

# Helping Your Child



through *Early Adolescence*



**U.S. Department of Education**  
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Secretary

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# Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence

for parents of children from 10 through 14

U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Communications and Outreach



# Foreword

Early adolescence can be a challenging time for children and parents alike. Parents often feel unprepared and they may view the years from 10 through 14 as a time just “to get through.” However, research and common sense tell us that this view is very limited. During the early adolescent years, parents and families can greatly influence the growth and development of their children. We sell our children short if we expect little from them and we sell ourselves short if we believe that we have no influence.

A growing awareness that young adolescents can accomplish a great deal is behind a national effort to improve education in America’s middle grades. At the heart of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is a promise to raise standards for all children and to help all children meet those standards. In support of this goal, President George W. Bush is committed to promoting the very best teaching programs. Well-trained teachers and instruction that is based on research can bring the best teaching approaches and programs to children of all ages and help ensure that no child is left behind. *Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence* is part of the president’s efforts to provide parents with the latest research and practical information that can help you support your children both at home and in school.

It’s not easy to raise a young teen. Many outside influences distract our children and complicate our efforts. Exhaustion, anxiety, a lack of support and limited resources may make it hard for us to be all that we want to be for our children. But whatever the challenges, we share one aim: to do the best job possible as parents. We hope that you will find this booklet helpful in achieving this goal.

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Learning as much as you can about the world of early adolescents is an important step toward helping your child—and you—through the fascinating, confusing and wonderful years from ages 10 through 14.

## Bumps, No Boulders



Mention being the parent of a young adolescent and other adults may roll their eyes and express their sympathy. They see images of bedrooms in which lost homework assignments share floor space with potato chip wrappers and grubby sweatpants.

But parents' concerns run deeper than messy bedrooms. They worry about the problems that young adolescents often face: rocky emotions, rebellion, peer pressures, low motivation, drugs, alcohol and pregnancies.

During the years from ages 10 through 14, children undergo many physical, emotional and mental changes. Together these changes can throw the lives of young teens and their parents off-balance. Major problems may arise, particularly among children who are already at risk of school failure.

On the other hand, if you talk to adults who work with young adolescents—teachers, school counselors and principals—you see another view of these children. It's true that young teens can be frustrating and challenging and that they can test their parents' patience. It's also true,





however, that these same youngsters can be funny, curious, imaginative and eager to learn. As research confirms, most young teens run into bumps but no boulders. They (and their parents) hit some rough spots, but they get through the young adolescent years successfully and grow into adults who find work, create meaningful relationships and become good citizens.

The journey through these years is easier when parents, families and caregivers learn as much as they can about this time in children's lives and when they give their children support. This booklet is designed to help in this effort. It pulls together information from scientifically-based research, as well as from interviews with award-winning middle school teachers, counselors and principals—most of whom also are—or have been recently—parents of young adolescents. The booklet addresses the following questions and concerns that parents of young teens often raise:

*The journey through these years is easier when parents, families and caregivers learn as much as they can about this time in children's lives and when they give their children support.*

- ★ How will my child change between the ages of 10 and 14?
- ★ What can I do to be a good parent for my adolescent?
- ★ How can I communicate better with my child?
- ★ How much independence should I give my child?
- ★ How can I help my child to become more confident?
- ★ How can I help my child to form good friendships and to resist harmful peer pressure?
  - ★ What can I do to keep the media from being a bad influence on my child?
- ★ What is school like for adolescents?
  - ★ What's the best way for me to stay involved in my child's school and in other activities?
    - ★ How can I help my child to be a successful reader?
    - ★ How can I keep my child motivated to learn and do well, both in and out of school?
    - ★ What can I do to help my child to develop good values and to learn right from wrong?
    - ★ How can I tell—and what can I do—if my child is having a serious problem?





## How will my child change between the ages of 10 and 14?

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 her\* developmental milestones grows weaker. Just *how* young teens develop can be influenced by many things: for example, genes, families, friends, neighborhoods and 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, the development of testes.

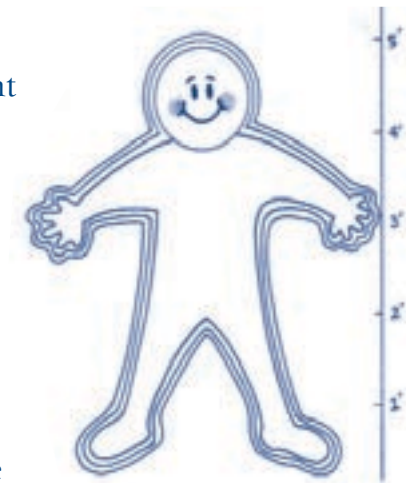
Adolescents do not all begin puberty at the same age. For girls, it may take place anywhere from the age of 8 to 13; in boys, on average, it happens about two years later. This is the time period when students’ physical characteristics vary the most within their classes and among their friends—some may 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. Because 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 takes 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’s 14. Young teens who bloom very early or very late may have special concerns. Late bloomers (especially boys) may feel they can’t 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 on 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.



\* Please note: In this booklet, we refer to a child as “her” in some places and “him” in others. We do this to make the booklet easier to read. Please understand, however, that every point that we make is the same for girls and boys.



## 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:

- ★ their school performance;
- ★ their appearance, physical development and popularity;
- ★ the possible death of a parent;
- ★ being bullied at school;
- ★ school violence;
- ★ not having friends;
- ★ drugs and drinking;
- ★ hunger and poverty in the country;
- ★ their inability to get a good job;
- ★ nuclear bombs and terrorists attacks on the country;
- ★ the divorce of their parents; and
- ★ 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. (Belief: “I can’t go to the party tonight because *everyone* will laugh at this baseball-sized zit on my forehead.” Facts: The pimple is tiny and hidden by hair.) A young teen also can be caught up in himself. He may believe that he is the



only person who feels the way he feels or has the same experiences, that he is so special that no one else, particularly his family, can understand him. This belief can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, a young teen’s focus on herself has implications for how she mixes with family and friends. (“I *can’t* be seen going to a movie with my *mother!*”)



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 a second toddlerhood. As Carol Bleifield, a middle school counselor in Wisconsin, explains, “One minute, they want to be treated and taken care of like a small child. Five minutes later they are pushing adults away, saying, ‘Let me do it.’ It may help if you can help them understand that they are in the midst of some major changes, changes that don’t always move steadily ahead.”

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’s 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. (For more information, see the **Problems** section, page 68.)





## 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 can't see or touch. They become better able to think through problems and see the consequences of different points of view or actions. For the first time, they can think about what might be, instead of what is. A 6-year-

old thinks a smiling person is happy and a crying person is sad. A 14-year-old may tell you that a sad person smiles to hide his true feelings.

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 her parents. She begins to anticipate how her parents will react to something she says or does and prepares an answer or an explanation.

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 don't go through this period of exploration are at greater risk of developing psychological problems, especially depression, when they are adults.

Just as adults, **who** with more experience and cognitive maturity can struggle with their different roles, adolescents 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 she walks with soda cans. Or she may spend an evening on the phone or exchanging e-mails with a friend talking about how they dislike a classmate because she gossips.

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 she can be like in the future and to develop plans for becoming that person.

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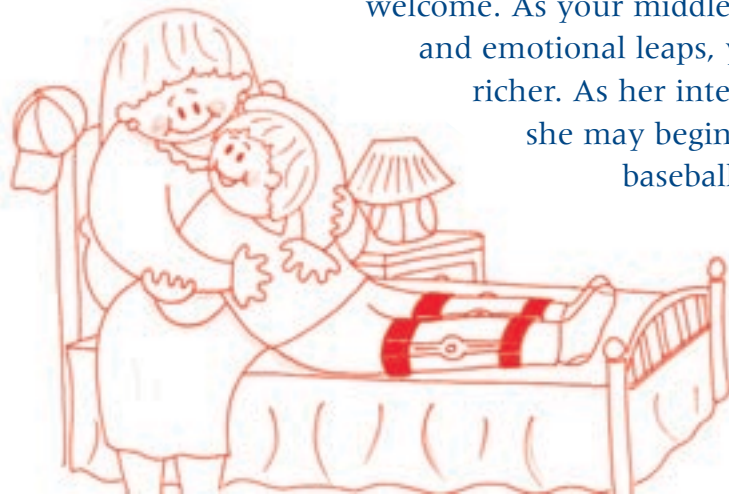


# Being an Effective Parent

## What can I do to be a good parent for my early adolescent child?

Parents often become less involved in the lives of their children as they enter the middle grades. But your young adolescent needs as much attention and love from you as he needed when he was younger—and maybe more. A good relationship with you or with other adults is the best safeguard your child has as he grows and explores. By the time he reaches adolescence, you and he will have had years of experience with each other; the parent of today’s toddler is parent to tomorrow’s teenager.

Your relationship with your child may change—in fact, it almost certainly must change—however, as she develops the skills required to be a successful adult. These changes can be rewarding and welcome. As your middle school child makes mental and emotional leaps, your conversations will grow richer. As her interests develop and deepen, she may begin to teach *you*—how to slug a baseball, what is happening with the city council or county board or why a new book is worth reading.



America is home to people with a great variety of attitudes, opinions and values.

Americans have different ideas and priorities, which can affect how we choose to raise our children. Across these differences, however, research has shown that being effective parents involves the following qualities:

- ★ **Showing love.** When our children behave badly, we may become angry or upset with them. We may also feel miserable because we become angry or upset. But these feelings are different from not loving our children. Young adolescents need adults who are there for them—people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them and show a genuine interest in them. This is how they learn to care for and love others. According to school counselor Carol Bleifield, “Parents can love their children but not necessarily love what they do—and children need to trust that this is true.”
- ★ **Providing support.** Young adolescents need support as they struggle with problems that may seem unimportant to their parents and families. They need praise when they’ve done their best. They need encouragement to develop interests and personal characteristics.
- ★ **Setting limits.** Young adolescents need parents or other adults who consistently provide structure and supervision that is firm and appropriate for age and development. Limits keep all children, including young teens, physically and emotionally safe. Carole Kennedy is a former middle school principal, U.S. Department of Education’s Principal-in-Residence (2000) and president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. She puts it this way, “They need parents who can say, ‘No, you cannot go to the mall all day or to movies with that group of kids.’” Psychologist Diana Baumrind identifies three types of parents: *authoritarian*, *permissive*

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and authoritative. By studying about findings from more than 20 years of research, she and her colleagues have found that to be effective parents, it's best to avoid extremes. *Authoritarian* parents who lay down hard-and-fast rules and expect their children to always do as they are told or *permissive* parents who have very few rules or regulations and give their children too much freedom are most likely to have the most difficult time as parents. Their children are at risk for a range of negative behavioral and emotional consequences. However, *authoritative* parents, who set limits that are clear and come with explanations, tend to struggle less with their adolescents. "Do it

because I said so" probably didn't work for your son when he was 6 and it's even less likely to work now that he's an adolescent. (For more information on setting limits, see the **Independence** section, page 23.)

