

# ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT EXPLAINED





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# CHAPTER 1

## ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT



### ADOLESCENCE IS A TIME OF ENORMOUS TRANSITION

Although adolescence may appear to be a turbulent time, it's also a period of great potential as young people engage more deeply with the world around them. Adolescents typically grow physically, try new activities, begin to think more critically, and develop more varied and complex relationships.

### ABOUT

This document examines the major developmental changes that occur in adolescence and provides suggestions on how parents and caring adults can support young people as they navigate through this critical period.



It builds on *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*, the seminal report developed by the Center for Adolescent Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, as well as on other important sources of information.

The document focuses specifically on five areas of adolescent development:



#### PHYSICAL

hormonal changes and development



#### COGNITIVE

changes in the way the brain functions



#### EMOTIONAL

how adolescents process emotions and stress



#### SOCIAL

changes in familial, social, and romantic relationships



#### MORALS AND VALUES

how adolescents regard their place in the world

## TEEN COMPLEXITY

It's important to note that these five areas often overlap and intersect. For instance, adolescents who are struggling with depression and/or anxiety also can experience problems with their schoolwork, parents, peers, and physical health, and may lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Adults need to understand this complexity, respond in a supportive way, and seek professional help for such adolescents, if needed.

For each of the five areas of development, parents and professionals will learn about:

1

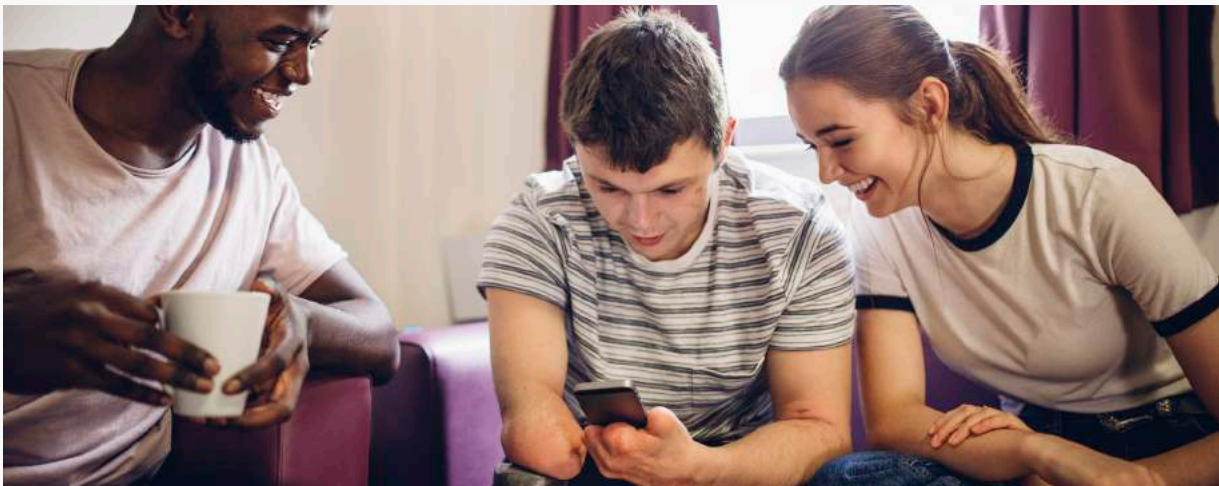
Changes that are a normal and necessary part of adolescence

2

Different ways that adolescents experience these changes and reasons for this variation

3

How adults can support adolescents' optimal health and development by guiding young people and helping them build the skills they need to thrive in the future



## PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS

Parents and other adults who care for and work with adolescents need to learn about adolescent development and continuously educate themselves about the realities of adolescent lives today. Teens' lives are complex, can change quickly, and can present issues that did not exist (e.g., social media) or were not fully acknowledged (e.g., mental health disorders) for prior generations of adolescents. If parents and caring adults understand the challenges and opportunities that adolescents face today, they can provide more effective support and encouragement for the young people in their professional and personal lives.

## CHAPTER 2

# PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT



Although some of the physical changes that happen during adolescence are internal and not visible, others can be seen easily by others. These obvious changes in the body can affect how adults and peers of both sexes view and treat young people.

The changes that occur both inside and outside the body during adolescence happen through a process called “puberty.”

This process stems from the release of certain hormones (chemicals) in the brain. These hormones released are the same in all adolescents, but differences in hormone levels lead to different results in males and females. The physical changes in adolescents shift them from their childhood bodies to their adult bodies and give them the ability to get pregnant or cause pregnancy. This ability to get pregnant or cause pregnancy is called “fertility.”

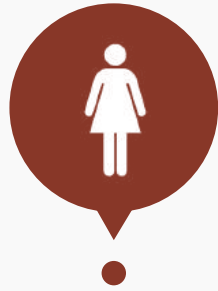


Anyone who looks at an adolescent male and female side by side will see some clear differences. Still, adolescents of both sexes exhibit many changes in common, most notably, growth spurts in height and weight. During these growth spurts, bones and muscles get longer and stronger, which allows adolescents to take on tasks they were likely not able to do as younger

children, such as lifting heavy objects and walking, running, or biking long distances. Many young people will reach their full adult height by the end of puberty. Beyond the growth spurts, other physical changes that happen in both males and females include body odor, acne, and more body hair.

