



Families Matter!

UNDERSTANDING TEENS

It's not easy being a parent! As children grow into their teens, every family goes through stress and conflict. It's a normal part of growing up. Understanding the changes your child is going through makes it easier to be a positive parent.

Physical changes begin early.

Teenagers vary in their development even more than little children do. There is no "right" time for changes to occur. In general:

Girls

- begin changing inside as early as 7 years old.
- can begin menstruation as early as 9.

Boys

- begin changing inside as early as 9.
- may start a growth spurt as early as 11, and keep growing until they are 21.

Physical maturity occurs long before emotional maturity.

Teens often don't know how to handle their new sexual maturity. Teens think: "If I look like a grown-up, why can't I act like an adult?"

- Television, movies and friends tell teens



to be sexually active; parents, schools and churches do not.

- How and where can teens talk about the conflicts they see and feel?

Physical changes can cause emotional upset.

The hormones which trigger growth can also cause mood swings. Although hormones have been over emphasized in the past, they probably have some influence on behavior. One teenager said, "some days I'm way up and other days I'm way down. The way I feel doesn't seem to have much to do with what's going on around me."

When emotions are “out of control,” more conflicts happen between parent and teens. Here are some general guidelines for different ages.

11-12 can be very moody and emotional.

13-14 can be irritable, excitable, more likely to explode than to control their emotions.

15 may try to “cover up” their feelings—may be more moody and withdrawn.

16-17 often calm down and settle into more adult patterns of behavior.

When teens grow so quickly, they may get very tired and be more emotionally “touchy”—especially if they skip breakfast and eat mostly sugary foods. Tired teens are a recipe for disaster.

Because the way people feel about their body and the way they feel about themselves is so closely connected, young teens often feel badly about themselves.

At about age 12, self-esteem takes a sharp drop for many youngsters, and then gradually climbs back up by ages 18 or 19.

Uneven growth in parts of their body can make them clumsy and self-conscious. One parent said, “he’s become so clumsy, he trips over his feet!”

Hands and feet grow much faster than arms and legs. Just think how much trouble you would have if your feet grew from their present size 6 to size 9 in the next six months!

Parts of the face grow at different rates, so when your teenager is sure that her nose is too big, she may be quite right—for a time. Soon, the rest of her face will catch up.

Nearly all teens have skin problems (acne or “zits”), which are related to their hormone changes.



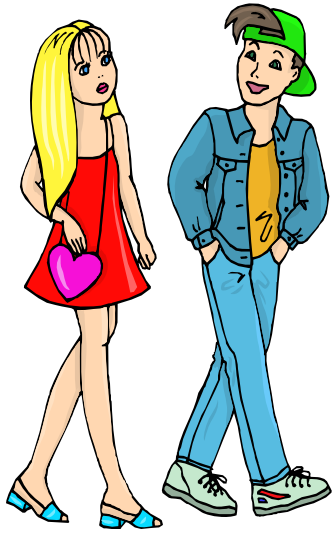
Young teens feel unsure of themselves and are often under a lot of stress.

Young teens are convinced that everyone is “looking at them.”

Teens spend a lot of time worrying about how they look. Looking like and dressing like the other kids is very important to them.

Even though they look “grown up,” young teens cannot think like adults.

The part of their brain that helps them plan, set priorities and make good decisions is still being built. Accidents are the biggest cause of death among teen boys. They lack good judgment and maturity.



Many parents find that giving teens more responsibility in non-dangerous areas (like selecting their own clothes) while keeping control over more important and potentially harmful situations helps teens grow into responsibility.

Due to changes in their thinking, teens want to:

- know the *whys* behind rules.
- negotiate rules.

At about 16, teens start to think like adults.

- They begin thinking about abstract ideas, such as honesty, love, and justice.

Before 11, youth are convinced that whatever they believe is true. You can't win an argument with kids this age. They are absolutely sure they are right.

Around 11, youth begin to think in a new way. They begin to see that there are many different views on any one subject.

They still believe they are unique. "No one ever felt this way before. No one understands how I feel."

They begin to reject the values and beliefs of their parents (at least for awhile). They want to spend time with friends rather than their family. Take comfort! Most teens return to their parents' values after they go through this stage.

Teens believe in "magic"—that they will be protected from the bad things that happen to others.



The more teens have a chance to talk about their own ideas and listen to others (especially other teens), the sooner they seem to mature in their thinking.