★ **Being a role model.** Young adolescents need strong role models. Try to live the behavior and values that

you hope your child will develop. Your actions speak louder than words. If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child stands a better chance of following your example. As adolescents explore possibilities of who they may become, they look to their parents, peers, well-known personalities and others to define who they may become.

★ **Teaching responsibility.** We are not born knowing how to act responsibly. A sense of responsibility is formed over time. As children grow up, they need to learn to take more and more responsibility for such things as:

If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child stands a better chance of following your example.



- completing chores, such as doing yard work, cleaning their rooms or helping to prepare meals, that contribute to the family's well being;
- completing homework assignments without being nagged;
- taking on community activities;
- finding ways to be useful to others; and
- admitting to both the good and bad choices that they make.

★ **Providing a range of experiences.** Adolescence is a time for exploring many areas and doing new things. Your child may try new sports and new academic pursuits and read new books. He may experiment with different forms of art, learn about different cultures and careers and take part in community or religious activities. Within your means, you can open doors for your child. You can introduce him to new people and to new worlds. In doing so, you may renew in yourself long-ignored interests and talents, which also can set a good example for your child. Don't be discouraged when his interests change.

★ **Showing respect.** It is tempting to label all young adolescents as being difficult and rebellious. But these youngsters vary as much as do children in any other age group. Your child needs to be treated with respect, which requires you to recognize and appreciate her differences and to treat her as an individual. Respect also requires you to show compassion by trying to see things from your child's point of view and to consider her needs and feelings. By treating your young adolescent with respect, you help her to take pleasure in good behavior.

There are no perfect parents. However, a bad decision or an "off" day (or week or month) isn't likely to have any lasting impact on your child. What's most important in being an effective parent is what you do over time.





## How can I communicate better with my child?

Young adolescents often aren't great communicators, particularly with their parents and other adults who love them. Emily Hutchison, a middle school teacher from Texas notes that young teens "often feel they can talk with anyone better than their parents—even wonderful parents." "They tend to be private," explains Patricia Lemons, a middle school teacher in New Mexico. "They don't necessarily want to tell you what they did at school today."



Many psychologists have found, however, that when parents know where their children are and what they are doing (and when the adolescent knows the parent knows, what psychologists call *monitoring*), adolescents are at a lower risk for a range of bad experiences, including drug, alcohol and tobacco use; sexual behavior and pregnancy; and delinquency and violence. The key, according to psychologists, is to be inquisitive but not interfering, working to respect your child's privacy as you establish trust and closeness.

It's easiest to communicate with a young teen if you established this habit when your child was little. As school counselor Carol Bleifield explains, "You don't suddenly dive in during the seventh grade and say, 'So what did you do with your friends on Friday night?'" But it's not impossible to improve communication when your child reaches early adolescence. Here are some tips:

- ★ **Realize that no recipe exists for successful communication.** What works for getting one child to talk about what's important doesn't always work with another one. One middle school teacher and mother of two says her daughter is open and talkative; her son is quieter. But because her son likes to listen to music, to write and to read, this mother often goes with him to a local bookstore. Here, in a place where he's comfortable, the son describes stories and book characters as a link to what he is thinking and feeling. By listening to music with him and proofreading his writing when he's willing to let her this mother encourages her son to open up.
- ★ **Listen.** "You need to spend a lot of time *not* talking," suggests Diane Crim, a middle school teacher in Utah. To listen means to avoid interrupting and it means to pay close attention. This is best done in a quiet place with no distractions. It's hard to listen carefully if you're also trying to cook dinner or watch television. Often just talking with your child about a problem or an issue helps to clarify things. Sometimes the less you offer advice, the more your young teen may ask you for it. Listening can also be the best way to uncover a more serious problem that requires your attention.
- ★ **Create opportunities to talk.** To communicate with your child you need to make yourself available. Young adolescents resist "scheduled" talks; they don't open up when you tell them to, but when *they* want to. Some teens like to talk when they first get home from school. Others may like to talk at the dinner table or at bedtime. Some parents talk with their children in the car, preferably when the radio, tapes and CDs aren't playing. "I take my daughter to

Sometimes the less you offer advice, the more your young teen may ask you for it.







a mall—not the closer one, but the cooler one that is an hour and a half away,” says a middle school teacher and mother. Many of the best conversations grow out of shared activities. “Parents try to grab odd moments and have this deep communication with their child,” notes Sherry Tipps, an Arkansas teacher. “Then they are frustrated because it doesn’t happen.”

★ **Talk over differences.** Communication breaks down for some parents because they find it hard to manage differences with their child. It’s

When differences arise, telling your child your concerns firmly but calmly can prevent differences from becoming battles.

often easiest to limit these differences when you have put in place clear expectations. If your 13-year-old daughter knows she’s to be home by 9:30 p.m.—and if she knows the consequences for not meeting this curfew—the likelihood that she will be home on time increases.

Differences of opinion are easier to manage when we recognize that these differences can provide important opportunities for us to rethink the limits and to negotiate new ones, a skill that is valuable for your child to develop. For example, when your daughter is 14, setting a later curfew for some occasions may be fine. Such negotiations are possible because of your child’s growing cognitive skills and ability to reason and consider many possibilities and views. Because she can consider that her curfew should be later on the weekend than on school nights, your insistence that “it doesn’t matter” will only create a conflict.

When differences arise, telling your child your concerns firmly but calmly can prevent differences from becoming battles. Explaining



*why* your child made or wants to make a poor choice is more constructive: “Dropping out of your algebra class will cut off lots of choices for you in the future. Some colleges won’t admit you without two years of algebra, plus geometry and some trigonometry. Let’s get you some help with algebra.”

★ **Avoid over-reacting.** Responding too strongly can lead to yelling and screaming and it can shut down conversation. “Try to keep anxiety and emotions out of the conversation—then kids will open up,” advises eighth-grade teacher Anne Jolly from Alabama. Instead of getting riled up, she says, “It’s better to ask, ‘What do you think about what you did? Let’s talk about this.’”

Middle school teacher Charles Summers adds, “Kids are more likely to be open if they look at you as somebody who is not going to spread their secrets or get extremely upset if they confess something to you. If your kid says, ‘I’ve got to tell you something. Friday night I tried beer,’ and you go off the deep end, your kid won’t tell you again.”



At a time when they are already judging themselves critically, adolescents make themselves vulnerable when they open up to parents. We know that the best way to encourage a behavior is to reward it. If you are critical when your teenager talks to you, what he sees is that his openness gets punished rather than rewarded.







★ **Talk about things that are important to your young teen.** Different youngsters like to talk about different things. Some of the things they talk about may not seem important to you, but, as school counselor Carol Bleifield explains, “With kids, sometimes it’s like a different culture. You need to try to understand this, to put yourself in their place and time.” She cautions against pretending to be excited about something that bores you. By asking questions and listening, however, you can show your child that you respect his feelings and opinions. Here are topics that generally interest young adolescents:

- School.* If you ask your child, “What did you do in school today?” she most likely will answer, “Nothing.” Of course, you know that isn’t true. By looking at your child’s assignment book or reading notices sent home by the school, you will know that on Tuesday, your 10-year-old began studying animals in South America that are headed for extinction or that the homecoming football game is Friday night. With this information, you then can ask your child about specific classes or activities, which is more likely to start a conversation.

★ “Music has been the signature of every generation. It defines each age group. Parents ought to at least know the names of popular singers.”

- Hobbies and personal interests.* If your child loves sports, talk about his favorite team or event or watch the World Series or the Olympics with him. Most young adolescents are interested in music. Barbara Braithwaite, a middle school teacher in Pennsylvania notes that “Music has been the signature of every generation. It defines each age group. Parents ought to at least know the names of popular singers.” It’s important, however, to tell your child when you believe that the music he is listening to is inappropriate—and to explain why. Your silence can be misconstrued as approval.



—*Emotions.* As was pointed out earlier, young adolescents worry about a lot of different things. They worry about: their friends, being popular, sexuality, being overweight or scrawny, tomorrow’s math test, grades, getting into college, being abandoned and the future of the world. The list goes on. Sometimes it’s hard to know if a problem seems big to your child. School counselor Carol Bleifield says that if she is unsure, she asks, “Is this a small problem, a medium problem or a big problem? How important is it to you? How often do you worry about it?” Figuring out the size and importance of the problem helps her decide how to address it.

- Family.* Young adolescents like to talk about and be involved in plans for the whole family, such as vacations, as well as things that affect them individually, such as curfews or allowances. If you need back surgery, your child will want to know ahead of time. She may also want to learn more about the operation. Being a part of conversations about such topics can contribute to your child’s feelings of belonging and security.



- Sensitive subjects.* Families should handle sensitive subjects in a way that is consistent with their values. Remember, though, that avoiding such subjects won’t make them go away. If you avoid talking with your child about sensitive subjects, he may turn to the media or his friends for information. This increases the chances that what he hears will be out of line with your values or that the information will be wrong—or both.



Sharon Sikora, a middle school teacher from Colorado, explains that middle schoolers have wrong or inaccurate information about many important subjects. They will say they know about certain sensitive topics but they really don't. Discussing a sensitive subject directly may not work, Ms. Sikora notes, "You can't just sit down and say, 'Today we are going to talk about marijuana use.' That shuts down the conversation before you ever start."