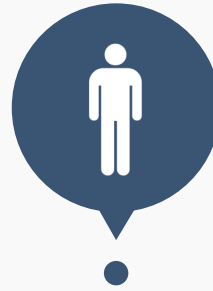
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As noted, many of the physical changes in adolescence are related to fertility. Some adolescents may be embarrassed by these changes at first, but they need to know that they happen to everyone. Consider this short list:



## FEMALES

Females will see changes in where fat appears on their body. For example, breasts become fuller and hips grow wider. Females typically experience their first menstruation (or period) during adolescence. Early on, periods can be irregular and affected by illness, stress, and even exercise.



## MALES

Males' shoulders become broader and their muscles get bigger. The penis and testicles also grow, and males will begin to experience erections and ejaculations, both voluntary and involuntary (sometimes happening while asleep). Males' voices also deepen during this time and may crack during the shift.

Beyond developing fertility, these visible sex-specific changes also let others know that a person is no longer a child. It is important to note that while the physical changes that adolescents experience happen to everyone, the timing and order of these changes will vary from person to person.

## UNIQUE ISSUES IN PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Although the major physical development milestones of adolescence happen to everyone, the timing of these milestones varies a lot, both between and within the sexes. Some adolescents exhibit physical signs of maturity sooner than their peers, and others exhibit them later.

For example, the visible physical changes in males often begin a couple of years after they begin in females. The timing of a female's first period also varies: girls can start their period as early as eight and as late as 16.



These differences can be hard for adolescents: they may feel self-conscious, or worry that they don't fit in if they don't look like others their age. These variations also can lead to other people treating adolescents in a way that does not match their cognitive or emotional development. For instance, females who develop visible curves or males whose voices change during middle school may be treated more like older teenagers by both their

peers and adults, even if they do not have the cognitive or emotional maturity of older teenagers. In contrast, adolescents who exhibit physical changes later than their peers may be treated like younger children, even though they are more mature cognitively and emotionally.

Some research suggests that youth who experience faster physical development are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior than their peers and that teens who develop more slowly than their peers may be more likely to face bullying.

Many factors can be responsible for differences in the timing and results of adolescents' physical changes, such as:



#### **GENES**

A person's genetic makeup can affect the timing of puberty and what the changes look like.



#### **EXERCISE BEFORE AND DURING ADOLESCENCE**

Overweight females, for example, are more likely to have their first period and experience breast development at younger ages than their peers.



#### **CHRONIC ILLNESSES**

Conditions such as cystic fibrosis, asthma, diabetes, or bowel problems also can contribute to delays in growth and puberty because of nutrient deficiencies, toxin excess, and/or medication side effects.



#### **SUBSTANCE USE**

Smoking or using other drugs can harm adolescents' growth and development. Smoking can stunt lung growth and make it harder to grow strong bones.



#### **DEVELOPMENT IN OTHER AREAS**

Variations in cognitive, emotional, social, and/or moral development also can influence development.



## HOW PARENTS AND CARING ADULTS CAN SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS

Here are some ways that parents and other caring adults can support adolescents through these physical changes:

**Let adolescents know that what they are going through is normal.** Although “normal” development covers a wide range, even older adolescents (and sometimes, their parents) are concerned with “fitting in.” Remind teens that despite their concerns, their personal developmental path is okay, even if it is different from their peers.

**Help adolescents eat well.** Parents and other adults play a large role in adolescents’ nutrition, by modeling healthy eating, following dietary guidelines, and making sure adolescents have access to healthy foods. Keeping healthy snacks at home and limiting junk food goes a long way to promoting solid nutrition.

**Encourage adolescents to have a positive view of their bodies.** Beyond reassuring that the timing of changes in the body varies from person to person, parents and caring adults can help adolescents appreciate their own bodies and developmental experiences.

**Get active with adolescents.** As with healthy eating, parents and caring adults can model physical activity, making it easier for adolescents to avoid becoming “couch potatoes.” If able, parents can go on walks or bike rides with their adolescent or just toss around a ball.

**Teach adolescents to avoid drugs.** It’s important for parents to talk to adolescents about how smoking and other drug use can hurt their health and keep them from growing strong and to lead by example. Check out the National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens website for more information.

**Make sure adolescents get enough sleep.** Sleep helps adolescents grow and strengthen their bodies and perform better in school, sports, and other activities. Strategies for parents include having a “lights out” rule and limiting the number of electronic devices (e.g., cell phone, computer).



## CHAPTER 3

# COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT



**“THE TEEN’S BRAIN IS WIRED FOR LEARNING.”  
- FRANCES JENSEN, M.D.**

Cognitive development refers to changes in the brain that prepare people to think and learn. Just as in early childhood, brains in adolescence undergo a lot of growth and development. These changes will reinforce adolescents’ abilities to make and carry out decisions that will help them thrive now and in the future. The brain grows and strengthens itself in three ways:

**1**

**GROWING NEW BRAIN CELLS.** Adolescence is one of the few times in which the brain produces a large number of cells at a very fast rate. In fact, the brain creates many more cells than will be needed. The extra brain cells give adolescents more places to store information, which helps them learn new skills.

**2**

**PRUNING SOME OF THE EXTRA GROWTH.** The disadvantage of having extra brain cells is that they also decrease the brain’s efficiency. As adolescents go to school, live, and work, the brain trims down the extra growth based on the parts of the brain the adolescent actively uses. This pruning process creates a brain structure that enables adolescents to easily access the information they use most.

