



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

Developmental Characteristics of Teens - TIP SHEET

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Introduction: Adolescence is a unique, vital, and exciting time for growth and development in a young person's life, a time during which they experience many developmental milestones marking their transition from childhood into adulthood. While in the past it was common to think of adolescence as a stage of life characterized by inevitable "storm and stress," the modern view recognizes adolescence as a normal, healthy developmental process. Not every young person will experience or handle this development in the exact same way, but there are a number of normal development tasks that each teenager will face, including changes in physical, cognitive, emotional, social, language, career, and spiritual domains. A teenager goes through three separate sub-stages of adolescence: early (12–14 years), middle (15–17 years), and late (18–21 years) adolescence. Understanding what changes occur during each of these periods will enable adults to better understand, connect, and communicate with teens. The following information describes normal development, feelings, and behaviors that the vast majority of young people will experience during adolescence, and will be helpful information for those working with teens

Early Adolescence (12–14 years)

- In this stage both boys and girls are experiencing the onset of puberty caused by hormonal changes, with girls generally starting puberty on average two years earlier than boys. Changes common to both genders during puberty include tremendous growth spurts resulting in increased height and weight, maturity of organs needed for reproduction, and visible physical changes. For girls, puberty means body fat increases, breast enlargement, growth of pubic and underarm hair, start of their first menstrual period, widened hips, and possible appearance of acne. For boys the physical changes include growth of facial, pubic, and body hair, enlargement of testes and penis, increased muscle size and bone structure, cracking voice and deepening of vocal chords, and possible appearance of acne.
- The brain also undergoes growth changes resulting in the ability for more abstract thinking and improved problem-solving.
- Changes in the language domain allow for improved abilities to use speech to express oneself and understand sarcasm and irony, meaning adolescents will naturally become better at arguing and questioning what they are told by parents, teachers, and peers.
- The changes occurring to their body during this stage may cause adolescents to feel awkward and self-conscious, causing teens to balance their high self-expectations with low self-esteem.
- During this time adolescents experience increased moodiness as they search for their identity, which is mostly driven by peer pressure and the strong need for conformity and acceptance. Individuals with similar behaviors, interests, and attitudes tend to form peer groups, but not necessarily close friendships.
- Increased independence from parents becomes important as adolescents will spend less time with their family and more time with peers. This can lead to conflict because adolescents begin to show less overt affection toward their parents, and, frequently, an increase in rudeness.
- Youth may start experimenting with alcohol, tobacco, and drug use.
- Interest in the same or opposite sex occurs and may involve dating in groups.

Middle Adolescence (15–17 years)

- Girls have typically completed full physical development while boys are reaching their peak and are close to finishing their physical growth. As muscle mass increases in males, so does body satisfaction. However, many teenage girls become dissatisfied with their bodies and weight due to the increase in body fat. Some teens may even resort to eating disorders in an attempt to feel better about their bodies.
- Teens become better at everyday planning and decision making. They are capable of understanding the consequences of their behavior and planning for their future. However, these skills are often used inconsistently by teens, who sometimes act first and think later.
- Dating relationships become more intimate and there is increased interest in sexual experimentation. Teens are more likely to be sexually active during this sub-stage.
- An awareness of personal sexual orientation develops with many teens self-identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual by 16 years of age.
- Teens begin to question who they are and what they should do with their lives. In attempts to answer these questions they begin to explore careers, religion, philosophical and political issues, and social causes. This may cause some to feel overwhelmed by the possibilities of their future with regard to college and career.
- Parents are often viewed as interfering with a teen's independence and teens will question and challenge their parents' rules, even resist their parents' belief systems or cultural traditions.
- Older teens develop a stronger sense of self and rely less on the opinions of others, allowing older teens to better resist peer pressure than younger teens.

Late Adolescence (18–21 years)

- The biggest developmental milestone during this stage is the transition from high school into postsecondary education, work, or military.
- Identity exploration is still occurring in regards to education, work, family role, and personal relationships.
- Peer pressure does not have as great an impact on decisions and values because improved cognitive abilities enable adolescents to consider and respect different points of view. In addition, youth at this stage tend to relate more to individual peers rather than groups.
- Adolescents have clearly established their sexual identity and are beginning to develop serious intimate relationships.
- Most are sexually experienced and engage in casual sex with friends or acquaintances.
- Youth at this stage have higher rates of alcohol and drug use than at any other age with the major issue being the indulgence of binge drinking.
- Conflicts with parents tend to decrease as adolescents change their relationships with parents in a way that balances independence with connection.

Tips for engaging youth:

- In general, it is best to engage teens through the use of listening skills and activities rather than lecturing or advice-giving.
- Begin the meeting by simply asking about how their week has been going prior to starting any lesson

or activity with them. Not only will this allow you to gauge how receptive the teen might be on that day, but it will also make the teen more willing to listen to you because they feel that you showed interest and concern.

- Since adolescents are very self-concerned, try to engage them in discussion by asking how the ideas, subject, situation, or outcome may impact their lives. Putting it in that context is a way of making the discussion personal and of interest to them.
- Reverse roles. Instead of the adult always being the teacher or mentor in the relationship, try learning something new from the teenager. This allows the teen to be an expert on a subject that you may know little about, which gets the teen participating and also helps to bridge the gap between generations.
- Try learning a hobby or participate in an activity that is new to both the adult and teen. This creates a sense of equality in the relationship and can help establish trust because of the shared experience.
- Provide options and choices when assigning a task; teenagers greatly value their independence and want to do things their own way. That means giving teens several options to choose from when working on a project or task so that they still feel a sense of control in the situation. This makes it more likely they will participate and be committed to completing the task.
- Use technology as a tool rather than topic of conversation. Teenagers do not view technology as one of their interests. To teens, technology is a normal part of daily life integrated into almost everything they do. Not only can you have them incorporate technology to complete projects and tasks, but also try to connect through various apps (e.g., games, fitness, mindfulness).
- Be sincere and genuine when working with teenagers. Teens are not expecting you to be trendy or cool, and trying too hard to be may backfire. They already know you are an adult. What they need is for you to be yourself and honest in your interactions.

In summary, please be mindful that the natural developmental experience of each individual adolescent may vary slightly from what is presented here. In general, the changes, feelings, and behaviors listed for each stage are considered part of the normal developmental process. However, if a teenager appears greatly different from the descriptions above, it may be appropriate to consult with a mental health professional.