- Parents' lives, hopes and dreams.* Many young adolescents want a window to their parents' world, both past and present. How old were you when you got your ears pierced? Did you ever have a teacher who drove you crazy? Did you get an allowance when you were 11? If so, how much? Were you sad when your grandpa died? What is your boss like at work? This doesn't mean you are obligated to dump all of your problems and emotions into your child's lap. You are a parent not a peer and an inappropriate question may best be left answered. However, recounting some things about your childhood and your life today can help your child sort out his own life.
- The future.* As the cognitive abilities of young adolescents develop, they begin to think more about the future and its possibilities. Your child may want to talk more about what to expect in the years to come—life after high school, jobs and marriage. He may ask questions such as, "What is it like to live in a college dormitory?" "How old do you have to be to get married?" "Is there any chance

that the world will blow up some day?" "Will there be enough gasoline so that I can drive a car when I get older?" These questions deserve the best answers that you can provide (and those that you can't answer deserve an honest, "I don't know.").

- Culture, current events.* Ours is a media-rich world. Even young children are exposed to television, music, movies, video and computer games and other forms of media. Remember, though, that the media can provide a window into your adolescent's world. For example, if you and your child have seen the same movie (together or separately), you can ask her whether she liked it and what parts she liked best.

- ★ **Communicate with kindness and respect.** Young teens can say or do things that are outrageous or mean-spirited or both. However hard your child pushes your buttons, it's best to respond calmly. The respect and self-control that you display in talks with your child may some day be reflected in her conversations with others.

However hard your child pushes your buttons, it's best to respond calmly.

*How* you say something is as important as *what* you say. "Stop picking at your face" can reduce a young adolescent to tears. "Your room looks like a pigsty" isn't as helpful as, "You need to spend some time picking up your room. The job will be easier if you spend 5 minutes right now picking the clothes up off the floor—putting the dirty ones in the hamper and hanging the clean ones up. After lunch you can spend 5 minutes straightening up your bookshelf." Youngsters also pay attention to the tone of your voice. A 10-year-old can easily tell a calm voice from an angry one.

## Independence



Kindness goes hand-in-hand with respect. As Joan Lipsitz, a nationally recognized authority on educating middle-grade students and the mother of two grown children, explains, “When I

was an active parent and teacher, I

had a rule that grew out of a classroom experience: ‘I will never knowingly be unkind to you and you will never knowingly be unkind to me.’ That turned out to be the most powerful rule I ever set, either in the classroom—it changed the culture—or at home.”

Communicating with respect also requires not talking down to adolescents. They are becoming more socially conscious and aware of events in the world and they appreciate thoughtful conversations. Jerri Foley, a middle school counselor in South Carolina, tells the story of a trip she made with a group of adolescent girls when the state was debating whether to continue flying the Confederate battle flag from atop the state house. “We were driving along the highway when we got into a big discussion,” she recalls. “We got so intense talking about it that we missed the exit to come home.”

### How much independence should I give my child?

As children enter adolescence, they often beg for more freedom. Parents walk a tightrope between wanting their children to be confident and able to do things for themselves and knowing that the world can be a scary place with threats to their children’s health and safety.



Some parents allow too much of the wrong kind of freedom or they offer freedom before the adolescent is ready to accept it. Other parents cling too tightly, denying young teens both the responsibilities they require to develop maturity and the opportunities they need to make choices and accept their consequences.

Research tells us that adolescents do best when they remain closely connected to their parents but at the same time are allowed to have their own points of view and even to disagree with their parents. Here are some tips to help balance closeness and independence:

- ★ **Set limits.** All children sometimes resist limits, but they want them and they need them. In a world that can seem too hectic for adults and adolescents alike, limits provide a security. Oftentimes, adolescents whose parents do not set limits feel unloved. Setting limits is most effective when it begins early. It is harder but not impossible, however, to establish limits during early adolescence.







★ **Be clear.** Most young teens respond best to specific instructions, which are repeated regularly. As middle school teacher Sharon Sikora notes, “Don’t just say, ‘I want your room clean,’ because they don’t know what that means. Say, in a non-argumentative way, ‘This is how I perceive a clean room.’ They may say, ‘I don’t really want the lamp over here, I want it over there.’ Give them the freedom to express themselves.”

★ **Give reasonable choices.** Choices make young teens more open to guidance. For example, you can tell your son that his algebra homework must be done before bedtime, but that he has a choice of

completing it either before or after supper. And you can tell your 14-year-old daughter that she can’t hang around the video arcade with her friends on Saturday night, but she can have a group of friends over to your house to watch a movie.



Using humor and creativity as you give choices may also make your child more willing to accept them. One middle

school teacher couldn’t get her own child to hang up clean clothes or put dirty clothes in the laundry basket. So she gave her daughter two options—either all the clothes had to be picked up or everything would go on the floor. “I was washing the clothes, then putting them in piles on the floor,” the teacher recalls. “It made me crazy, but it worked.” After two weeks, her daughter got tired of the stacks on the floor and she began picking up her clothes.



★ **Grant independence in stages.** The more mature and responsible a young teen’s behavior is, the more privileges parents can grant. You might first give your young teen the right to choose which sneakers to buy within a certain price range. Later you can let him make other clothing purchases—with the understanding that price tags won’t be removed until you approve the items. Eventually, you can give him a clothing allowance to spend as he likes.

★ **Health and safety come first.** Your most important responsibility as a parent is to protect your child’s health and safety. Your child needs to know that your love for her requires you to veto activities and choices that threaten either of these. Let your child know what things threaten her health and safety—and often the health and safety of others—and put your foot down. Doing this is made more difficult, though, because adolescents have a sense that nothing can hurt them. At the same time that he feels that everything he experiences is new and unique, an adolescent also believes that what happens to others will not happen to him. His beliefs are based on the fact that adolescence is the healthiest period of time during our lives. In this period, physical illnesses are not common and fatal disease is rare. The important thing to emphasize to your child is that, while he may be very healthy, death and injury during adolescence are most often caused by violence and accidents.

Your child needs to know that your love for her requires you to veto activities and choices that threaten either of these.







★ **Say no to choices that cut off future options.** Some things aren't worth fighting about. It may offend you if your son wears a shirt to school that clashes wildly with his pants, but this isn't a choice that can cut off future possibilities for him. Young teens may have a growing sense of the future, but they still lack the experiences required to fully understand how a decision they make today can affect them tomorrow. They may have heard that smoking is unhealthy, but they do not fully understand what it means to die of lung cancer at the age of 45. Talk to your children about the lifelong consequences of choices they make. Help them understand there are

You can guide by being a good listener and by asking questions that help your child to think about the results of her actions.

good and bad decisions and that knowing one from the other can make all the difference in their lives. Let your child know that you are "the keeper of options" until he is old enough and responsible enough to assume this responsibility: He may not skip school and he may not avoid taking tough courses that will prepare him for college.

★ **Guide, but resist the temptation to control.** The earlier section on being an effective parent discussed the importance of striking a good balance between laying down the law and allowing too much freedom. With most young teens, it's easiest to maintain this balance by guiding but not controlling. Young teens need opportunities to explore different roles, try on new personalities and experiment. They need to learn that choices have consequences. That means making some mistakes and accepting the results. But parents need to provide guidance so that young teens avoid making too many poor choices.



You can guide by being a good listener and by asking questions that help your child to think about the results of her actions: "What could happen if you let someone who is drunk drive you home?" Your guidance may be better appreciated if you ask your child's advice on a range of matters and follow the advice if it seems reasonable: "What should we cook for Daddy's birthday?" "I don't have to work on Saturday. Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

The fine line between guiding and controlling may be different for different children. Some children, whether they are 7 or 17, need firmer guidance and fewer privileges than do other children at the same age. One middle school teacher explains how the different behavior of her own two teens created a need for different limits: "My daughter understood a midnight curfew to mean that she either had to be in the house with the door locked by 12 or else she must have placed the call from the emergency room informing her parents that she had broken her leg. My son, who was 15 months younger, understood a midnight curfew to mean that he could call at 11:59 p.m. to inform his parents that he'd be home after the pizza he'd ordered with his buddies had arrived and been consumed and he'd driven home his 6 friends."





- ★ **Let kids make mistakes.** We want our children to grow into adults who can solve problems and make good choices. These abilities are a critical part of being independent. To develop these abilities, however, young teens on occasion may need to fail, provided the stakes aren't too high and no one's health or safety is at risk. Making mistakes also allows young teens to learn one critical skill—how to bounce back. It's hard for a child to learn how to pick himself up and start over if his parents always rescue him from difficulties.
- ★ **Make actions have consequences.** If you tell your child that she must be home by 10 p.m., do not ignore her midnight arrival. You lose credibility with your child if she suffers no consequences for returning home two hours late. However, the punishment should fit the crime. Grounding a child for six weeks restricts the entire family. Instead, you might talk with your child about how coming in two

*Your teenager may want to dye her hair purple and pierce most parts of her body, but these expressions may be independent of her sense of who she is and who she will become.*

hours late has affected you. You've been up worrying and have missed your sleep. But you'll still have to get up the next morning at your regular time, make breakfast, do your chores and go to work. Because her lack of consideration has made your life harder, she will have to complete some of your chores so that you can get to bed earlier the next night.



Finally and despite what we often hear and read, adolescents look to their parents first and foremost in shaping their lives. When it comes to morals and ethics, political beliefs and religion, teenagers almost always have more in common with their parents than their parents believe. As a parent, you should look beyond the surface, beyond the specific behaviors to who your child is becoming. Your teenager may want to dye her hair purple and pierce most parts of her body, but these expressions may be independent of her sense of who she is and who she will become. At the same time that many of your child's behaviors are ultimately harmless, some of them may not only be harmful but also deadly.

Parents need to talk to their children and make it clear that many of the major threats to their future health and happiness are not a matter of chance, but are a matter of choice—choices like drinking and driving, smoking, drugs, sexual activity, and dropping out of school.

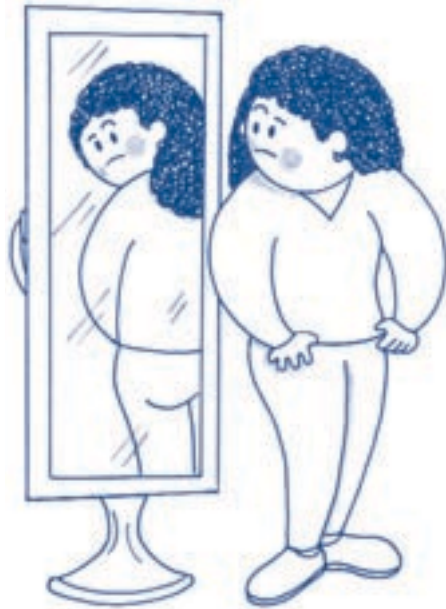
Research tells us that adolescents who engage in one risky behavior are more likely to participate in others, so parents need to be front and center, talking to their children about the potentially deadly consequences of opening that Pandora's box.