**3**

**STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS.** The connections between brain cells are what enable the information stored in the brain to be used in daily life. The brain strengthens these connections by wrapping a special fatty tissue around the cells to protect and insulate them. These changes help adolescents recall information and use it efficiently.

As fast as the changes happen, these processes take time. Different sections of the brain develop at different times, with the part of the brain responsible for abstract thinking, planning, and decision making developing last. Overall, the brain is not fully developed and protected until people are in their mid-twenties.

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The changes in the adolescent brain affect adolescents' thinking skills. Specifically, young people gain these advantages as the brain grows, prunes, and strengthens connections:



**ABSTRACT  
THINKING**

Young children mostly understand only things that can be seen or touched. They may understand a portion of abstract ideas, such as love, justice, or fractions, but their understanding is of limited scope. As the brain develops in adolescence, a young person gains a broader understanding of more abstract ideas.



**ADVANCED  
REASONING**

Children generally have limited reasoning that focuses on the information at hand. In contrast, adolescents can predict the results of their actions by using logic to imagine multiple options and different situations. This new ability helps young people plan for their future and consider how their choices will affect that future.



**META  
COGNITION**

Another new skill adolescents develop is “thinking about thinking”— or metacognition. This practice enables youth to reflect on how they came to an answer or conclusion. This new skill also helps adolescents think about how they learn best and find ways to improve how they absorb new information.



**ENHANCED  
LEARNING**

New synapses, or gaps between nerve cells through which impulses are transmitted, make the adolescent brain a learning machine that can absorb facts, ideas, and skills.

Adolescence is an ideal time in a person's life to gain and maintain new skills. The changes in the brain and how they shape a young person's thinking help prepare adolescents for adult decision-making. Still, parents and other caring adults should remember that the teen brain is not fully developed. In particular, teens

may struggle with impulse control and may be more likely to make decisions based on emotions than on logic. In addition, an adolescent's thinking and decision-making processes may vary from day to day. By keeping these issues in mind, adults can provide the support adolescents need as their brains develop.



## UNIQUE ISSUES IN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive development, much like physical development, happens at a different pace for every adolescent. As a result, adolescents of the same age may not have the same thinking and reasoning skills. Additionally, brain development occurs at a different rate than physical development, which means that an adolescent's thinking may not match the adolescent's appearance. Here are some other factors that affect how adolescents' brains develop and how adolescents think:

1

**LEARNING STYLES AND MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES.** Every adolescent learns and processes information in a different way. Adolescents may find that some academic subjects are easier for them to learn or are more interesting than others. Education theories suggest that presenting information and assessing learning in multiple ways helps young people with different learning styles.

2

**DISABILITIES.** A learning disability—such as auditory processing disorder, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—can affect cognitive development. Challenges will differ based on the disability, but being aware of the issues can help adults link adolescents to the proper tools and resources so they can thrive. Furthermore, under the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), K-12 public schools must provide accommodations for students with disabilities, including learning disabilities. Parents also can support their children's special learning. College students with disabilities can obtain supports through the Americans with Disabilities Act.

3

**TRAUMA.** For some adolescents, brain development might be more difficult because of earlier or ongoing trauma. The brain reacts to the environment. Experiencing violence, neglect, or abuse can stunt brain growth. Being aware of trauma and its potential impact, whether in early childhood or in adolescence, and helping adolescents cope, can go a long way in improving young people's well-being.

4

**MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS.** Many mental health disorders first appear during adolescence, in part because of changes in physical brain development. An adolescent struggling with mental health challenges may have decreased motivation and have a harder time with cognitive tasks, such as planning and decision-making. Adults can support adolescents by watching out for mental health warning signs and providing teens who face mental health challenges with treatment.

5

**SUBSTANCE USE.** Substance use can greatly hinder adolescents' potential by slowing and stunting brain development. The brain also is especially vulnerable to addiction at this stage of life. Use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs in the teen years is associated with increased risk for adult substance use disorders. In contrast, if teens abstain from certain substances (such as tobacco), they are less likely to use these substances as adults.



One of the biggest changes and challenges in adolescence is an increase in risk-taking. Cognitive development during adolescence predisposes young people to take more risks than adults, and taking risks is an important part of growing up. Trying new things gives adolescents the chance to have experiences that will help them make the transition to their independent adult lives, such as finding a career, starting their own family, or moving to new places.

As adolescents' brains develop and new cognitive skills emerge, the ability to reason and think through consequences takes a leap forward. In fact, adolescents can even match adults' abilities in assessing risk, but adolescents do not always make the healthiest decisions because factors other than risk assessment, such as their emotions or the social rewards, come into play. Adults can help protect adolescents from unhealthy risks by being aware of these factors and creating environments that guide young people to healthy choices:



## • DIFFERING REWARDS

Because the back of the adolescent brain develops before the front, the parts of the brain that handle rewards form stronger connections before the parts that manage impulse control. This gap means that even if adolescents know the risks for the future, they may still place a higher value on a short-term reward. For example, if a young person attends a party where there is drinking, he or she may understand the risk of underage or binge drinking but value the reward of social acceptance more.

