

Health & Young Adolescents

"Sometimes I feel that my being an adolescent is more of a growth process for my dad than it is for me."
— *A middle school student quoted in Middle School Handbook*

Remember when your biggest health worry as a parent was wondering if your child would fall in the "normal" range on the pediatrician's growth chart? Remember when your most challenging health concern as a teacher was finding enough tissues and hand soap to keep germs from spreading during flu season?

Keeping kids safe and healthy has gotten harder over the years. And the challenges always seem to multiply as they—and we—get older. It's true that children undergo more rapid emotional, physical, and social changes between the ages of 10-15 than at any other period of their lives. But instead of yearning for simpler times, we need to remember that these growth spurts are a normal part of adolescent development.

It's *our* responses that need fine-tuning. If we remember our own experiences with the awkward "wonder years," and recognize the increasing pressures on today's adolescents, we can take steps to ensure that they grow into healthy young adults. Here are some suggestions for making the journey more productive and enjoyable.

Respect Their Privacy, But Don't Close Them Off

If your child puts a "Do Not Enter" sign on the bedroom door, don't despair. During adolescence, children often retreat to their rooms as they search for identity and independence. Don't be afraid to enter their domain, but remember to knock first.

Surveys show that adolescents want to converse with their parents, but they don't always know how to start the conversation. KidsPeace, a national organization that helps families overcome crises, reports that fewer than 20 percent of teens feel "totally comfortable" discussing difficult issues with their parents. Young adolescents are three times more likely to consult friends instead of parents when a crisis involves physical and sexual assault, drugs, or alcohol. But research shows that children whose parents communicate with them, spend time with them, and have positive relationships with them are much less likely to use alcohol and other drugs.

Be Patient with Their Mood Swings

As a teacher, you might be wondering if your elementary school colleague was mistaken about how much you'd enjoy "Tommy," a smart student who showed up in your classroom as an insolent and sullen and delightful student who showed up in your classroom as an insolent and sullen adolescent. Keep in mind that during the summer, Tommy began to go through puberty at a rapid rate, the dentist put those dreaded braces on his teeth, and the optometrist recommended eyeglasses. He's still a smart student and a good kid, but all those changes have taken a toll. Draw him out. Include him in challenging and fun activities. Let him know you care about him. According to a study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, students who are close to people at school and believe their teachers are fair tend to avoid risky and addictive behaviors.

Set Limits, But Give Them Some Choices

Your daughter's new uncooperative behavior is actually a sign that she's growing up. Involve her in setting clear expectations and you can avoid some unproductive battles. Consider hair maintenance, for example. Adolescents are much more likely to wash their hair on a regular basis if they agree that it is a reasonable expectation. Instead of yelling, "Wash your hair now," try saying, "I'd like for you to wash your hair at least three times a week. Which nights work best for you?"

Understand Their Need to Be Involved

Researchers have found that when a person enjoys high self-esteem, physical fitness, and authentic accomplishment, the brain produces its own serotonin—a powerful mood regulator. Yet physical activity decreases by about 50 percent between the ages of 12 and 18. Teens most often drop out of sports because they say the competition is too stressful and the practices too boring. In one successful adolescent sports program cited by The Youth Sports Institute, coaches learn how to avoid criticizing young players and how to develop positive relationships among team members. As a result, the players report having more fun, and those who start out with low self-esteem become more confident.

Clubs and activities such as chess, drama, Junior Achievement, and scouting give young adolescents other positive ways to be involved. When these activities aren't available, adolescents may begin to experiment with premature sex, violence, alcohol, and drugs.

Adolescents want to make a difference in the world, but they don't always understand how to connect and contribute to their communities. In a nationwide poll by Louis Harris for the National Teens, Crime, and the Community program, nearly 90 percent of students said they would get involved in programs to stop violence if they knew what to do. That same survey showed that more than seven in 10 youths already are involved in prevention efforts. Strategies they recommended included creating posters that teach young people about the costs of vandalism; tutoring or mentoring younger students; serving in peer leadership groups; and assisting neighborhood clean-up projects.

Respect Their Developing Intellect

Young adolescents enjoy learning demanding research skills, such as footnoting, bibliography, and scientific notation. They're easily turned off by packaged programs that claim to teach "real life skills." Instead, give them opportunities to interview the mayor, write a consumer complaint letter to a corporation, or design the school Web site.

Parents also play a significant role in the academic success of young adolescents. According to the U.S. Department of Education, three factors over which parents exercise authority—school absenteeism, variety of reading materials in the home, and excessive television viewing—explained nearly 90 percent of the difference in eighth-grade math test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Show Them Why Nutrition Matters

Good eating habits are critically important to brain development and functioning. All children require a high protein breakfast for alertness and a balanced diet that includes complex carbohydrates throughout the day.

Proper nutrition also helps minimize the effects of chronic stress, which causes the body to deplete available nutrients. Stress inhibits the growth of message receptors on brain cells, resulting in slow thinking and depressed learning.

It's smart to let students snack during the school day. When nutritious foods are available to children while they study, they actually earn statistically higher test scores, demonstrate more positive attitudes, and increase their reading speed and accuracy.

Let Them Know You Care

As KidsPeace suggests, remember that every kid is unique, has worth, value, and dignity; safety is a primary need and fundamental right of every kid; kids grow in the context of supportive relationships; every kid has powerful potential; and kids learn by making decisions and taking actions based on values.

Additional Resources

- *Fateful Choices: Healthy Youth for the 21st Century*, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 800-631-8571
- *How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent (H.E.L.P.)*, National Middle School Association, 800-528-NMSA
- *How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent (More H.E.L.P.)*, National Middle School Association, 800-528-NMSA
- *Living with a Work in Progress: A Parents' Guide to Surviving Adolescence*, National Middle School Association, 800-528-NMSA
- *MegaSkills: In School and in Life, the Best Gift You Can Give Your Child*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 212-420-5800
- *Middle School Handbook*, National Association of Independent Schools, 202-973-9700
- *Parenting 911*, Broadway Books, 212-782-9000
- *The Roller Coaster Years: Raising your Child through the Magical yet Maddening Middle School Years*, Broadway Books, 212-782-9000
- *Setting an Example: The Health, Medical Care, and Health-Related Behavior of American Parents*, Child Trends, 4301 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 100, Washington, D.C. 20008
- *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14*, Northeast Foundation for Children Inc., Greenfield, Massachusetts, 800-360-6332