

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding the Reasons : Adolescent Development

Adolescence is the stage of development between being a child and being an adult. There are no set ages at which adolescence begins and ends. It varies for each young person according to a range of social, cultural, biological and other factors.

Many of the behaviours that cause so much anguish for parents during their child's teenage years are actually normal and healthy adolescent behaviours. It helps if you understand the changes that your child is going through and have appropriate expectations and responses.

Even when your child is experiencing major problems or taking grave risks, it is important to understand the developmental stage they are at so you can respond in the most helpful way.

The adolescent years

A general guide is that early adolescence can be seen as the years between 10-14 years of age. Middle adolescence occurs around 15-19 years of age and late adolescence is 20-24 years of age.

Puberty is often seen as marking the start of adolescence. When it ends often depends on opportunities such as employment and marriage. These events have often been seen as signalling 'adult status', but are occurring later on average than in past generations.

Physical growth is one of the biggest changes in the teenage years. But there are also huge changes in ways of thinking, relationships and sense of identity. These can take longer to complete.

Dealing with body changes

The amazing hormonal and physical changes of adolescence are a challenging experience.

Teenagers often become self-conscious or private about their bodies. They become aware of their sexuality, and this starts to show in their relationships with others.

Intense friendships

Friendships become more important and more intense for adolescents.

Teenagers can have a huge desire for lots of contact with friends. They may want to be on the phone or MSN-chat with their friends all night, for example, even when they have seen them all day.

Pulling away from parents and towards friends is a normal, healthy part of psychological development in adolescence.

Thinking for themselves

Adolescents start to form their own opinions and views. They may not be the same as yours. They may express disagreement and anger at you as they try to work out what they think about things. It can be a shock for parents to have their son or daughter speaking their own mind and challenging parents' views, but it is a normal part of adolescent development.

Critical of family

As they learn to think for themselves, young people may decide there are aspects of their upbringing they do not like. Often they are wrong or hurtful in what they say about family life while they are going through this phase of separation. Sometimes, however, what they say may have some truth, and this can cause conflict or hurt.

Experimenting

Young people experiment with different identities. They will often try on "different hats" to see which one best fits.

They try out different styles in hair and clothes, taste in music and other 'identities'. They take up new activities and drop old favourites. They may change friends.

Experimenting may involve risky behaviour like drug use, train-surfing or inappropriate sexual activity. Risk-taking behaviour is part of adolescence, but some of these behaviours may be unsafe and/or not okay. Parents need to do what they can to help their young people keep safe.

Shutting parents out

Adolescence is a time of many changes; strong feelings and mood swings are common. When your children were little, they came to you for comfort or help at these times.

Now they may try to deal with these feelings by themselves, or turn to friends for support. It can be especially hard for parents when they feel shut out and unable to help.

Self absorption

Adolescents are working hard to develop themselves as individuals. This may lead them to be quite self-absorbed. By adult standards they can be selfish and inconsiderate – but they should not be judged by adult standards, yet.

Anger

In trying to transform parent-child relationships, and manage lots of changes and challenges, young people can experience a lot of anger. Anger is a necessary and healthy human feeling: it lets you know when something is not right and helps you strengthen yourself. But anger needs to be expressed in a safe and useful way – without violence.

Changing relationships with parents

Young people are learning to be independent and self-sufficient. Parental control gradually, or suddenly reduces. They are making more of their own decisions – whether you agree or not. They may accept support and advice from family, but in middle and older adolescence they will often no longer be directed.

On the other hand, strong family bonds are still very important for young people. Even when they seem to reject family, research¹ shows that family relationships and support are a protective factor against a range of risky behaviours.

Knowing they have family support helps. They still need to know you care. Ways of offering help are given in other help sheets on this site.

1. See, for example: Rayner, M. & Montague, M. (2000) Resilient Children and Young People. Deakin University, Geelong; Policy and Practice Unit; Fuller, A. (1998) From Surviving to Thriving. Melbourne: ACER.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Many difficult or challenging behaviours that cause parents anguish are actually normal and healthy adolescent behaviours.
- Understand behaviour from a developmental viewpoint so that you can respond in the most helpful way.
- Pulling away from parents and towards friends is a normal, healthy part of psychological development in adolescence.
- As young people learn to think for themselves, they may decide there are aspects of their upbringing they do not like.
- Friends become important sources of support. It can be especially hard for parents when they feel shut out and unable to help.
- Strong family bonds are still very important for young people. They need to know you care, no matter what.



Useful Resources

- Carr-Gregg, M (2005) *Surviving Adolescents: The Must-Have Manual for Parents*, Penguin Books, Australia.



Related Help Sheets

- What went wrong? Why?
- Parenting an Adolescent
- Parenting Styles
- Keeping Calm
- Setting Boundaries
- Dealing with Conflict



Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au