## • “HOT” VS “COLD”

Another element that affects adolescent decisions is whether they have to make a choice in a “hot” or “cold” environment. A “hot cognition” situation is one in which a decision needs to be made quickly or in the heat of the moment. A “cold cognition” situation is one in which adolescents have time to reflect and weigh their options. Hot cognition environments also tend to have more emotions tied to them. Adults can help adolescents to make positive decisions by encouraging them to think through situations in cold cognition environments and practice what to do in the heat of the moment.



## • SENSATION SEEKING

Adolescents vary in how much risk they want to take. Some adolescents consciously seek out sensations, meaning that they greatly enjoy new, stimulating experiences and look for them. Looking for these experiences does not make them bad at decision-making or suggest that they will turn to negative health behaviors. Adults can support these adolescents by providing them with positive opportunities that challenge and stimulate them.



## HOW PARENTS AND CARING ADULTS CAN SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS

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**Ask open-ended questions on complex issues.** Adolescents are eager to improve their abstract thinking skills. Asking probing questions, such as, “What did you think about [x event]?” or “How would you have approached [y situation] differently?” and following up with an adolescent in a nonjudgmental manner can jump start an adolescent’s reasoning and abstract thinking skills. Adults can further engage adolescents in developing aspects of higher cognition by giving them opportunities to plan and organize events. For example, a parent may ask an adolescent to plan a specific family activity.



**Provide more learning opportunities that entail healthy risks.** Taking risks can be healthy and promote growth. Healthy risks can include trying a new activity such as a new sport or art project, taking challenging classes, or getting involved with the community. Encouraging healthy risks and distinguishing them from negative risks (like substance use or driving dangerously) can give adolescents skills needed to assess and cope with risk.

**Help adolescents consider consequences of actions at multiple time points.** Adolescents sometimes have difficulty weighing future risks versus immediate rewards, especially in the heat of the moment. By asking adolescents to think through the pros and cons of various actions both in the short term and long term, adults can help adolescents to improve their future-thinking capacity. For example, ask an adolescent to think about the benefits and drawbacks of staying up late with friends versus going to sleep earlier on a school night.

**Encourage healthy sleep habits.** Adolescents need a lot of sleep so their brains can function well. During sleep, the brain aids in memory and learning functions. A good night’s rest also is associated with improvements in focus and energy and is a protective factor against depression, anxiety, and substance use. Experts recommend that teens get eight to 10 hours of sleep a night, but less than 30 percent of high school students report getting at least eight hours of sleep.

Brain changes shift an adolescent’s sleep cycle, and for many adolescents, it is hard to fall asleep before 11 p.m. However, the average school start time is at 8 a.m. This combination of staying up late and getting up early makes it difficult for adolescents to get the amount of rest they need. Parents can help adolescents build healthy sleep habits by setting routines and encouraging practices such as limiting electronic devices in the bedroom.

**Promote injury prevention.** Help adolescents protect their brain during a time of rapid and crucial development. Adolescents should be encouraged to take safety precautions to prevent concussions and other brain injuries. These precautions include always wearing a seatbelt when driving and a helmet when participating in sports and outdoor activities such as biking, skating, skiing, or rock-climbing. Furthermore, if an adolescent does participate in a team sport, parents, coaches, and other caring adults should understand the risks and learn how to spot potential brain injuries.



**Seek out opportunities for teens to engage as learners.** A great way for adolescents to learn and improve their cognitive abilities is for them to look for opportunities to put their new skills to the test in a leadership capacity. Adolescents can find learning and leadership activities that help them develop foresight, vision, and planning skills through their schools, extracurricular activities, communities, or at home. Parents and other caring adults can suggest different activities and facilitate adolescents' participation (e.g., by helping them find a way to get to and from a club).

**Support adolescents with learning disabilities.** If parents think an adolescent is struggling academically, they should make sure the adolescent is screened. The earlier a professional can diagnose a learning disability, the sooner the young person can receive assistance. Furthermore, adults can work with schools and healthcare providers to make sure students with learning disabilities have the skills and support they need for success.





## CHAPTER 4

# EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Healthy emotional development is marked by a gradually increasing ability to perceive, assess, and manage emotions. This is a biological process driven by physical and cognitive changes and heavily influenced by context and environment. The process of emotional development gives adolescents the opportunity to build skills, discover unique qualities, and develop strengths for optimal health. Factors that affect how well adolescents navigate this process include:

### SELF-MANAGEMENT

By managing their own emotions, adolescents can establish positive goals and gain foresight into how their emotions can influence their goals and futures. To improve their ability to manage emotions, adolescents must first learn to recognize and describe strong, complex emotions. Although young people learn to describe basic emotions earlier in life, as they get older they develop an ability to truly grasp what emotions are and understand their impact. When adolescents can recognize how they feel, they can choose how they will react to a situation. They also learn to avoid the problems that strong emotions sometimes cause.

However, because the brain's frontal lobe—which is responsible for reasoning, planning, and problem-solving as well as emotions—doesn't fully develop until the mid-twenties, adolescents may find it difficult to manage their emotions and think through the consequences of their actions. Over time and with the support of parents and helpful adults, adolescents can develop the reasoning and abstract thinking skills that enable them to step back, examine their emotions, and consider consequences before acting rashly.



### HORMONES

These critical chemicals in the brain that bring about physical changes also affect adolescents' moods and heighten their emotional responses. These characteristics together mean that teens are more easily swayed by emotion and have difficulty making decisions that adults find appropriate. Adolescence also is a time of rapid and sometimes stressful changes in peer relationships, school expectations, family dynamics, and safety concerns in communities.