## How can I help my child to become more confident?

Young teens often feel inadequate. They have new bodies and developing minds and their relationships with friends and family members are in flux. They understand for the first time that they aren't good at everything. The changes in their lives may take place more rapidly than their ability to adjust to them.



Poor self-esteem often peaks in early adolescence, then improves during the middle and late teen years as identities gain strength and focus. At any age, however, a lack of confidence can be a serious problem. Young teens with poor self-esteem can be lonely, awkward with others and sensitive to criticism and with what they see as their shortcomings. Young teens with low confidence are less likely to join in activities and form friendships. This isolates them further and slows their ability to develop a better self-image. When they do make friends, they are more vulnerable to negative peer pressure.

Some young adolescents who lack confidence hold back in class. Others act out to gain attention. At its worst, a lack of confidence is often linked with self-destructive behavior and habits—smoking or drug or alcohol use, for example.

Girls often experience deeper self-doubts than do boys (although there are many exceptions). This can be for many reasons:

- ★ Society sends girls the message that it is important for them to get along with others and to be very, very thin and pretty. Life can be just as hard, however, for a boy who thinks he has to meet society's expectations that boys have to be good at sports and other physical activities.
- ★ Girls mature physically about two years earlier than do boys, which requires girls to deal with issues of how they look, popularity and sexuality before they are emotionally mature enough to do so.
- ★ Girls may receive confusing messages about the importance of achievement. Although girls are told that achievement is important, some also fear that they won't be liked, especially by boys, if they come across as too smart or too capable, especially in the areas of math, science and technology.

If your young adolescent suffers from a severe lack of confidence over long period, she may benefit from seeing a counselor or other professional. This is especially true if she also has a drug or alcohol problem, a learning disability, an eating disorder or severe depression. (See the

**Problems** section, page 68, for information that can help you to decide whether your child fits into one of these categories.) Most young adolescents will get through the rough spots with adequate time and support.



Most psychologists now believe that self-esteem and self-confidence represent a range of feelings that a child has about himself in many





different situations. Psychologist Susan Harter has developed a theory of self-esteem that considers both a child's sense of confidence in an area of activity and how important that area is to the child. For example, adolescents may think about a number of situations: competing on the track

**An adolescent is likely to feel more confident doing some of these things than others.**

team, studying math, dating, taking care of younger brothers or sisters and so on. An adolescent is likely to feel more confident doing some of these things than others. She may feel very good about her athletic ability and skill at math, but feel bad about her dating life. She may also have mixed feelings about how good a sister she is to

her baby brother. How good this teenager feels about herself ties to how important each of these area is to her. If having a very active dating life is the most important area of her life, this girl will feel bad about herself. If being a scholar-athlete is most important area, then she will feel very good about herself. Based on this theory, the best ways to help your child to develop confidence include the following:

★ **★ Provide opportunities for your child to succeed.** As teacher Diane Crim points out, "The best way to instill confidence in someone is to give them successful experiences. You need to set them up to succeed—give them experiences where they can see how powerful they are. Kids can engineer those experiences. Part of confidence is knowing what to do when you don't know what to do."

★ Help your child to build confidence in his abilities by encouraging him to take an art class, act in a play, join a soccer or baseball team, participate in science fairs or computer clubs or play a musical instrument—whatever he likes to do that brings out the best in him.



Don't push a particular activity on your child. Most children, whether they are 3 or 13 years old, resist efforts to get them to do things that they don't enjoy. Pushing children to participate in activities they haven't chosen for themselves can lead to frustration. Try to balance your child's experiences between activities that he is already good at doing with new activities or with activities that he is not so good at doing.

You can also help your child to build confidence by assigning him family responsibilities at which he can succeed—unloading the dishwasher, cleaning his room or mowing the lawn.

★ **★ Help young teens feel safe and trust in themselves.** The ability of adolescents to trust in themselves comes from receiving unconditional love that helps them to feel safe and to develop the ability to solve their own problems. Your child, like all children, will encounter situations that require her to lean on you and others.

★ But always relying on you to bail her out of tough situations can stunt her emotional growth. "We have to teach our children how to cope with the things they encounter, instead of easing the path," says teacher Anne Jolly.







- ★ **Talk about anxieties that are related to school violence and to global terrorism.** Many children have seen terrifying images of death and destruction on television and on the Internet. You can help your child to understand that although the country has suffered awful acts of terror, we are strong people who can come together and support each other through difficult times. In addition, you can:
  - Create a calm environment in your home through your own behavior. This may not be possible if your family has been affected directly by an act of terror or violence. If you are anxious, you need to explain to your child what you are feeling and why. Children take emotional cues from those they love.
  - Listen to what your child has to say. Assure him that adults are working to make homes and schools safe.
  - Help your child to separate fact from fiction. Discuss facts with your child and avoid guessing, exaggerating or overreacting.
  - Monitor your child’s television, radio and Internet activity. Help her to avoid overexposure to violent images, which can heighten her anxiety.
  - Use historical examples (for example, Pearl Harbor or the Challenger space shuttle explosion) to explain to your child that bad things happen to innocent people, but that people go on with their lives and resolve even terrible situations.

—Continue your normal family routines.

More information on talking with children about violence or acts of terror is available on the U.S. Department of Education’s Web site at [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).



- ★ **Praise and encourage.** Praise is meaningful to adolescents when it comes from those they love and count on most—their parents and other important adults in their lives. Praising your child will help her to gain confidence. However, the compliments that you give her must be genuine. She will recognize when they are not.
- ★ **Have patience.** As adults, most people have confidence. This confidence comes about through years of experiencing success, but also through years of exploring strengths and weakness and choosing to stress different parts of our lives. Most of us would be unhappy if we had to do only those things that we are not good at. As adults, we tend to find our areas of strength and—to the extent we can—to pursue these areas more than others. For an adolescent, however, it is difficult to downplay the areas in which they are less confident. For example, it is very hard for an adolescent with academic skills to focus on school rather than on dating, when all of her friends are dating and telling her how important dating is. For a parent this can lead to feelings of helplessness. You know that whether that cute new boy asked out your daughter will have little consequence on her life for the long run, but you also know that she cannot yet see this!





## How can I help my child to form good friendships and to resist harmful peer pressure?

Friendships can affect many areas of young adolescents' lives—grades, how they spend their time, what clubs they join and how they behave in public places, such as a shopping mall. Youngsters who have trouble forming friendships are more likely to have poor self-esteem, do poorly in



school, drop out, get involved in delinquent behavior and suffer from a range of psychological problems as adults.

Children of all ages need to feel that they fit in—that they belong. As children approach the teen years, the need to be “one of the gang” is stronger than at any other

age. Friendships become closer and more important and play a key part in allowing young adolescents to sort out who they are and where they're headed. They are likely to form small groups or cliques, each with a special identity (for example, jocks, brains, preppies or geeks).

Many parents worry that their children's friends will become so influential in their lives that their own roles will diminish. Parents worry still more that their children's friends will encourage them to take part in harmful activities.

Studies by psychologist Thomas Berndt and his colleagues have shown that friends do influence one another's attitudes and behavior and that, over time, friends become more and more similar in their attitudes and behavior. For example, adolescents whose friends described themselves as more disruptive in school increased in disruption themselves over the school year.

The peak period for peer influence is generally from seventh to ninth grades. During this time, friends often influence taste in music, clothes or hairstyles, as well as the activities in which youngsters choose to participate. However, peers *do not* replace parents. You are still the most important influence in your child's life. Young teens are more inclined to turn to their parents than to peers for guidance in deciding what post-high-school plans to make, what career to select and what religious and moral values to choose. This influence is greatest when the bond between parent and child is strong.

Here are some tips to guide you in helping your child to form good friendships:

- ★ **Recognize that peer pressure can be bad or good.** Most young teens are drawn to friends who are similar to them. If your child chooses friends who are not interested in school and who make poor grades, he may be less willing to study or complete assignments. If he chooses friends who like school and do well in their studies, however, his motivation to get good grades may be strengthened. Friends who avoid alcohol and drugs also will exert a positive influence on your child.

Young teens are more inclined to turn to their parents than to peers for guidance in deciding what post-high-school plans to make.





★ **Get to know your child's friends.** A good way to learn about your child's friends is to drive them to events—talking with them in the car can reveal a lot. You can also welcome your child's friends into your home. Make it a place with food and a comfortable atmosphere. Having your child's friends at your home can provide you with peace of mind and allow you to set the rules of conduct, as well as help you to gain a better understanding of what they talk about and what their concerns are.

★ **Get to know the parents of your child's friends.** You don't have to be best buddies, but it helps to know if other parents' attitudes and approaches to parenting are similar to yours. Former principal Carole

Kennedy explains, "The kid may seem okay, but you need to know if someone is around at the other house to supervise." Knowing the other parent makes it easier to learn what you need to know: where your child is going, who she's going with, what time the activity starts and ends, whether an adult will be present and how your child will get to and from the activity.



★ **Provide your child with some unstructured time in a safe place to hang around with friends.** Activities are important, but too many piano lessons or basketball practices can lead to burnout. Allowing



your child some unstructured time with friends in a safe place with adult supervision lets him share ideas and develop important social skills. For example, among friends your child can learn that good friends are good listeners, that they are helpful and confident (but not overly so), that they are enthusiastic, possess a sense of humor and that they respect others. Spending time with others may also help your child to change some behaviors that make others uncomfortable around him: being too serious or unenthusiastic, critical of others or too stubborn.

★ **Talk with your child about friends, about friendship and about making choices.** It's normal for adolescents to care about what others think of them. This makes it especially important for you to talk with your youngster about resisting the pressure to disobey the rules or go against the standards and values that she has been taught. You can talk with her about how to be a good friend and about how all friendships have their ups and downs. You can also talk about the importance of making good choices when she is with friends. "I always tell them, 'If it feels wrong, it probably is,'" explains teacher Barbara Braithwaite.

Spending time with others may also help your child to change some behaviors that make others uncomfortable around him.

Teacher Charles Summers tells his middle school students and his own children, "You need to look at who you are when you are with this person." He also suggests that they ask themselves this question: "How do you want to be described by others?" Children's responses can guide their behavior.