Adolescent Development and Behavior: What to Expect

Phase	Task	Typical	Behavior
<p>Preadolescence (9-11)</p>	<p>Begins to form ties outside family.</p>	<p>Physical restlessness; fidgeting</p> <p>Arguments with parents over rules, neatness, time management.</p>	<p>"Bathroom" humor</p> <p>Boys part of "gang," companions in adventures. Girls choose "best" friend to share secrets.</p>
<p>Early Adolescence (12-13)</p>	<p>Gains some independence from parent rules and values.</p> <p>Adjusts to new body image.</p>	<p>Self-absorption, touchiness.</p> <p>Impulsive, inconsistent mood swings.</p> <p>Constantly hungry, but can be finicky eater.</p>	<p>"Bedroom" humor.</p> <p>Develops close friend like self, often someone with qualities wished for in self.</p> <p>May develop "crush" on older man or woman.</p>
<p>Adolescence (14-15)</p>	<p>Discovers personal strengths and capabilities.</p> <p>Develops ability for abstract thought.</p> <p>May be interested in the opposite sex.</p> <p>Forms sexual identity.</p>	<p>Intense emotional life—heightened senses (especially eye and ear)</p> <p>Analyzes ideas and considers own values.</p> <p>First "tender love."</p>	<p>Tests own limits—excessive physical exertion or risk-taking.</p>
<p>Late Adolescence (16-18)</p>	<p>Consolidates personality.</p> <p>Self-regulates behavior.</p> <p>Gains physical independence from parents.</p>	<p>Predictable</p> <p>Takes responsibility for self and actions.</p> <p>Chooses vocational goals.</p>	<p>Prepares for marriage and parenthood.</p>

Struggles between parents and teens are normal. They happen in every family.

Parent's expectations and the teen's willingness or inability to live up to them are major sources of conflict.

Parents

- want their teens to turn out well.
- are embarrassed and disappointed when teens act like children.

Teens

- need opportunities to show they can be responsible



- know they have to be "in charge" of their lives before they can become adults.
- think parents over-control and over-protect. "Why do my parents treat me like such a baby?"
- are embarrassed when their parents aren't as rich, beautiful and "cool" as TV stars.

What do parents and teens need?

- **Realistic expectations of each other.**
- **Feeling in control.** Teens need to have some areas of their lives where they are taking responsibility for themselves.

- **Strong self concepts.**
- **Constructive communications skills.**
- **A supportive environment.** Adolescents need stable, well-structured, predictable guidelines because they are feeling so unstable themselves. Teens experience less stress when their parents are consistent, clear, firm and fair.

Because their brains are still "under construction" teens need help from their parents in

- Providing routines and structure
- Helping them sort through priorities and making plans
- Helping them organize their time and their thoughts
- Helping them weigh the "pros" and the "cons"
- Helping them think through hard decisions (even when they say they don't want your help)

Summary

For many families, having a teenager in the house is a very stressful stage. Teens find the many changes they are going through stressful.

Even though there are some tough times as teens grow up, there are some wonderfully fun and happy times that seem to make parenting teens worth all the trouble. When you think about it, it's almost a miracle that in such a short period of time, children turn into adults.

It helps to talk with other parents. Talking with other parents can help put your parenting challenges in perspective.

Have a good month!

[Patricia Tanner Nelson, Ed.D.](#)

Extension Family & Human Development
Specialist

Adapted from materials prepared for Wisconsin
Cooperative Extension.

Suggested citation: Nelson, P.T. (2007).
Understanding Teens. In *Families Matter! A
Newsletter Series for Parents of School-Age Youth*.
Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of
Delaware.

No. 01-REV1008

Want more information? Visit the Extension Cord at
<http://aq.udel.edu/extension/fam/>— Extending the
University to YOU!

Or contact your county Extension office: New
Castle: 461 Wyoming Road, Newark, DE 19716-1303,
Tel. 302-831-8965; Kent: 69 Transportation Circle,
Dover, DE 19901, Tel. 302-730-4000; Sussex:
Research & Education Center, 16684 County Seat
Hwy., Georgetown, DE 19947, Tel. 302-856-7303.

Cooperative Extension Education in Agriculture and
Home Economics, University of Delaware, Delaware
State University and the United States
Department of Agriculture cooperating. Distributed
in furtherance of Acts of Congress of March 8 and
June 30, 1914. It is the policy of the Delaware
Cooperative Extension System that no person shall
be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of
race, color, sex, disability, age or national
origin.