The body responds to stress by activating specific hormones and activities in the nervous system so that the person can respond quickly and perform well under pressure. The stress response kicks in more quickly for adolescents than it does for adults whose brains are fully developed and can moderate a stress response. Not all stressors are bad. Positive experiences such as landing a first job or getting a driver's permit can trigger a stress response that enables adolescents to approach a challenge with alertness and focus.

## UNIQUE ISSUES IN EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Physical changes increase adolescents' capacity for emotional awareness, self-management, and empathy, but emotional development is strongly influenced by context. This means that many aspects of adolescents' lives can influence their emotional development. Among these aspects are:



### SELF-ESTEEM

How people feel about themselves—or the way they perceive their own talents, characteristics, and life experiences—can affect their sense of their own worth. An adolescent's self-esteem can be influenced by approval from family, support from friends, and personal successes. Research shows that adolescents with a positive self-concept experience greater academic success than do adolescents who lack this quality. Concerns about body image also are common and can provide opportunities for parents, teachers, and other caring adults to teach self-care, offer encouragement, and reinforce a positive body image.

For some adolescents, the concern for body image is extreme and—when combined with other warning signs—may indicate an eating disorder. Eating disorders are one type of mental health problem among adolescents. However, feeling good about oneself does not necessarily protect against risky behaviors. Therefore, it is still important to limit adolescents' exposure to risky situations and empower young people to make healthy choices when they inevitably come across such a situation.

### IDENTITY FORMATION

There are many facets to identity formation, which includes developmental tasks such as becoming independent and achieving a sense of competence. Adolescents may question their passions and values, examine their relationships with family and peers, and think about their talents and definitions of success. Identity formation is an iterative process during which adolescents repeatedly experiment with different ideas, friends, and activities. This experimentation is normal and can provide adolescents opportunities to learn more about themselves and others, but it isn't always balanced with thoughtfulness or a cognitive ability to consider the consequences of their actions.

Although this path to finding one's identity can prove challenging for some families, it also can motivate adolescents to learn about themselves and become more confident in their own, unique identities.





## STRESS

Adolescents live in a variety of environments and experience a wide range of stressors that affect emotional development. Learning healthy responses to stressful situations is part of normal development, and some stress can even be positive. However, some adolescents face particularly traumatic events, such as experiencing or witnessing physical or sexual abuse or school violence. Some of these events are prolonged or recurring, such as chronic neglect or being bullied. Some adolescents also have to deal with multiple types of traumatic stress. These more extreme forms of stress, often referred to as toxic stress, can weaken an adolescent's immune system, resulting in chronic physical health problems and potentially leading to depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. Toxic

stress also can lead to stress-related diseases and cognitive impairment in adulthood. Adolescents who experience this form of stress also are more likely to use harmful substances, engage in other risky behaviors, and experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition in which a person relives a traumatic event through persistent memories or flashbacks and experiences other symptoms such as insomnia, angry outbursts, or feeling tense. However, people respond to stress differently, and a strong support system can help protect adolescents from long-lasting negative effects and create an environment that enables youth to thrive.



## HOW PARENTS AND CARING ADULTS CAN SUPPORT EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Parents and other adults can support positive emotional development and help youth thrive by modeling healthy behaviors. This means that it is important to:

1

**MAKE YOUR OWN EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING A PRIORITY.** You may find it helpful to join a parent group where you can safely navigate your feelings with people who understand your point of view.

2

**PRACTICE HEALTHY GOAL-SETTING.** Let go of ideas of perfection for adolescents and yourself. Set realistic goals and break them into smaller tasks that are easier to manage. When you come up against an obstacle or experience a failure, focus on what you can control, and let go of the things that you cannot.

3

**VALUE EVERY ADOLESCENT'S UNIQUE IDENTITY.** Even when you don't relate to an adolescent's feelings or experiences, your understanding and respect as a parent or caring adult goes a long way.

4

**RESOLVE CONFLICTS WITH RESPECT FOR OTHERS.** When you disagree with someone, focus on resolving the issue at hand instead of assigning blame. Take time to cool off and think things through when you start to feel overwhelmed. Family conflicts can be especially stressful given the intense emotions and relationship dynamics at play.

5

**MANAGE YOUR ANGER.** Practicing relaxation exercises and using humor to diffuse a tense situation are a couple strategies you can use to manage your anger. Seek professional help if you are unsure of what to do.

Parents and other adults also can support the development of adolescents' skills that facilitate emotional development by taking steps to:

**Strengthen communication skills.**

Many lessons about relationships and emotions start with the parent-child relationship. Effective and open communication lies at the heart of this relationship. Strong communication skills include being an attentive listener, sharing your experiences instead of lecturing, and asking open-ended questions.

**Nurture self-regulation skills.** Provide opportunities for adolescents to understand, express, and moderate their own feelings and behaviors. This step involves modeling self-regulation, creating a warm and responsive environment, establishing consequences for poor decisions, and reducing the emotional intensity of conflicts.

**Build emotional vocabulary.** State your feelings and discuss how other people may feel in a nonjudgmental way. Point out nonverbal cues such as body language when discussing emotions. Ask your teen, "How did you feel about that?" and "How do you think that made the other person feel?"

