

Encouraging Healthy Growth and Development

Have you had the experience of going to bed one night and waking up the next to find your child seems to have grown several inches or suddenly seems to look like a teenager? If so, you are not alone.

Adolescence is a time of transition for both parents and children. These years are an exciting time of many rapid changes in your child's body, mind, and behaviors. During the preteen and teen years, adolescents experience changes in their development at a rate that similar to the first two years of life. In order to help your child make the transition from a "kid" to a "teen" and to maintain your sanity, take time to learn more about what exactly is going on with your child's development.

- Adolescents, especially girls, may become more concerned and overly sensitive about their weight and looks. Be careful when commenting on your child's body and help them focus on being healthy. Avoid criticizing or comparing your child to others. During a year, a boy can gain as much as four inches in height and a girl as much as three inches in height. Weight can fluctuate too as boys experience muscle growth and girls build more body fat.
- Stressing about physical development is very common during adolescence. Be patient and listen to their concerns while reassuring them that everyone develops at their own rate. On average, girls begin experiencing puberty around age 11 and boys around age 14. You may see changes in your child ranging from growth in body hair to behavioral changes from increased hormones. Remember that just because your child looks older, they are still young emotionally.
- Encourage your child to get enough rest and understand that they may need a little extra encouragement to get out of bed in the morning. On average, adolescents need about 10 hours of sleep a night. Try to be understanding on those weekend mornings when they sleep until noon.

- Model and support healthy eating and exercise habits. During this period of rapid growth, it is important for adolescents to eat enough. Healthy exercise habits help burn energy, sleep better at night, and help adolescents work out stress about their changing bodies. Remember, you are your child's first and most important role model for the habits they will carry over into adulthood.
- As they move from childhood to adulthood, adolescents feel the urge to be more independent from their families. Friends replace parents as their source for advice and when at home, adolescents may prefer to spend time alone rather than with their family. No matter what, family support is still important to help them build a strong sense of self.
- This is a time to explore different lifestyles and experiment with values and beliefs. Encourage them to talk about their ideas and thoughts. One of the best things you can do is keep an open line of communication with your child. Even if you have to text them or call them on their cell phone, keep that communication flowing.
- Curiosity about sexuality develops during this time. Consider carefully how to educate your child. How adolescents are educated about and exposed to sexuality will largely determine whether they develop a healthy sexual identity in the future. Be sure to talk to your child about sexuality in age appropriate ways and be willing to answer any questions they may have.

The adolescent years are a time of transition for your child, your family, and for your parenting style. Be flexible and remember that as children grow, you need to adapt your parenting style to reflect age-appropriate tactics of discipline, communication, and responsibility. Maintaining a trusting, open relationship with your child as they grow from a "kid" to a "teen" can be a challenge. Take advantage of resources in your community that will help your relationship with your child stay strong for years to come!