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# Understanding Teens: Opening The Door to a Better Relationship

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If you are a parent of a teen, do these statements sound familiar? He won't do anything around the house. She's always in her room. He is always on the phone. She can spend an hour on her hair; why can't she spend five minutes to empty the dishwasher? I can't stand the way teens dress. I'm worried that they may try drugs or become sexually active.

Despite the fact that most parent-teen relationships are warm and caring, issues of independence and increasing conflict emerge during the teen years. These two connected issues may cause you concern as you try to figure out how to handle them.

In recent years, psychologists have revised their idea of healthy parent-teen relationships. They have found that most teens have warm, close relationships with their parents. They care about their parents' opinion of them and hold their parents' opinions in high regard. Many teens who do not have good rapport with their parents have had difficulties with them for years. If your relationship with your child has always been strained, there are ways to relate more positively.

Parents of children in their early teens can expect an increase in the number of arguments with their children. At this time your teen is trying to establish him or herself as an independent person in the household. Once you and your family begin to acknowledge this change, the number of arguments between parents and teens usually declines.

Parents fear loss of control over the adolescent and fear for the adolescent's safety because of his/her increased independence. Parents are irritated and annoyed with the adolescent's behavior. Adolescents face stress when pushing for more

freedom than parents are willing to grant. When they fail to adhere to parental advice they may engage in deviant behavior. Understanding teens' developmental stages and their traits as teens can help parents support their teens in developing into independent, responsible adults.

### Developmental Stages of Teens

**Physical Changes.** Adolescents experience rapid rates of growth and maturation of the reproductive organs and glands. Together, these physical changes accomplish the biological task of transforming a child into an adult. Rapid change combined with wide variation among individuals tend to make adolescents extremely sensitive to their appearance. At no other time in life are feelings about the self (self-esteem) so closely tied to feelings about the body (body image).

These physical changes also affect their social relations and emotions. That is why a pimple or being ahead or behind a classmate in physical growth can be so stressful to the teens' emotions.

**Mental Changes.** Teens develop their abstract thinking capacities. Before age 11 or 12 children think in terms of concrete objects and groups of objects. By age 16 most adolescents have gone from the simple way of thinking to complex forms of reasoning. They learn to approach a problem systematically. Moral issues become more complex because they understand that two sound rules or principles might conflict. For example: They will understand that in certain situations the values of friendship and honesty conflict. They will struggle with a question about whether

someone should report a friend for breaking a rule.

Teens also come to realize that what exists is only one of many possibilities. This is important in facing many choices as they move into adulthood and choose career directions, educational paths and mates. Thus, teens need time alone to think about the many possibilities.

**Social Changes.** Because of their physical and mental growth, adolescents are no longer treated like children. The expectations adults and peers have of them change and their behavior changes. Thus the social world in which they live changes in important ways.

One of the most obvious social changes is the beginning of serious interest in and interactions with teens of the opposite sex. They have to learn to handle the emotions and behavior that go along with these relationships. They also experience a change in how adults treat them and talk to them. It is often in a more adult manner. They are also seeking more independence. They are given more privileges that were reserved for adults like driving and working. However, they may feel they should have even more privileges and these may become areas of conflict for parents and teens. Parents may feel frustrated with the perception that teens want more freedom but not the responsibility that comes with it.

These changes lead to typical traits of teenagers. Some of these are:

**Concern with being popular.** The teen is trying to find out how worthwhile he or she is in the eyes of peers. Having friends means that he has been accepted. Teens spend more time with peers because they have similar tastes in music, dress, activities, dreams, and goals.

**Challenging the way things are.** Teens will challenge the rules and reason of parents, teachers, and the world. This is part of their intellectual growth and trying out new ideas and possibilities.

**Express concern about how they look.** They feel that everyone is looking at them. They are concerned with their physical and hormonal changes. Are they fitting in with their classmates? They now can imagine what other people may be thinking so teens feel as if they are living in a display store window and everyone is watching them.

**Having friends you may not approve of.** They are exploring new relationships and ideas these friends may have.

**Influenced by peers.** Teens will look to their peers for norms in dress, drugs, alcohol, and sexual behaviors. However, research shows that teens are strongly influenced by their parents in moral issues.

**Belonging is very important.** Having friends during early adolescent years is valuable as children are trying to develop acceptable social skills. They are relating to other teens in different ways than when they were younger.

**Need privacy.** Teens need time to think as their intellectual capacities increase and they are faced with new ideas and challenges. The changes they are undergoing physically often lead them to a need for privacy.

**Moodiness.** With the rapid changes going on in physical, social, and intellectual growth, they may be concerned with how they are doing. Their hormonal changes are a great factor.

With all this going on, is it any wonder that they forget to take out the trash? It may be important to us but it is certainly low on their priority list.

During adolescence teens experience rapid physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Problems may arise because parents do not change their parenting style. Treating a teen as a young child — not taking into account his/her intellectual growth and ability to think through a situation in a way that was not previously possible can belittle the teen and cause conflict. He or she is also seeking more independence. Instead of mandating rules, including the teen in discussion of some rules can help them in learning to work through problems and arrive at solutions that may involve compromise. Remembering all the changes teens are going through and following these steps can improve the parent-teen relationship.

## References

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