**Help teens think carefully about risky situations.** After a risky event, ask adolescents, "Why do you think this happened?" and "What could you do differently next time?" It may take them a long time to fully process their experiences so give them time to think about the answers.

**Promote stress management skills.**

Encourage adolescents to handle stress in healthy ways. Daily management strategies include getting adequate sleep, staying active with exercise and hobbies, practicing deep breathing, and eating regular meals. Teach adolescents to "mind their brain" by talking about adolescent brain development and letting them know how they can use the power of their brains to learn healthy behaviors.

**Pay attention to warning signs.** Adolescents may show signs of stress, anxiety, or depression such as increased irritability or anger, changing sleeping and eating habits, dropping favorite activities, or feelings of loneliness. Resources are available to those experiencing an emotional crisis. If you are concerned about an adolescent's well-being, consult your healthcare provider or mental health professional. An adolescent may also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

**Limit exposure to risky situations.** When faced with a decision, emotions may intermingle with recollections of what might have happened in the past. Prepare adolescents for risky situations by talking about what they can do to anticipate, avoid, and process them.



## CHAPTER 5

# SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



### GENERAL SOCIAL CHANGES ADOLESCENTS EXPERIENCE

The process of social development moves adolescents from the limited roles of childhood to the broader roles of adulthood. For young people, this transition includes:

1

**EXPANDING THEIR SOCIAL CIRCLES.** Young children mostly spend time with their family. Their social circle expands slightly as they enter school. By the time they reach adolescence, their networks also can include people from team sports, student organizations, jobs, and other activities. As their social circles expand, adolescents spend less time with their families and may focus more on their peers. Young people also develop a greater capacity to form stronger relationships with adults outside of their families who may function as mentors.

2

**EXPANDING THEIR SOCIAL ROLES.** The changes adolescents experience in their brain, emotions, and bodies prime them to take on more complex social roles. Cognitive and emotional development work together to help adolescents have deeper conversations and express their emotions better. Physical development signals that adolescents are becoming adults and that they may become entrusted with greater responsibility. Adolescents may assume new roles, such as taking on a leadership position in school, on a team, or at church; serving as a confidante; or being a romantic partner.

Building new connections and establishing identities outside of the context of the family is a normal part of healthy development. Interacting with people outside of the family circle can teach adolescents how to maintain healthy relationships in different contexts and identify roles they can play in the broader community. Still, it is important to remember that adolescents will need support as they experience these new roles. Engaging in role-playing and rehearsing strategies modeled by peer and adult mentors may help adolescents practice cooperation, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, as well as tactics to resist peer pressure.



One aspect of social development that promotes having a broad social network is the tendency of adolescents to become more aware of how other people feel. The ability to empathize and to appreciate the unique differences among people increases in adolescence. Adolescents often learn to take other people's feelings into account, be compassionate about the suffering of others, listen actively, and interpret nonverbal cues. Although youth typically begin to express

some complex emotions early in life, adolescents start to examine their inner experiences and express their emotions verbally. However, because the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until early adulthood, adolescents often find it challenging to interpret body language and facial expressions. As the prefrontal cortex develops and the capacity for abstract thinking grows, adolescents will be able to empathize more deeply with others.



## UNIQUE ISSUES IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The way adolescents develop socially largely depends on their environment. For example, some youth live in neighborhoods and attend schools where violence is relatively common. These adolescents must develop different coping strategies than do those who live in neighborhoods with more physical security. Some adolescents also experience trauma. These experiences can evoke stress reactions across all developmental areas.

Some survivors of trauma have difficulty regulating emotions, sleeping, eating, and acting on or making decisions (See page 16 for more information on stress). In any case, all adolescents need caring adults in their lives who offer them support, provide opportunities for them to test their new skills, and offer guidance on how to be successful. The key role that environment plays in adolescent development means that adolescents of the same age will differ greatly in their ability to handle diverse social situations.

Here are some other factors that differ among adolescents and can affect their social development:

### **VARYING RATES OF PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT**



Adolescents' bodies change and develop at different rates, and this process does not always happen in sync with other areas of development. For instance, those who develop physically at a relatively young age may be seen and treated more like adults or they may end up spending more time with older youth because of how they look, a pattern that increases their potential for engaging in sexual relationships. However, these more mature-looking adolescents may not be emotionally and cognitively ready to handle those new roles. On the other hand, adolescents who develop later may be seen and treated more like young children.

### **EVOLVING GROUPS OF FRIENDS**



Acceptance by a peer group is crucial to adolescents, especially those who are younger. Seeking acceptance might spur them to change the way they think, speak, dress, and behave to make them feel they belong to the group. As a result, younger adolescents tend to hang out with peers who are similar to them (e.g., same race, ethnicity, family income, religion, or class schedule). Older adolescents may branch out to other groups as their social worlds diversify and expand.

### **DIFFERING TYPES OF PEER PRESSURE**



Peer pressure sometimes gets a bad reputation. The stereotype about this pressure stems from perceptions of delinquent and risky behaviors, including sexual activity and substance use, which some adolescents think will earn them greater acceptance among their peers. However, peer pressure can be beneficial, and peer relationships can be largely positive. Positive peer groups practice behaviors such as cooperating, sharing, resolving conflicts, and supporting others. The accepted standards, or norms, of positive peer groups can help adolescents build relationship skills, hold favorable views of themselves, and have the confidence to take positive risks.