★ **Teach your child how to get out of a bad situation.** Talk with your child about dangerous or inappropriate situations that might arise and about possible ways to handle them. Ask your 14-year-old daughter what she would do if a guest arrived at a slumber party with a bottle of wine in her overnight bag. Ask your 12-year-old son how he would handle a suggestion from a friend to cut school and head for a nearby burger place.

Ideally, youngsters themselves can be the ones to say “no” to a potentially dangerous or destructive situation. But if they haven’t yet learned this skill, parent Marianne Cavanaugh from Connecticut suggests an alternative: “Sometimes kids don’t want to do what their peers want them to do. I tell my kids to blame me—to tell their friends that their Mom says ‘no.’ This helps get them off the hook.” Finally, no child going out for an evening should be without change for a phone call. As a last resort, this may be his lifeline. A cell phone may also be appropriate if family finances allow one and if the child knows how to use the phone responsibly.



★ **Monitor friendships to help your child avoid risky and unhealthy behavior.** Young adolescents need supervision, including during the important after-school hours. Keep tabs on who your child’s friends are and what they do when they get together. Bill Gangl, a middle school teacher in Minnesota, suggests, “Don’t be afraid to be the jerk who makes the phone call to the other house to make sure that (your child) is there. And don’t be afraid to say no.”

Many middle school teachers and parents have different opinions as to whether parents can or should try to stop their children from seeing a friend that the parents dislike. Some youngsters will rebel if told they can’t spend time with certain friends. Many adults who have worked with young teens suggest that you let your child know that you disapprove of a friendship and why you disapprove. They also suggest that you limit the amount of time and the activities that you will allow with the friend.

★ **Model good friendships.** The example of friendship you provide has a bigger impact on your child’s friendships than any lecture. Children who see their parents treat each other and their friends with kindness and respect have an advantage. Baking cookies for the new neighbor or offering a listening ear for an unhappy friend sends your child a powerful message.

Many adults who have worked with young teens suggest that you let your child know that you disapprove of a friendship and why you disapprove.



## What can I do to keep the media from being a bad influence on my child?

It's hard to understand the world of early adolescents without considering the huge impact on their lives of the mass media. It competes with families, friends, schools and communities in its ability to shape young teens' interests, attitudes and values.

The mass media infiltrates their lives. Most young adolescents watch TV and movies, surf the Internet, exchange e-mails, listen to CDs and to radio stations that target them with music and commercials and read articles and ads in teen magazines.

First, look on the bright side. The new media technologies can be fun and exciting. Used wisely, they can also educate. Good TV programs can inform, good music can comfort and good movies can expand interests and unlock mysteries. Additionally, many forms of media are being used in classrooms today—computers, cable-equipped TVs and VCRs are all part of the landscape. Indeed, recent years have seen a commitment to connecting every classroom to the Internet and providing a reasonable

number of computers to each classroom for student use. As a result, children need to be exposed to media, if only to learn how to use it.



The problem is that young adolescents often don't—or can't—distinguish between what's good in the media and what's bad. Some spend hours in front of the TV or plugged into earphones, passively taking in what they see and hear—violence, sex, profanities, stereotyping and story lines and characters that are unrealistic. We know from research such as that conducted by George Comstock and Erica Sherrar that seeing too much TV violence appears to increase aggressive behavior in children and that regular viewing of violence makes violence less shocking and more acceptable.

Students who report watching the most TV have lower grades and lower test scores than do those who watch less TV. “In any classroom discussion I have, it is very apparent who's watching [a lot of] television and who's not,” explains teacher Sherry Tipps. “For the kids who are not motivated in the classroom, mention TV and suddenly they perk up.”

As young teens mature, high levels of TV-viewing, video-game playing and computer use take their toll. On average, American children spend far more time with the media than they do completing work for school. Seventh graders, for example, spend an average of 135 minutes each day watching TV and 57 minutes doing schoolwork.

Add to these negative psychological and academic effects, negative physical effects. Recent reports by the U.S. Surgeon General show that the number of overweight teens in American has increased greatly over the past two decades. Being overweight, in turn, can contribute to serious health problems, such as diabetes.

On average, American children spend far more time with the media than they do completing work for school.



Negative influences also come from other media. For example, a growing number of ads in magazines, including some for harmful products such as alcohol and tobacco, are targeted at young adolescents.

Your child will benefit from your guidance in helping him to balance media-related activities with other activities such as reading, talking with family and spending time with friends. Here are some ways that you can help your child make good media choices:

- ★ **Limit the amount of time your child spends viewing TV.** It's impossible to protect your child entirely from the media. Banning TV entirely may only strengthen its appeal to her. However, some parents do make TV viewing off-limits during the school week, except for special programs that are agreed to ahead of time.

Remember, it's easier to restrict your child's poor media choices if you say no before she brings home the objectionable CDs or computer games or turns on the violent TV programs. Let your child know that you will monitor her media choices.

- ★ **Monitor what your child watches and listens to.** Former principal Carole Kennedy advises, "Don't just listen to how loud the music is, but to what the words are." Learn about the TV programs and movies that your child wants to watch, the computer games he wants to play and the music he wants to listen to.

Knowing something about your child's interests will let you enter into his world and talk with more knowledge and force about his choices. Ask your young teen what bands or singers he likes. Then read about his favorites in



magazines or newspapers or listen to their CDs or to the radio stations that play their music.

- ★ **You can also watch or listen *with* your child.** This allows you to spend time with him and to learn more about the programs, games and music that he likes. Talk with your child about what you are seeing and hearing.

- ★ **Suggest TV programs that you want your child to watch.** Encourage your child to watch TV programs about a variety of subjects—nature, travel, history, science, biography and news, as well as programs that entertain. News and history programs, for example, can encourage conversations about world issues, national and local politics, social problems and health concerns.

- ★ **Talk with your child about the difference between facts and points of view.** Young teens need to learn that not everything they hear or see is true. Let your child know that the TV show or movie he sees, the radio station or music he listens to and the magazine he reads may have a definite point of view. Talk with him about how the media can promote certain ideas or beliefs, which may differ from those of your family. If your child wants to watch, listen to or read something that you believe is inappropriate, let him know exactly why you object.

- ★ **Talk with your child about misleading ads.** Young adolescents are especially vulnerable to advertising. Talk with your child about what ads are for—to sell products—and about how to judge whether the products the ads sell are right for her. If, for example, your daughter has short, blond, curly hair, ask her if she really thinks the shampoo that she wants you to spend \$15 for will make her hair look like the long, black, straight hair on the model in the magazine ad.







- ★ **Consider buying a V-chip for your TV or a filter for your computer.** A V-chip is a computer chip that can detect program ratings—X, R, PG and so on and so block your child from watching pornographic, violent or other inappropriate TV channels. Similar chips or filters can prevent your child from visiting certain Web sites. Many of these can be obtained for free or for modest costs at your local electronics store.
- ★ **Talk with your child about the risks of visiting computer chat rooms.** Let your child know the dangers of “talking” online with strangers. There is software that can restrict children from chat rooms, even as they allow access to other content.
- ★ **Talk with other parents.** Discussing movies, TV shows, computer games and CDs with the parents of your child’s friends and classmates can give you more strength to say *no* when she wants to see or hear something that think is inappropriate. You also can quickly find out that *not everyone* in the seventh grade is going to be allowed to see the latest R-rated movie in which bloody bodies are strewn across the screen.
- ★ **Provide alternatives to media entertainment.** According to teacher Bill Gangl, “If you give the kids enough activities, the TV goes away.” Given the opportunity, many children would rather *do* than *watch*. A day at a miniature golf course or a visit with a friend may hold more appeal for your child than watching TV.
- ★ **Model alternative forms of entertainment.** A young teen whose parent is constantly in front of the TV or checking her e-mail over a quick dinner is being sent a definite message. Parents who turn off the TV or computer and engage in conversation, sports, games or other activities are showing alternatives to their children. An adolescent today may well wonder “what did you do before TV (or computers or video games)?” Show them!



### What is school like for young adolescents?

It is likely that you attended a junior high school. It probably combined grades seven through nine and resembled a mini-high school. You probably moved from class to class throughout the school day and had a different teacher for each subject.

During the past 20 years, many changes have taken place in how young adolescents are educated. These changes continue as we learn more about how these children develop and learn. Today, fewer and fewer young adolescents attend junior highs. Instead, a growing number attend middle schools. Most of these schools are for grades 6–8, although some may have grades 5–8, 5–7 or even 7–8. As the middle school movement has accelerated, many high schools have moved from serving grades 10–12 to grades 9–12.

As a parent, you may wonder, “Is one grade structure better than another for my child? Most educators believe (and research confirms) that the way a school organizes the grades is not as important as what goes on inside the school. That is, *what* gets taught and *how* it gets taught in a school matter more than how the school combines its grades. Furthermore, the grade span of a school doesn’t tell you much about the quality of the school and whether its educational practices are well suited to young adolescent students.





Most young teens entering a new school find that it's a big change. They're used to being the oldest; once again they're the youngest. Many classmates are new, as are the routines and the school work. Coming at a time when young teens are undergoing many other stressful changes, the move to a new school can be overwhelming and have a negative impact on motivation and self-esteem.



Because of this, many middle schools have programs to ease the transition. For example, they might invite elementary school students to visit the middle school to become familiar with the building, lockers and changing classrooms. Or, administrators of the middle and elementary schools might meet to discuss programs. School counselors might meet to talk about how to help students make a smooth transition. These and other

practices can help make the new school seem friendlier.

Hormones may be fluctuating, but young teens of all backgrounds and with a broad range of personal characteristics still absorb vast amounts of information. They also can benefit from a strong curriculum. As young adolescents develop their cognitive skills, they are able to complete longer and more involved projects and to explore subjects in more depth.



Young teens generally benefit from being exposed to a broad range of experiences and programs—academic, recreational and vocational. These opportunities take advantage of their natural curiosity and can be invaluable in familiarizing them with new worlds and possibilities. These exploratory programs can also be fun. For these reasons, some schools provide opportunities both in and out of school for students to participate in sports, as well as in programs to learn subjects that range from foreign languages, to music, to drama, to technology. Many schools also encourage students to participate in volunteer or community service projects. Exploratory programs can help young teens figure out where they fit in and allow them to think about their future plans.

