

## *Adolescence*

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Adolescence is a time of searching for identity. Their challenge is to find the answer to the question “Who am I?” Teenagers are no longer children but they are not yet adults. They experiment with what kind of person they want to be by trying different things. They may associate with peers who are doing things they have never done such as: smoking cigarettes, experimenting with illegal drugs, drinking alcohol, shoplifting, “skipping” school, etc. This quest for identity may involve behavior that is uncharacteristic for the teen. A usually compliant teen with good grades in school may become rebellious and show a decline in their academic performance. Although they may be unaware of the dynamics, this behavior is essentially a way for them to try on a new identity.

As our children enter adolescence their primary focus shifts away from their parents and toward their peer group. They want to be popular among their friends and sometimes risk doing things they know their parents do not approve.

Their interest in the opposite sex can also be frustrating. They become preoccupied with a special boyfriend or girlfriend and want to be with them, or talk with them by telephone, or “chat on line”, constantly.

In addition to establishing their identity, adolescents are struggling to negotiate independence from their parents. By the time they are teenagers they have learned many ways to rebel and circumvent parental authority. As they continue to establish their independence, greater conflict between them and their parents is created.

Teenagers try to practice being adults. In doing so, they try to make decisions for themselves. Sometimes these decisions are contrary to their parent’s rules. The teen then incurs the parent’s wrath and receives consequences for this behavior. Hopefully the teen learns from their mistakes and becomes more skilled at negotiating with his parents. Although this can be frustrating for everyone involved, it is often a necessary part of growing up. Unfortunately many teens are likely not to take your word as accurate when you give them advice based upon your experiences in the past. You probably remember your parent trying to warn you about some of the pitfalls of being a teen and how you did not listen to them either. There is no substitute for first hand experience and sometimes our teenagers need to “learn the hard way” by making mistakes.

These struggles between teenagers and their parents are as old as time. For many years there have been arguments about hair, clothes, friends, music and curfew. Today’s new conflicts revolve around tattoos, body piercing, computers and cell phones. These represent the same struggle for identity and independence with modern details.

It helps to keep two basic principles in mind. First of all you have no control over your adolescent and what they do. Secondly, you have total control of providing them with the consequences they deserve, whether positive or negative ones.

The first principle can be difficult and scary to admit. What I mean by this is that you as a parent can not force them to read, improve their grades, eat vegetables or refrain from “sex, drugs or rock & roll”. Teens are largely motivated by their peer group. We hope that by this time in their lives we have instilled in them the values and morals that

are important to our family. We also hope that they will exercise good judgment and restraint when appropriate.

This is where the second principle enters the picture. When they act appropriately we reward them with privileges such as going out with friends, TV, telephone, computer, rides to parties, etc. On the other hand, when they act inappropriately we must give them a clear message that we do not approve by withholding these privileges. When they are old enough to earn their driver's license or learner's permit this is a very powerful motivator. Do not make the mistake of allowing them to earn the privilege to drive simply because they are eligible and their friends' parents are doing so. Before your child begins to drive a car remember automobiles can be lethal weapons. Set up clear expectations and standards to be maintained in order for your teen to earn driving privileges.

Keeping these two principles in mind it will make being the parent of a teenager a little less stressful. It may also help to remember that just as the "terrible twos" passed, so will adolescence.

Mark Twain said:

*"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years".*