### **CHANGING WAYS TO INTERACT**



As with all technologies, using social media carries both potential risks and potential benefits for adolescents. Text messaging, social networking platforms, blogs, email, and instant messaging can help adolescents stay connected to each other, and express who they are to the world. Today's adolescents have such large social networks that it is not uncommon to have virtual friendships with peers they have never met face-to-face. This digital interaction may curtail nonverbal communication and cues that occur in person that are important for developing social skills; but these interactions are still social and meaningful to the adolescents who participate in them. At the same time, technology and social media have also provided a new forum for harassment. In addition to the 20 percent of high school students who reported being bullied in school the previous year (2015), another 16 percent reported being bullied online.



## HOW PARENTS AND CARING ADULTS CAN SUPPORT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Although adolescence is a time when young people try to manage their lives on their own, they still depend on their families and caring adults for primary support, affection, and decision-making, as well as for help establishing their identities and learning about skills and values. Here are some ways parents and other adults can support youth thriving in social development.



### SET EXAMPLES OF HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

1

Relationships can be strong when you're aware of your own feelings as well as aware of other's emotions. In healthy relationships, both partners should treat each other with respect, give each other space, talk through problems, and communicate honestly. Modeling positive friendships and relationships with co-workers and neighbors also is important.

2

### MONITOR AND GET TO KNOW ADOLESCENTS' FRIENDS AND DATING PARTNERS

Find out whom they spend time with, what they are doing, and where they are going. Ask about how the adolescent picks their friends and what they enjoy about the people with whom they spend their time.

3

### ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES ADOLESCENTS CARE ABOUT

Help adolescents make friends by getting them involved in activities that match their interests (e.g. art, music, computer science, sports).

4

### EXHIBIT EMPATHETIC BEHAVIOR

Show empathy by acting on concern for other people, using statements that describe how people might feel, and talking about being compassionate toward diverse groups of people. Adults and adolescents also can work together on community service projects.

5

### BUILD CONNECTIONS BY TALKING TO ADOLESCENTS ABOUT YOUR INTERESTS AND LEARN ABOUT THEIRS

Take the time to learn about your adolescent's hobbies and interests and expose them to new activities to help you find mutual interests and have more meaningful interactions.

6

### TEACH ADOLESCENTS HOW TO DEAL WITH PEER PRESSURE

Help adolescents understand which risks will enable them to test their skills and which risks may have harmful consequences, even if their peers encourage those behaviors.

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## TALKING WITH ADOLESCENTS

Parents and other adults can help answer young people's questions about their changing social worlds and relationships. Have open and honest conversations with adolescents to help them make healthy decisions about their social development.

**Acknowledge what adolescents have to say.** Not every disagreement is a conflict. Be available to listen to any concerns adolescents disclose. Meaningful conversations may happen informally and spontaneously.

**Discuss boundaries and expectations in relationships with friends and romantic partners.** Stress the importance of having personal space, setting limits, and respecting privacy in any relationship. Discuss what true friendships and romantic relationships are (respectful, supportive, encouraging, and caring) as well as what they are not (disrespectful, abusive, controlling, and violent). Acknowledge that friends and romantic partners can remain close and intimate even if they say “no” to each other.



**Set online boundaries.** A large part of social development now occurs while adolescents are online. Whether social media acts as a risk or a tool for adolescent health largely depends on how adolescents use the media and how parents talk with teens about online safety. Talk to adolescents about behaving responsibly online, both in how they treat others and how they can keep themselves safe.

**Teach and model good communication skills.** Having a conversation, especially on sensitive topics, can be challenging. Respectful communication is a learned skill. Showing adolescents how to listen and share their thoughts and feelings respectfully, even in the midst of conflict, can help them socially, romantically, and professionally.

**Let adolescents know when it is important to share sensitive information with you.** Make sure teens know they can come to you with information that affects their safety or the safety of their peers without fear of being judged or punished.

## CHAPTER 6

# MORAL DEVELOPMENT



### GENERAL CHANGES IN VALUES ADOLESCENTS EXPERIENCE

Adolescence is a time when changes in the brain encourage young people to think about the world more deeply and in a more abstract way. This thinking helps shape how adolescents see the world, how they choose to interact with it, and how they begin to develop the morals and values that will play out in their adult lives. Some of the most common changes in thinking about morals and values that occur during this life stage include:

1

#### SEEING THE WORLD IN SHADES OF GRAY

Adolescents begin to understand that not every question has a clear-cut answer. As they develop empathy, they begin to see why other people make different choices and to understand those choices better.

2

#### UNDERSTANDING THE REASONS BEHIND RULES

Abstract thinking means adolescents can sense more fully how rules are related to ideas such as justice, public good, and safety. This knowledge also means that they may push back more on the issue of why rules exist. Children may be okay when parents and other adults say “because it’s the law” or “because I said so” as answers to their questions, but adolescents may need more justification for curfews, limits, or other rules.

3

#### FORMING THEIR MORAL CODE

The questions and debates adolescents raise about rules are normal and helpful. The reasons and logic adults provide help adolescents form their views of the world and how it works. When adolescents get answers that satisfy their questions about a rule, it becomes personal to them, and they are better able to see why a rule makes sense.