There's still plenty of room for improvement in middle schools. Test scores suggest that many young teens lack the skills needed for high school success. On international comparisons they aren't scoring as well as we would like in areas such as reading and math.

Exploratory programs can help young teens figure out where they fit in and allow them to think about their future plans.

More educators and policymakers are becoming aware of the high levels to which young teens can achieve. This awareness is leading to still more change in middle-grades education: in what gets taught, how it is taught, how teachers are prepared and how to assess what students know and can do.



## What's the best way for me to stay involved in my child's school activities?

Your young teen needs you in her life more than she may admit (to you or to herself)—although she may want you present under different terms and conditions than she did previously. Some parents misread the signals that their children send and back off too soon. For example, for children at age nine, about 75 percent of American parents report high or moderate involvement in school-related activities, but when children reach age 14, the rate of parent involvement has dropped to 55 percent. The rate continues to drop throughout high school.

Research shows that adolescents do better in school when their parents are involved in their lives and that education works best when teachers and parents work closely with one another. Here are some tips for staying involved in your child's school life:



## ★ Set ground rules for your child at the beginning of the school year.

From the first day of school, make certain that your child knows what time he is expected to go to bed and get up, what he needs to do to get ready for school each morning and what time he needs to leave the house for school. Check that he knows his curfew both on weekdays and on the weekend. Make sure, too, that your child knows that he is expected to try hard and do his best in school.

## ★ Learn about your child's school.

The more you know, the easier your job as parent will be. Ask for a school handbook. This will answer many questions that will arise over the year. If your school doesn't have a handbook, ask questions. Ask the principal and teachers, for example: What classes does the school offer? Which classes are required? What are your expectations for my child? How does the school measure student progress? What are the school's rules and regulations?

## ★ Find out about the school's homework policy.

Knowing school policies for homework is important because by the middle grades, homework generally plays a bigger role in your child's grades and test scores than it did in elementary school. Find out from teachers how often they will assign homework and about how long it may take to complete. Do *not* do homework for your child. However, make sure that he tries his best to complete assignments.

For more information on homework, see the U.S. Department of Education booklet *Helping Your Child with Homework*, listed in the Resources section, page 77.





★ **Help your child get organized.** Many young teens are easily distracted. With so much to do and think about, it's not surprising. The amount of their school work and their extracurricular activities often increases at the same time that they are going through a growth spurt, developing new

relationships and trying to develop more independence. Young teens respond to these changes in varying ways, but many of them daydream, forget things, lose things and seem unaware of time. It's not unusual for a middle schooler to complete a homework assignment but forget to turn it in. Some schools help students develop organizational skills. Others leave the task to you. Whatever the case, you can:

- Go over your child's schedule together to see if she's got too much going on at once. Talk with her about setting priorities and dropping certain activities if necessary or rearranging the time of some of them.
- Help her learn good study habits. Set a regular time for her to do homework. Talk about the assignments. Make sure she understands what she's supposed to do. Make sure she has a calendar on which to record assignments, as well as a backpack and homework folders in which to tuck assignments for safekeeping.



- Help your child get started when he has to do research reports or other big assignments, perhaps by taking him to the library or helping him find sources of online information from appropriate Web sites.
- Help your child to avoid last-minute cramming by working out a schedule of what he needs to do to prepare for the test.
- Work alongside your child to clean out his backpack or clean up his room.

★ **Provide an environment at home that encourages learning and school activities.** Provide a quiet time without TV and other distractions when homework assignments can be completed. If you live in a small or noisy household, try having all family members take part in a quiet activity during homework time. You may need to take a noisy toddler outside or into another room to play. If distractions can't be avoided, you may want to let your child complete assignments in the local library.

Let your child know that you value education. Show him that the skills he is learning are an important part of the things he will do as an adult. Let him see you reading books, newspapers and computer screens; writing reports, letters, e-mails and lists; using math to balance your checkbook or to measure for new carpeting; and doing things that require thought and effort. Tell your child about what you do at work.

Show him that the skills he is learning are an important part of the things he will do as an adult.





★ **Attend school events.** Go to sports events and concerts, attend back-to-school night, PTA meetings and awards events, such as a “perfect attendance” breakfast. Remember, though, that many young teens are often self-conscious and want parents to be present but in the background. “They want you there, but they want you at more of a distance,” explains teacher Bill Gangl. “They want

to look out of the corner of their eye and see you there. On the track, they want to peek up into the stands to make sure somebody is watching them.” Look for school activities that you can do with your child—cleaning up the school grounds, for example.

★ **Volunteer in your child’s school.** If your schedule permits, look for ways to help out at your child’s school. Schools often send home lists of ways in which parents can get involved. Chaperones are needed for school trips or dances. School committees need members and the school newsletter may need an editor. The school may have councils or advisory committees that need parent representatives. If work or other commitments make it impossible for you to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home. For example, you can make phone calls to other parents to tell them about school-related activities or maybe help translate a school newsletter from English into another language.



★ **Keep in touch with the school and your child’s teachers.** Keeping in touch can be tricky when your child has many teachers, but at the very least it’s good to know your child’s counselor and a favorite teacher. The more visible you are, the more educators will be able to communicate openly and regularly with you. Attend parent-teacher conferences. Read school bulletins when they are sent home.

★ **Make sure your child takes classes that are needed to attend college.** Middle school or junior high is by no means too early to plan for your child’s future. A two- or four-year college degree is becoming more and more important for finding a good job. Colleges want students and employers want workers who have taken certain courses and acquired a solid base of skills and knowledge. Good courses for college-bound students include English, science (biology, chemistry, earth science and physics), history or geography, as well as algebra and geometry. Many colleges also require applicants to study a foreign language for at least two years and some prefer three or four years of one language. Basic computer skills are also essential and many colleges view participation in the arts and music as valuable.

★ **Monitor how well your child is doing in school.** Report cards are one indication of how well your child is doing in school. But you also need to know how things are going between report cards. For example, if your son is having trouble in math, find out when he has his next math test and when it will be returned to him. This allows you to address a problem before it mushrooms into something bigger. Call or e-mail the teacher if your son doesn’t understand an assignment or if he needs extra help to complete an assignment.

The more visible you are, the more educators will be able to communicate openly and regularly with you.



## How can I help my child to be a successful reader?

It's during the middle grades that young adolescents build the foundation for lifelong reading habits. They develop their own reading interests and learn to read different kinds of text—informational articles and books, poetry and plays, as well as stories and novels. They increase their vocabularies by reading widely and they begin to use reading to help answer important questions about themselves and the world.

On the other hand, for many young adolescents, reading difficulties go hand-in-hand with social and emotional problems.

It is important for you to keep your child reading through the adolescent years, both at school and at home. Here are some suggestions that can help:

- ★ **★ Make sure your home has lots of reading materials that are appropriate for your child.** Reading materials don't have to be new or expensive. You often can find good books and magazines for your child at yard or library sales. Ask family members and friends to consider giving your child books and magazine subscriptions as gifts for birthdays or other special occasions. Set aside quiet time for family reading. Some families even enjoy reading aloud to each other, with each family member choosing a book, story, poem or article to read to the others.
- ★ **★ Encourage your child to use the library.** Take your child to the local library and help him get his own library card. Ask librarians to help him locate different areas in the library, use the card catalogue or computer system and find materials in which he is interested.



- ★ **★ Be a positive role model for reading.** Let your child see you reading for pleasure as well as for performing your routine activities as an adult—reading letters and recipes, directions and instructions, newspapers, computer screens and so forth. Go with her to the library and check out books for yourself. When your child sees that reading is important to you, she may decide that it's important to her, too.



- ★ **★ Find out from your child's teachers how they encourage or teach reading.** Make it clear that you value reading and that you support homework assignments that require your child to read. Ask for lists of books for your child to read independently at home.
- ★ **★ Find out how to help your child if his first language is not English.** When your child first enters middle school, talk with her teachers. Most teachers welcome such talks. If you feel that you need some support in meeting with teachers, ask a relative, neighbor or someone else in your community to go with you. When you meet, tell the teachers the things that you are doing at home to strengthen your child's reading. Children who can switch back and forth between languages have accomplished something special. They should be praised and encouraged as they work for this achievement.





★ **Get help for your child if she has a reading problem.** When a child is having reading difficulties, the reason might be simple to understand and deal with. For example, your child might have trouble seeing and need glasses or she may just need more help with reading skills. If you think that your child needs extra help, ask teachers about special services, such as after-school or summer reading programs. Also ask teachers or your local librarian for names of community organizations and local literacy volunteer groups that offer tutoring services.

Some causes for reading difficulties signal larger problems, perhaps a learning disability. If you think your child may have some kind of physical or learning problem, it is important to get expert help quickly. (See the **Problems** section, page 68.) Ask for a private meeting with her counselor, a teacher or the principal. (You may feel more comfortable taking a friend, relative or someone else in your community with you.)

There is a law—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—that may allow you to get certain services for your child from your school district. Your child might qualify to receive help from a reading specialist, a speech and language therapist or other specialist. You can learn about your special education rights and responsibilities by requesting that the school give you—in your first language—a summary of legal rights.

★ **Ask teachers or your local librarian for names of community organizations and local literacy volunteer groups that offer tutoring services.**

## Motivation

★ **How can I keep my child motivated to learn and do well, both in and out of school?**

Psychologist Carol Dweck defines motivation as “the love of learning, the love of challenge.” And, according to her, motivation is often more important than initial ability in determining our success.

Yet somewhere in the middle grades the motivation of some young adolescents for learning takes a nosedive. A young teen may begin to grumble about assignments and teachers, ask to drop out of a favorite activity, complain that he’s bored or show signs of being lost in the educational shuffle.

Here are some the things that can contribute to low motivation:

- ★ **Biological changes.** The onset of puberty—getting her period or being 4 feet 2 inches tall when your buddy is 5 feet 10 inches—distracts some teens. Distractions make it hard to think about the swim team or the social studies project that’s due.
- ★ **Emotional concerns.** It may take extra effort to concentrate on a science project when she is preoccupied with physical insecurities or concerned about being excluded from a special group.





