

Adolescent Care from 12 to 15 Years

Could anything in life have prepared you for the experiences that you have had with your adolescent? What a roller coaster life it is for you as the parent as well as for your teenager! Your adolescent's physical features will change a great deal during this time depending on the sex and genetic makeup. Girls usually begin their growth spurt about two years ahead of boys, achieving their peak in height growth at about 12-13 years. Boys achieve their peak growth at 14-15 years.

Your adolescent is very focused on social life, friends and school. Close friendships with members of the same sex are developed. Sometimes, a teenager's best friend becomes a parent substitute and confidante. These friendships, however, will often change abruptly, causing hurt feelings.

Adolescents pursue personal interests with considerable focus, often to the exclusion of everything else! Although sometimes difficult, this self-centeredness is normal. Traditional sex differences in interests are blurring. For example, both sexes may be interested in clothes or sports. Daydreaming, mood swings, temper outbursts, and name calling are all part of the emotional experience of trying to gain independence. Because of all the changes occurring in every phase of their development, it is no wonder this age can make such an impact on the family. If you are worried about your child in any respect, it is appropriate to discuss this with a professional.

Eating

Adolescents seem to eat continuously! Unfortunately, many teenagers consume fast foods daily and eat snacks that are high in calories and fat. Appropriate snacks should be encouraged and junk food consumed only in moderation. Breakfast is very important. Make sure your child has a nutritious breakfast daily.

Continue to offer your teenager selections from the basic food groups at all meals and snacks. Teach him about foods. Of the major food groups, he needs: around 4-6 servings of milk or milk products; 6-8 ounces of the meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, and nuts group; 2-4 fruit servings; 3-5 vegetable servings; and 6-11 bread, cereal, rice, pasta group servings per day. At least one serving of fruit per day should be a citrus fruit or juice. A yellow or dark green vegetable should be served at least 3 to 4 times a week. A bread serving is one slice or a cup of cereal.

Avoid "empty" calorie snacks such as soft drinks, chips, candy, and cookies. If given, these should be in limited amounts. Encourage snacks of fruit, popcorn, peanut butter, stuffed celery, raisins, cheese strips, etc.

At this age, it is especially important to evaluate your teen's food consumption in relation to the amount of exercise that he does. Obesity is quite worrisome in this age group and studies have shown that children who are overweight at this time have a greater chance of obesity as an adult. On the other hand, teenagers also often participate in sports activities, necessitating an increase in caloric intake.

Girls may also develop anemia during this time from a lack of sufficient iron in their diet to replace menstrual losses. Crash dieting is a common response to their obsession with self image and appearance. This may result in thinness. Like obesity, eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia are common during

adolescence. If you need information on foods which are high in iron, advice on a weight loss program, or suspect your child has an eating disorder, then consult your health care provider.

Sleeping

While your child may not be experiencing any particular problems at this age, the adolescent is frequently sleep-deprived. Teenagers require approximately 9 hour of sleep per night. Sleep lost cannot be made up later.

Development/Play

Physical changes are very important to your adolescent, as they signify that he is developing like his peers. It is important, however, that you talk with your teen about these changes prior to their occurrence so he will be prepared and can more easily adjust to his changing body. Girls often begin menstruation at this time (the average age being 12 ½). They show changes in breast development, body hair, and broadening of hips. Boys frequently begin to have nocturnal emissions, facial and body hair, and broadening of shoulders. By now you are very aware of how “social” your child is becoming! Even though the family is still very important, friends (individuals, classmates, and group members) and their opinions are highly valued. Teenagers enjoy these interactions and spend a great deal of time with their peers.

School remains very important in your child’s life now. Some subjects are enjoyed (as hopefully, are some teachers). Young teens are capable of problem solving and by middle adolescence may begin to think abstractly. They begin to show some concern for political and social problems by the end of this stage and are often idealistic and altruistic in intellectual capabilities.

Teens enjoy board, video, and computer games, sports activities, crafts, sewing, music, musical studies, computers, video/audio equipment, and just “hanging out.” Your teenager may join a club in your neighborhood or at school or enjoy an organized group such as scouts or a religious group. Team sports both in and out of school are good for channeling some of the boundless energy and teaching discipline. Support these kinds of activities in your community. Make sure all your child’s activities are properly supervised or chaperoned. Some adolescents enjoy reading, particularly a book series, comics or magazines appropriate for their age. You might consider subscribing to some. Others enjoy writing; encourage keeping a log or diary (maybe on the home computer) but respect your child’s privacy. You may notice your child enjoys collecting things such as stamps or baseball cards or creating things like collages, building models, or cooking. This is a good time to help your child improve in his use of tools, utensils and other household equipment.

Safety Dialogue and Discipline

It is important that the adolescent have increasing independence with appropriate limits set for their safety and well-being. Because of the type of activities your teen enjoys, it is extremely important to teach and reinforce the practice of activity-appropriate safety measures to prevent and limit risk for injury. These activities include: team and individual sports, bicycling, swimming, and those likely to cause bodily damage such as trampolines, skateboards, and roller blades.

Continue to teach your adolescent that all firearms are unsafe and should be presumed loaded. STORE ALL WEAPONS UNLOADED IN LOCKED CABINETS. AMMUNITION SHOULD BE SIMILARLY LOCKED BUT IN A DIFFERENT LOCATION. Most firearm injuries occur in and about the home. Consider asking questions about the presence of firearms at friends' homes. Teach him the **NEW** rules of gun safety: **N**ever touch a gun, **E**very gun is loaded, **W**hen in doubt, get out.

Effective education in the area of sex, contraceptives, drugs/alcohol, and cigarettes/chewing tobacco is extremely important. AIDS prevention has magnified the importance of educating your child. It is appropriate and important to impart your own moral values about these subjects, but try to be flexible and open-minded enough to let your child ask questions about express feelings without fear of judgment or punishment. If you are just too uncomfortable to talk about these areas, make this known at an annual exam so your health care provider can help with this. This is an extremely difficult time for parents who must cope with their adolescent while trying to keep the channel of communication open. Try to love with no strings attached!!!

Do you know signs and symptoms of drug abuse or childhood depression? Ask for a handout on these subjects as well as those mentioned above.

Suggested Handouts, Readings, and Videos

“How to Talk With Your Teenager About the Facts of Life”⁷, “Sexual Feelings”³, *Head Full of Questions*³ video, *Especially You*³, “How to talk to your children about AIDS”⁹

Additional Resources

Caring for Your Adolescent by the American Academy of Pediatrics

What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Boys by L. Madaras and D. Saavendra

What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Girls by L. Madaras and D. Saavendra

Your Ten to Fourteen Year Old by L. Ames, F. Ilg, and S. Baker

Straight from the Heart: How to Talk to Your Teenagers About Love & Sex by C. Cassell

Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World by S. & J. Gordon

Crisis Proof Your Teenager by K. McCoy and C. Wibbelsman

Experts Advise Parents ed. by E. Shiff

Parent/Teen Breakthrough: The Relationship Approach by M. Kirshenbaum and C. Foster

Positive Discipline for Teenagers by J. Nelsen and L. Lott

From Anticipatory Guidance Sheets for Parents by M. Cohen, D. Hansen, K. Skilling © 1994

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