4

#### BECOMING MORE INTERESTED IN BIG QUESTIONS

As part of establishing their values, adolescents may think more about what is right and what is wrong, what their role should be in the world, and what they should do when faced with personal moral dilemmas. They may spend time exploring their own religious traditions more deeply, as well as looking at other religions, philosophies, and forms of spirituality.



While it may be true that adolescents no longer think like children, they still need time and support to process new ideas and ways of thinking. As part of this process, adolescents often question and challenge rules and those in authority. When adolescents raise questions, evaluate answers, and explore new ideas, they are practicing their new thinking and emotional abilities. This practice in abstract thinking helps prepare them for making complex, concrete decisions in adolescence and adulthood.

The process of setting values also can push adolescents to get involved with causes of interest to them and to become connected with the wider community. This connection to the larger world can help adolescents make positive choices that protect their health and their futures.





## UNIQUE ISSUES IN MORAL DEVELOPMENT

As with other types of development, adolescents vary in when, how much, and how fast they establish and change their morals and values. This variation also is affected by how much they have changed and mastered skills in other areas. Specifically, cognitive, emotional, and social development all can have an impact on how adolescents shape their morals and values.

Adolescents' thoughts and emotions also can vary across different events so that the same person will react to similar situations in completely different ways. This inconsistency is normal, and in many cases, good. The more adolescents think through their response to different events, the more they can build their decision-making skills. When faced with a choice, values can shape whether a person is aware of a problem, how they organize information about a situation, what solutions they think of, and how they weigh different results.





Adolescent moral and values development, and consequently young peoples' worldview and approach to different situations, is based on their personality and prior experiences. For instance:

Some adolescents may connect more easily with issues in the wider world and be moved by events that happen across the globe, whereas others may focus more on issues affecting their local community.

For some adolescents, experiencing traumatic events may shape their worldview. Some research shows that in addition to tools like cognitive therapy and approaches like trauma-informed care, religion and spirituality can help a person cope with trauma.

Adolescents may differ in their level of optimism, as well as in how much they consider things from a practical or idealistic viewpoint.

Family members are often a person's first teachers for how the world works, setting cultural norms and traditions.

Adolescents' values are formed by interactions with parents and other adults, peers, schools, religious groups, the media, the internet, and other institutions. As adolescents experience a range of views, they learn to reflect on, question, and refine their own views.

Ideally, youth would only make choices that match where they are in their development. However, life circumstances mean that some youth face more complex decisions than what they feel ready to tackle. In these cases, parents and other caring adults can play an especially vital role in providing guidance.



Beyond the different experiences described above, adolescents also differ in the types of choices they face. Some teens may have faced these choices at a younger age, while others may be confronting them for the first time. Examples of these choices (or dilemmas) include:

Keeping some things private by not posting to social media versus posting to gain acceptance by one's peers.

Finding time to follow through on commitments, such as schoolwork or being engaged in an activity, while also taking care of one's health (e.g., getting adequate sleep, exercising).

Getting a job or taking up a leadership position during one's free time.

Giving friends honest feedback or staying quiet to spare their feelings.

Debating an issue online with a friend or acquaintance versus talking face-to-face.



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## HOW PARENTS AND CARING ADULTS CAN SUPPORT MORAL DEVELOPMENT



The process of moral and values development in adolescence not only helps adolescents become engaged in society, it also supports optimal health. For example, research has linked faith-based participation and spirituality with positive social ties, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of substance use.

During this time of questioning, adolescents often want to talk to parents and other adults such as coaches, teachers, and counselors. The four in five adolescents who attend religious services at least once a year may look to their faith tradition for supportive adults.



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No matter what your role in young people's lives, these tips can help you create a space where youth can thrive.

### **TALK HONESTLY AND OPENLY ABOUT YOUR VALUES**

Even though it may not always seem like it, teens do care about what their adult role models think and appreciate when parents and other adults are “real” with them. You don't need to wait for them to come to you to start a conversation. The news, TV shows, movies, and other media can be conversation starters. Sharing your story about how different life events shaped you helps adolescents process their own ideas.

### **LISTEN AND DON'T JUDGE**

When adolescents share their concerns, they are making themselves vulnerable to your opinion. Listening to them and treating their questions as valid will help them feel safe and also will make it more likely that they will continue coming to you for advice. You can let teens know that it's okay to make mistakes.



### **SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS IN EVALUATING AND ADDRESSING THE RESULTS OF THEIR ACTIONS**

A valuable part of risk-taking is that adolescents experience some of the results of their actions. As a parent or caring adult, it may be necessary to try and reduce the harm that can come from an adolescent's choices (e.g., to prevent serious injury). Still, having an accurate and full picture of the results of their actions helps adolescents make decisions in the future. When adolescents experience negative outcomes, you can help them think through a new approach for the next time.

### **LET ADOLESCENTS EXPLORE OTHER PERSPECTIVES**

Adolescents are curious about how their values and ideals fit in with those of other people. One way they can explore this is by talking and working directly with people of other ages and backgrounds. Adolescents also can get to know other views through music, art, books, poems, movies, and plays. Being comfortable with seeing and thinking about new ideas, even if they never adopt them, can help adolescents respect others' views.

Additional information on adolescent development can be found in *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*, produced by the Center for Adolescent Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The document is available at: <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/training-consulting/training-materials/teen-years-explained/index.html>.

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