- ★ **The school environment.** A young teen may lose motivation after moving from elementary school to a middle school or junior high. The loss of motivation can be fueled by insufficient support in the new school or by an increased workload and expectations to which the student hasn't yet adjusted.
- ★ **Social and peer pressures.** A child may be influenced by friends who believe that academic success isn't "cool," or that girls aren't good at math.
- ★ **A shift in how your child views his ability.** Younger children tend to believe that the harder you try, the smarter you'll get. But Dr. Dweck notes that as children move into their early teens, they may begin to believe that ability is fixed and to compare their ability with that of others—the harder you *have* to try, the less able you *must* be. This view can dampen motivation. Why try hard if it won't help you to do well?
- ★ **Lack of opportunities.** Some youngsters lack opportunities to take the classes or participate in the activities that they need to spark their enthusiasm. This is most likely with students from disadvantaged families or who are at risk, contributing to perceptions that they are unmotivated.

The loss of motivation can be fueled by insufficient support in the new school or by an increased workload and expectations to which the student hasn't yet adjusted.

- ★ **Short attention spans.** Some educators report that it's hard to get students to focus on a long history project when they're used to TV programs and media presentations that are fast, short and entertaining.



- ★ **Undeveloped work ethic.** Some unmotivated youngsters may not have learned that school success takes time and effort. Many attractions compete for students' attention and, according to some research, some students expect school and activities to be consistently exciting. They aren't aware of the fact that both in school and daily life, they can learn valuable lessons from activities that aren't always fun and that achievement usually requires real effort. You can encourage and provide opportunities for your child, but ultimately your son is responsible for seeing that his homework gets done and your daughter must be the one to practice the piano.

Here are ways to encourage your child's motivation:

- ★ **Be a good role model.** Young teens benefit from seeing their parents putting forth their best effort, completing work and meeting obligations. Parents need to demonstrate that they value learning and hard work.
- ★ **Let your child know that sustained effort over time is the key to achievement.** Teach him to set high goals and to work hard to achieve them. Help him to see the value of tackling challenges and of finding ways to meet or exceed those challenges.
- ★ **Steer your child toward appropriate classes and suitable activities.** Young teens need opportunities to excel and be useful. Success can be a powerful





motivator and boredom may be a sign that your child hasn't enough opportunities to develop her talents. She may need an advanced English class, an art class or the chance to volunteer at a homeless shelter.

★ **Offer support.** Insincere praise or praise for poor efforts is no help, but young teens need to be reassured that they can do something.

"Sometimes kids will say they are bored, but it's because they haven't done [an activity] before," advises teacher Barbara Braithwaite.

Your child may need hints about how to get started with a new project from you, another adult, an instructor or a book.

★ **Find strengths and build on them.**

Every child can shine in some area. Identify what your child does best, no matter what it is.

★ **Communicate with your child's teachers, counselors or school principal when necessary.** A drop in grades is

not uncommon when students go from one grade level to another. But

if your child's grade drop is extreme or if it persists for more than one marking period, get in touch with someone at the school. It's OK to be a strong but respectful advocate for your child. Because middle-grades teachers may have very full schedules, you may need



to show persistence. Call, write or e-mail teachers if you think that many assignments are inappropriate or if your child is unable to complete them successfully. Take the lead if your child is placed in classes that you think are poor in content or that fail to provide your child with sufficient stimulation.

★ **Hold realistic expectations.** It's important to hold children to high standards. But when young teens are asked to do the impossible, they may stop trying. Don't pressure your 5-foot 4-inch son to try out for center on his basketball team just because he played center for his elementary school team. Instead, reassure him that, in time, he'll grow taller and help him to look for other activities in the meantime. Holding realistic expectations also requires that you consider your child's personality and temperament. Your 6-foot son may not enjoy playing basketball. Make sure that your child knows, deep in his heart, that you love him for what he *is* and not for what he *does*.

★ **Be patient.** Children's motivation generally improves when parents take the steps discussed. However, patience may be required: Many young teens need the gift of time to develop the maturity that allows them to complete homework assignments and chores with a minimum of supervision.

**Make sure that your child knows, deep in his heart, that you love him for what he *is* and not for what he *does*.**







## What can I do to help my child to develop good values and to learn right from wrong?

We want our children to develop respect and compassion for others. We want them to be honest, decent and thoughtful—to stand up for their principles, to cooperate with others and to act responsibly. We want them to make sound moral choices. The payoffs for encouraging a child's values are enormous: those who grow up with strong, consistent and

positive values are happier, do better in school and are more likely to contribute to society.



**Talk to your children about good values and why they matter.** Just as children need to be guided academically, so too must they be educated in the values of a civil society—values like love your neighbor; give an honest day's work for

an honest day's wages; tell the truth and be honest; respect others, respect their property and respect their opinions; and take responsibility for your decisions.

In word and deed, parents play an important role in helping their children develop a good sense of right from wrong and good from bad.

Many of the major threats to our children today are not a matter of chance, but are a matter of choice—choices like drinking and driving, smoking, drugs, sex, and dropping out of school.

The research tells us that young people who engage in one risky behavior are more likely to participate in others, so parents should help their children understand the potential risks and consequences of their choices—not just for the immediate future but for their lifetime as well.

Fortunately, most children share the values of their parents about the most important things. Your priorities and principles and your example of good behavior can teach young teens to take the high road when other roads look tempting. Here are some ways that you can help your child to develop good values:

- ★ If you stick with a challenging job, your child will be more inclined to finish homework and chores.
- ★ When you say “no” to alcohol before heading out on the highway, your child takes note.
- ★ When you accept a loss on the basketball court graciously, your child can learn that winning isn't everything.
- ★ If your child sees his parents treat each other with respect, he is more likely to follow this example in dating and into marriage.

**Your priorities and principles and your example of good behavior can teach young teens to take the high road when other roads look tempting.**





- ★ When your daughter senses that her parents appreciate people of all colors and creeds, she is likely to become more open to friends of all races and backgrounds.
- ★ When you tell a sales clerk that she gave you change for a ten-dollar bill and not a five, your child sees honesty in action.
- ★ When your child see his parents make tough choices—“We’re buying a used car so that we can save more money for a vacation”—he picks up the cues.
- ★ If you accept disappointments as a part of life—if you pick yourself up and keep going—your child stands a better chance of becoming a survivor.
- ★ If you can laugh at your own mistakes, your child is more likely to accept his own imperfections.
- ★ When you volunteer at a food kitchen, your child will be more likely to have compassion for others who are less fortunate.

The way that you view money and material goods can also mold your child’s attitudes. If you see your self-worth and the worth of others in terms of cars, homes, furniture, nice clothes and other possessions, your child is more likely to develop these attitudes as well. It is equally important to meet your child’s *needs* but to guide him to set them apart from his *wants*. The expensive leather jacket that he *has to have* may be OK—if you can afford it.



Giving your child an allowance is one good way to help her understand the value of money. But you must decide how much the allowance will be, taking into account your resources, your child’s age and what expenses the allowance will cover (lunches, clothes, church donations, entertainment or whatever). An allowance can help your young teen learn how to save and how to use money wisely.

Naturally, parents want to disclose information and provide guidance that is consistent with their values and religious beliefs. We know from child development experts that parents are often better at providing information about the facts of life than they are at talking about what matters more: their values concerning sexuality. To make good decisions, young teens need to have accurate information about “the birds and the bees” that takes into consideration strong values.

Parents often find it easier to teach their children values when they rely on their friends and other parents for support and guidance. Many parents also draw support from their churches, synagogues, mosques or other religious institutions.

At some point in their adolescent-rearing efforts, many parents find themselves disappointed and frustrated. (“I can’t believe my kid did something so dumb and insensitive. What did I do wrong?”)

Generally, there is no reason to panic if your child sometimes behaves in a way that differs from your standards—as long as he doesn’t do it regularly. Bad behavior needs to be recognized and dealt with. But we would all do well to remember our own adolescence—most of us turned out OK.

An allowance can help your young teen learn how to save and how to use money wisely.



## How can I tell—and what can I do—if my child is having a serious problem?

Most youngsters from 10 through 14 are not as troubled as their stereotype suggests. They manage the bumps of adolescence successfully. Still, you need to be on guard. According to one study, 28 percent of America's eighth-graders have experimented with drugs, although a much smaller percentage go on to develop serious drug problems. Some young teens develop eating disorders. Others suffer from depression and other emotional problems. In some cases, emotional problems are linked to learning disabilities that have not been diagnosed or treated.

Some factors that can place a young teen at greater risk for developing problems include:

- ★ growing up in poverty;
- ★ living in a single-parent home;
- ★ being male;
- ★ growing up in a neighborhood with few social supports;
- ★ lacking adequate adult supervision;
- ★ having poor relationships with their parents or other adults who are important to them;
- ★ possessing low self-esteem;
- ★ attending poor-quality schools; or
- ★ experiencing physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect.

Don't assume that being "at-risk" automatically means trouble for a child. Some young teens with many risk factors avoid major problems. And some with few risk factors stumble.

We know that certain things increase the chances that children will avoid major problems. Having warm, supportive parents who also draw clear rules and monitor sufficiently is key. In addition, a child with an easy-going temperament, good social skills and a sense of humor is generally able to deal with problems. A child who attends school and lives in neighborhood that provides many supports is also, on average, more able to bounce back from trouble. These supports include people who take a special interest in them—for example, teachers, coaches or neighbors.

This booklet is unable to address in detail all problems that young teen face. However, it is important to recognize the warning signs for some major problems and the **Resources** section lists materials organizations, Web sites and hotlines that can provide you with further direction and help.

One warning: You may have to address more than one problem at the same time, because serious problems likely appear together in one child: a 12-year-old with an eating disorder may also be depressed and a 14-year-old who uses marijuana also may be sexually active.

You may have to address more than one problem at the same time, because serious problems likely appear together in one child.



## Alcohol or Drug Use

Because early adolescence can be a confusing and stressful time for children, it is not surprising that this is the time when many of them first try alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

Because mood swings and unpredictable behavior are common among young teens, parents often find it hard to spot signs of alcohol and drug abuse. If your child starts to show some of the following signs, drugs or alcohol may be at the heart of the problem -

- ★ He's withdrawn, depressed, tired and careless about personal grooming.
- ★ She's hostile and uncooperative and often breaks curfews.
- ★ He has new friends (and may not want to talk about them).
- ★ She doesn't want to tell you where she is going and what she is going to do.
- ★ His grades slip.
- ★ She's lost interest in hobbies, sports and other activities that were once favorites.
- ★ His eating or sleeping patterns have changed; he's up late at night and sleeps during the day.
- ★ Her relationship with family members has worsened and she refuses to discuss school, activities, friends or other important subjects.



