

Teen Years

The teenage years carry the reputation of being a challenging time. It's potentially a time of rebellion, risk-taking and sneakiness, which stirs up worry, stress and fear in parents.

Each development stage brings new things for children to learn, and parents must make adjustments with each new stage of their child's growth. The difference between the adolescent development stage and previous stages is that the consequences of mistakes are much bigger.

This can cause parents to seek tighter control, yet trying to control a teen can result in greater rebellion and risk-taking. A better choice is to seek to understand this unique stage from a social, psychological, and physiological perspective. Parents can align with their teens and actually enjoy the people their teens are becoming as opposed to going to war with them.

THE TEEN BRAIN

Great changes are taking place in the whole body, including the brain. The brain begins to make structural changes in order to become more integrated (meaning different areas of the brain link together). The brain reduces the number of neurons (basic brain cells) it has grown since before birth, letting go of excess neural connections not being used anymore.

Also, the brain lays down myelin which connects the electronic flow between neurons allowing for faster and more efficient information flow. The frontal lobes, the master control center that helps coordinate major brain functions, dramatically changes, further linking up and integrating different areas of the brain. Additionally, as the teen gains important life experiences, more neural connections are created, further developing this brain.

As the teen brain integrates new connections, positive, new skills are gained such as the ability to:

- pause and consider more than one impulsive response
- look at the bigger picture of a situation in order to make wiser choices based on experience and intuition
- focus on complex ideas, and to wonder about the meaning of life for the first time
- consider creative thoughts, and, when paired with their energetic drive, produce new ideas and solutions



Adult Roles that Best Support Teen Development

Don't take things personally: It is not about you so much as about the fact that the brain is remodeling itself. The thinking process and ability to manage emotions are challenged. Empathy is emerging but not fully there. Remember, rejection of family is part of the process for now, but it is not permanent.

Channel the need for novelty, risk, and adventure: Offer experiences in controlled environments such as sports, rock climbing, race track driving, or organized travel experiences with peers. Pull back your direct adult supervision to some degree but communicate clear expectations. Give permission for more social activities but have boundaries about curfews, talk with the adults supervising events, or have established check-in/call times, etc.

Assure that consequences make sense: If something gets broken or lost, have your teen take part in repairing and paying expenses. If teens stay up too late, they still must get up and meet responsibilities on time.

Give needed space but stay connected: Back off when teens want alone time but be available when they have something to say. Show interest, not judgment, about their newly emerging opinions. Invite genuine conversation through questions, "What do you think about this issue?" "Do you have a new plan for next time this happens?" Listen with your mouth shut and ears open!

Accept who they are becoming: This is truly an exciting time as teens mature into unique adults. Join in the excitement of seeing where their interests and ideas take them. You may learn a great deal as you let them teach you things you've never explored.

INDIVIDUATION: THE TEEN'S TASK

Much like a toddler who is trying to establish independence and says, "Me do it!" and "No!", a teen has entered a similar phase. Teens can sound more like this: "Don't tell me what to do!" and "I'll just do it anyway without your permission."

The biologically driven push for independence is called the Individuation Process. It is an **important** and **necessary** process as teens prepare to head into the young adult stage of life.

All teenagers are not the same, but there are some general behaviors that most teens display. Here is a list of typical teen traits.

1. Rebellious: Many teens reject the family and family's values. To find out who they are, teens must first reject whatever their parents find important in order to figure out what they believe and how they are different from the family. Rebellion is the fuel to push forward into separation. Example: "I don't want to go to church anymore."

2. Emotional: Teens are maturing physically and sexually at a rate they cannot control. They may feel anxious about maturing too fast or too slow. High levels of hormones and the restructuring of the brain at this time creates mood swings. They are delightful one minute and rude the next. Example: "I love you, Mom." "Get out of my room!"

3. Friendship focused: Interacting within their peer group helps teens figure out if and how they fit in. Example: "I have to go to the party! Everyone else is going!"

4. Tests limits, seeks thrilling experiences, is impulsive and takes risks: Teens want to test out what they are able to do without being directed, advised, or ordered. Increased levels of the chemical dopamine in the brain fuels impulsive behavior and desire for excitement. The brain's evaluation center at this stage looks at the positive rewards of a risky choice and ignores the possible negatives, thus the risk seems worth it to teens.

5. Private: Alone time and keeping their thoughts private helps them to figure out who they are and what's important without an audience. Teens interpret any kind of question as prying and respond defensively. Example: "Why do you want to know about my day?!" They often respond to questions with one-word answers or give silent shrugs to guard their privacy.

6. A mistaken sense of knowing it all and thinking parents know nothing: Any adult advice or wisdom is rejected and considered "stupid." In fact, being seen with a parent in public causes great embarrassment. Teen thinking is: "Parents can't possibly relate to me and my generation."

Resources: *Positive Discipline for Teenagers*, Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott; *Brainstorm*, Dr. Daniel Siegel
Adapted by Colleen Murphy

Going Deeper

The adolescent stage is a force of nature that cannot be stopped. What if parents try to keep it from happening? Think about your baby learning to walk. Every time she took a step and fell, did you yell at her for trying? Did you hold her down so she didn't hurt herself? Did you punish her and put her in her crib? Of course not. Learning to walk is an important task with many failed attempts. Teens must also be given the same amount of room to make mistakes and take some appropriate risks in order to learn. Learning to drive, managing time, making decisions about drugs, sex, alcohol, etc. can't be learned without experience.

Teens need to be given opportunities to make decisions according to their maturity level. The better their decisions, the more freedom they earn. But expect mistakes. Hold them accountable to fix any mistake and allow small opportunities to earn back trust.



The consequences of attempting to stunt this natural developmental stage could result in: rebellious, risky, and sneaky behavior, shutting you out completely, or running away. Possibly the opposite can happen. If denied their individuation, teens remain a "good girl/ boy" who do what they are told by others all their lives, never reaching their full individual potential.

Trust the individuation process despite the messy details.

Key Steps

- Gain an understanding of the Individuation Process and learn what to expect
- Expect mistakes; mistakes hold invaluable lessons
- Hold teens accountable for mistakes (respectfully and logically) so that they learn to act more mindfully
- Offer opportunities for teens to handle bigger responsibilities. When they make a poor choice, show faith in their ability to make better choices next time
- Offer opportunities to demonstrate more responsibility when they are ready
- Refrain from the lecturing and saying, "I told you so"
- Listen. Show that you value their opinions and interests
- Channel teens' need for risks and adventure into safe, healthy activities
- Remember, this is a stage; it's not permanent. Find the powerful assets in this stage while holding a vision of who they are becoming



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