

Adolescence: A Time Full of Changes

Throughout our lives, we grow and change, but during early adolescence, the rate of change is especially evident. We consider 10-year-olds to be children; we think of 14-year-olds as "almost adults." We welcome the changes, but we also find them a little disturbing. When children are younger, it is easier to predict when a change might take place and how rapidly. But by early adolescence, the relationship between a child's real age and his or her developmental milestones grows weaker. How young teens develop can be influenced by many things, including genes, families, friends, neighborhoods, values and other forces in society.

Physical Changes

As they enter puberty, young teens undergo a great many physical changes, not only in size and shape but in such things as the growth of pubic and underarm hair and increased body odor. For girls, changes include the development of breasts and the start of menstruation; for boys, changes include the development of testes.

Adolescents do not all begin puberty at the same age. For girls, it may take place anywhere from the age of 8 to 13; in boys, on average, it happens about two years later. This is the time period when students' physical characteristics vary the most within their classes and among their friends—some may grow so much that, by the end of the school year, they may be too large for the desks they were assigned in September. Others may change more slowly.

Early adolescence often brings with it new concerns about body image and appearance. Both girls and boys who never before gave much thought to their looks may suddenly spend hours primping, worrying and complaining—about being too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny or too pimply. Body parts may grow at different times and rates. Hands and feet, for example, may grow faster than arms and legs. Since the movement of their bodies requires coordination of body parts— and because these parts are of changing proportions—young adolescents may be clumsy and awkward in their physical activities

The rate at which physical growth and development take place also can influence other parts of a young teen's life. An 11-year-old girl who has already reached puberty will have different interests than will a girl who does not do so until she is 14. Young teens who bloom very early or very late may have special concerns. Late bloomers (especially boys) may feel they cannot compete in sports with more physically developed classmates. Early bloomers (especially girls) may be pressured into adult situations before they are emotionally or mentally able to handle them. The combined effect of the age or the beginning for physical changes in puberty and the ways in which friends, classmates, family and the world around them respond to those changes can have long-lasting effects on an adolescent. Some young teens, however, like the idea that they are developing differently from their friends. For example, they may enjoy some advantages, especially in sports, over classmates who mature later.

Whatever the rate of growth, many young teens have an unrealistic view of themselves and need to be reassured that differences in growth rates are normal.

Emotional Changes

Most experts believe that the idea of young teens being controlled by their "raging hormones" is exaggerated. Nonetheless, this age can be one of mood swings, sulking, a craving for privacy and short tempers. Young children are not able to think far ahead, but young teens can and do—which allows them to worry about the future. Some may worry excessively about:

- School performance
- Appearance, physical development and popularity
- Possible death of a parent
- Being bullied at school
- School violence
- Not having friends
- Drugs and drinking
- Hunger and poverty in the country
- Inability to get a good job
- Nuclear bombs and terrorist attacks on the country
- Divorce of their parents
- Dying

Many young teens are very self-conscious. And, because they are experiencing dramatic physical and emotional changes, they are often overly sensitive about themselves. They may worry about personal qualities or "defects" that are major to them but are hardly noticeable to others. A young teen also can be caught up in his or her own self. The teen may believe that he or she is the only person who feels a particular way or has the same experiences, that the teen is so special that no one else, particularly family, can understand him or her. This belief can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, a young teen's focus on him or herself has implications for how the teen mixes with family and friends.

Teens' emotions often seem exaggerated. Their actions seem inconsistent. It is normal for young teens to swing regularly from being happy to being sad and from feeling smart to feeling dumb. In fact, some think of adolescence as second toddlerhood.

In addition to changes in the emotions that they feel, most young teens explore different ways to express their emotions. For example, a child who greeted friends and visitors with enthusiastic hugs may turn into a teen who gives these same people only a small wave or nod of the head. Similarly, hugs and kisses for a parent may be replaced with a pulling away and an, "Oh, Mom!" It is important to remember, though, that these are usually changes in ways of expressing feelings and not the actual feelings about friends, parents and family.

Be on the lookout for excessive emotional swings or long-lasting sadness in your child. These can suggest severe emotional problems.

Cognitive Changes

The cognitive, or mental, changes that take place in early adolescence may be less easy to see, but they can be just as dramatic as physical and emotional changes. During adolescence, most teens make large leaps in the way they think, reason and learn. Younger children need to see and touch things to be convinced that they are real. But in early adolescence, children become able to think about ideas and about things that they cannot see or touch. They become better able to think through problems and see the consequences of different points of view or actions.

The cognitive changes allow young teens to learn more advanced and complicated material in school. They become eager to gain and apply knowledge and to consider a range of ideas or options. These mental changes also carry over into their emotional lives. Within the family, for example, the ability to reason may change the way a young teen talks to and acts around his or her parents.

In addition, these mental changes lead adolescents to consider who they are and who they may be. This is a process called identity formation and it is a major activity during adolescence. Most adolescents will explore a range of possible identities. They go through "phases" that to a parent can seem to be ever-changing. Indeed, adolescents who do not go through this period of exploration are at greater risk of developing psychological problems, especially depression, when they are adults.

Adolescents often struggle in developing a sense of who they are. They begin to realize that they play different roles with different people: son or daughter, friend, teammate, student, worker and so forth.

Young teens may be able to think more like adults, but they still do not have the experience that is needed to act like adults. As a result, their behavior may be out of step with their ideas. For example, your child may participate eagerly in a walk to raise money to save the environment—but litter the route with soda cans.

It takes time for young teens and their parents to adjust to all these changes. But the changes are also exciting. They allow a young teen to see what he or she can be like in the future and to develop plans for becoming that person.

Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- Administration for Children and Families: www.acf.hhs.gov
- Office on Women's Health: <http://womenshealth.gov>
- National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Education's publication entitled "Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence": www.ed.gov

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