- ★ He has trouble concentrating and seems forgetful.
- ★ Her eyes are red-rimmed and/or her nose is runny when she doesn't have a cold.
- ★ Household money keeps disappearing.

For more information about how to spot and what to do about drug and alcohol use, see the U.S. Department of Education's publication *Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention*, listed in the Resources section, page 77.

## Eating Disorders

Eating disorders usually occur in females. Eating disorders in males are usually associated with athletics, especially wrestling.

The most common eating disorders are *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia*. Anorexia is an emotional disorder that can be signaled by severe weight loss or failure to gain weight. About 90 percent of the people who have this disorder are females. Studies suggest that one in 250 young women may suffer from anorexia, with symptoms most often first appearing in early to middle adolescence. Bulimia can be signaled by episodes of binge eating followed by self-induced vomiting, fasting or strenuous exercise. Bulimia tends to develop among older adolescents, many of whom have also been anorexic.

Many physical disorders are associated with eating disorders, such as kidney problems, irregular heart rhythms, irritation and tears in the esophagus, dizziness or fainting and stomach and intestinal problems. The death rate is from 5 to 15 percent, but it is lower if sufferers receive treatment.

Take your worries to an expert if your child:

- ★ loses a large amount of weight for no medical reason;
- ★ reduces the amount of food she eats and/or stops eating high carbohydrate and fatty foods;
- ★ exercises excessively despite weakness and fatigue;
- ★ possesses an intense fear of gaining weight;
- ★ stops menstruating;
- ★ binges on foods that are high in calories; or
- ★ tries to control her weight by vomiting or using laxatives or diuretics.

## Depression and Suicide

An increase in suicides among young adolescents makes it vital for parents to recognize the causes and symptoms. Many factors can contribute to serious depression that can lead to suicide. If a parent suffers from extreme depression, a child is more likely to experience it, too. But situations such as broken or unhappy families, the loss of parent through divorce or death, sexual abuse or drug or alcohol abuse may also

contribute to depression. Other stressful situations may also play a role: for example, losing a relative, being ignored by friends or serious concerns about sexuality.

Some warning signs of depression and possible suicidal tendencies include:

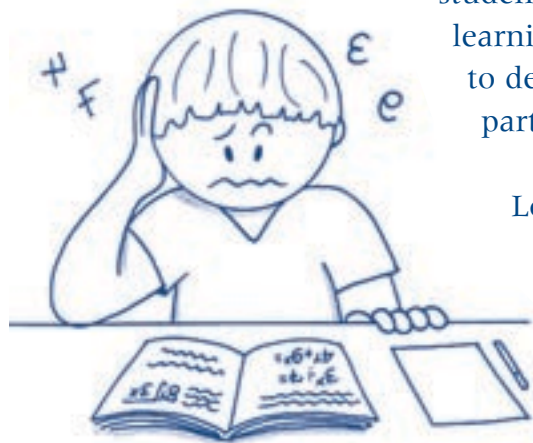
- ★ Change in sleeping patterns (either sleeping too much or too little);
- ★ Change in behavior (can't concentrate on school, work or routine tasks, slipping grades);
- ★ Change in personality (seems sad, withdrawn, irritable, anxious, tired, indecisive, apathetic);
- ★ Change in eating habits (loss of appetite and weight or overeating);
- ★ Physical changes, (including a lack of energy, sudden weight gain or loss, lack of interest in appearance);
- ★ A major loss or life change (through death, divorce, separation, broken relationship);
- ★ Decreased interest in friends, school or activities;
- ★ Low self-esteem (feeling worthless, overwhelming guilt, self-hatred);
- ★ No hope for the future (believes things will never get better, that nothing will ever change);



- ★ Preoccupation with music, art and personal writing about death;
- ★ Giving away prized possessions and otherwise “getting affairs in order;” and
- ★ Direct suicide threats or comments such as, “I wish I was dead!” “My family would be better off without me.” or “I don’t have anything to live for.” These threats should always be taken seriously.

## Learning Disabilities

The National Institutes of Health estimate that 15 percent of the U.S. population has some type of learning disability (LD). Learning-disabled students have a neurological disorder that creates difficulty in how they store, use or produce information. They are as intelligent as anyone else and they often do very well in art, music or sports. But a gap may exist between their ability and their performance and they may have trouble with reading, writing, speaking or mathematics, as well as with social relationships. Most often, learning-disabled students must work harder to make up for their learning problems. This can leave them open to depression and cause a lack of confidence, particularly if the disability goes untreated.



Look for these warning signs of learning disabilities. One or two of these signs in your child is not reason for concern, but the presence of several can signal the need for help:

- ★ Often reverses letters in writing, such as writing *felt* for *left*.
- ★ Has trouble learning spelling strategies, such as using information from prefixes, suffixes and root words.
- ★ Avoids reading aloud.
- ★ Avoids writing compositions.
- ★ Has trouble with handwriting or avoids it altogether.
- ★ Grips a pencil awkwardly.
- ★ Has trouble recalling facts.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or ADHD (which includes hyperactivity), is not a learning disability, although about one fifth of ADD students have learning disabilities. These students are extremely easily distracted and have a hard time staying focused.

If you believe your young teen has a learning disability, talk to your pediatrician, your child’s teachers and the school counselor, who can guide you to a proper evaluation. By law, children with learning disabilities are entitled to their own learning curriculum called an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Most often, learning-disabled students must work harder to make up for their learning problems.



## Conclusion

No one can guarantee that young adolescents will grow into responsible and competent adults. Your influence on your young teen, however, is enormous. Yes, on a bad day the smelly sneakers and mood swings may push you to your limits. But it is critical to remain involved. It's when you are ready to throw up your hands in frustration that you most need to hang in.

Learning as much as you can about the world of early adolescents is an important step toward helping your child—and you—through the fascinating, confusing and wonderful years from 10 through 14. As middle school teacher Emily Hutchison from Texas puts it, early adolescence is “never dull, never boring.” Stay tuned to the life of your young teen and enjoy this special time.

## Resources

### Publications of Interest to Parents of Early Adolescents

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## Organizations and Web Sites That Provide Information for Parents of Young Adolescents

### Federal Offices or Federally Funded Agencies and Clearinghouses

#### No Child Left Behind Parents Tool Box

U.S. Department of Education  
Toll Free: 1-888-814-NCLB  
<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/parents/index.html>

#### ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education

1920 Association Drive  
Reston, VA 22091  
Toll Free: 1-800-328-0272  
<http://www.ericec.org/>

#### National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Clearinghouse

Toll Free: 1-800-370-2943  
<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/publications.htm>



### National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities

P.O. Box 1492  
Washington, DC 20013-1492  
Toll Free: 1-800-695-0285 (voice & TTY)  
<http://www.nichcy.org>

### Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20202  
202-205-5465  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/>

### Private Organizations

#### Al-Anon Family Groups Headquarters

1600 Corporate Landing Parkway  
Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617.  
Toll free: 888-425-2666 (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.)  
[www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org).

#### American Anorexia/Bulimia Association

165 West 46th Street, Suite 1108  
New York, NY 10036  
1-800-931-2237





**Learning Disabilities Association of America**

4156 Library Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15234  
412-341-1515 or 412-341-8077  
www.ldanatl.org

**Middle Web**

www.middleweb.com

**National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders**

PO Box 7  
Highland Park, IL 60035  
847-831-3438

**National Black Child Development Institute**

463 Rhode Island Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
Toll free: 800-556-2234

**National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information**

P.O. Box 2345  
Rockville, MD 20847-2345  
Toll free: 800-729-6686 (24 hours a day)  
www.health.org

**Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

Toll free: 800-843-5678.

**National Runaway Switchboard**

Toll free: 800-621-4000(operated 24 hours a day for runaway and homeless youth and their families)

**National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency**

12 West 21st Street, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10017  
212-206-6770 or toll free: 800-NCA-CALL

**National Middle School Association**

2600 Corporate Exchange Drive, Suite 370  
Columbus, Ohio 43231-1672  
Toll free: 800-528-NMSA  
http://www.nmsa.org



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## Tips to Help Your Child through Early Adolescence

1. Learn as much as you can about early adolescence. Good information can help you make good decisions. Find out what changes you can expect during these years. Learn about what goes on in your child's school.
2. Stay involved in your child's life, both inside and outside of school. A positive relationship with a parent or other adult is the best safeguard your child has as he grows and explores. Find new and different ways to stay involved that work well with your child.
3. Provide both unconditional love and appropriate limits to help your child thrive and feel safe.
4. Talk with your child often about what's most important to her. Include the tough and sensitive subjects. Listen to what she has to say. Connected children are generally happier and do better in school and in life.
5. Hold your child to high but realistic standards both in school and in life. Let him know that you expect him to work hard, cooperate with teachers and other students and do his best.
6. Show that you value education. Stay in touch with your child's teachers and school officials. Check to see that he gets to school on time, completes homework assignments successfully and is signed up for classes required for college.





7. Provide opportunities for your young teen to succeed. Help your child to discover and develop her strengths. Success produces confidence.
8. Monitor friendships. Get to know your child's friends and their parents. Talk with him about friends, friendship and about choices he makes when with friends.
9. Work with your child to become more aware of the media and how to use it appropriately. Discuss what TV and movies to watch and what computer games to play. Become aware of the music she listens to and the magazines she reads.
10. Model good behavior. The best way to raise a child who is loving, decent and respectful is to live the values and behavior you hope he will develop.
11. Be alert to major problems, such as drug use, depression or an eating disorder. If the problem is too big to handle alone, get help from some of the many resources available.
12. Hang in there when times are tough. Most youngsters weather the bumps of early adolescence successfully and grow into successful adults. You play a major role in making that happen.

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This new law represents his education reform plan and contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act since it was enacted in 1965. It changes the federal role in education by asking America's schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. The act contains the president's four basic education reform principles.

- ★ Stronger accountability for results
- ★ Local control and flexibility
- ★ Expanded options for parents
- ★ An emphasis on effective and proven teaching methods

In sum, this law—in partnership with parents, communities, school leadership and classroom teachers—will ensure that every child in America receives a great education and that no child is left behind.

For more information on No Child Left Behind, visit the website at [www.nochildleftbehind.gov](http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov) or call 1-800-USA-LEARN.





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