behaviors. By late adolescence (ages 17–19), many teens have reached their adult size and focus on independence and peer relationships. Differences in individual teens' growth patterns can make them anxious. Their emotions may be difficult for parents to handle.

Despite their sometimes rebellious actions, most teens still value their families and abide by their parents' rules more often than they will admit. Teens with consistent support from their parents and families will likely navigate these difficult years successfully. But there are several areas where parents' actions can make a big difference in their teenagers' lives. Those areas include:

- *Organized activities, volunteerism, and community involvement.* Participating in community activities and helping solve community problems builds civic-minded and caring youth and adults. Parents can set an example by finding opportunities where the family can volunteer together.
- *Substance abuse.* The link between the abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs and delinquent or violent behavior is much clearer now than it was a generation ago. If parents suspect that their teen is involved with alcohol or drugs, they should act promptly to get help from a health care provider who specializes in substance abuse prevention and treatment.
- *Access to guns and other weapons.* The increased access that youth have to weapons and the role that weapons play in serious crime, suicide, and homicide is cause for national concern. Many parents consider removing any guns from their home. If guns are permitted in the home, they must be handled responsibly and locked in a secure location.
- *Peer influence.* Peer pressure can encourage youth to do well or push teens into risky behaviors. Parents and strong families provide an important buffer for their teens that can help guide their choice of friends. Family support increases the likelihood that teenagers will make responsible choices even if there is strong pressure to get involved in risky behaviors.
- *Dating relationships and violence.* Dating is a normal part of healthy development, but some dating relationships can become abusive or violent and have a devastating long-term impact. Parents can help by encouraging group activities and talking about healthy relationships.
- *Transitions to adulthood.* Preparing for the future and the transition to young adulthood increases during the teen years and does not stop when the teen reaches the age of 18. Parents can help with the continuum into adulthood by encouraging their teen's education, work experience, and life skills, as well as remaining as a safety net if difficulty occurs.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Teen Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

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