



The Family Connection

News to Use for families of young adolescents

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What parents should know about young adolescent development

Young adolescents are often labeled with any number of stereotypes – often called troublesome, unpredictable, and perhaps disrespectful. Some are confused, turned off, or wild. While such stereotypes overlook the range of differences among students, they do reflect the erroneous view of early adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” that has characterized adolescent psychology for almost 100 years.

A truer picture of early adolescence frames it as a time of a great range of major developmental changes. The physical changes are more dramatic in these years than at any other time in the life of a human being, save perhaps for infancy. The sexual changes are a major focal point. The social challenges are countless and consume much time and energy. Personal development is erratic, and the likelihood of responsible behavior is totally unpredictable. A brief summary of some of the key points of physical development follows.

Young adolescents are very concerned with their physical and sexual development. For some, physical development or lack thereof is the dominant, central theme in their lives. Average gain in height is from 2-4 inches per year, and the average weight gain for young adolescents per year is 8-10 pounds. Over the early adolescence period, ages 10-15, this averages out to a gain of 10-20 inches in height and 40 to 50 pounds.

Growth in young adolescents does not take place evenly. That is, certain parts of the body, most notably the extremities, develop earlier and more rapidly. Feet and hands are often too big for the rest of the body and it is not uncommon for more rapid growth of the nose and ears in comparison to the rest of the body. This age is also when the majority of bone growth takes place, making it critical that young adolescents not overextend the capacity of the muscular structure, causing permanent damage to muscle fibers.

During this period of rapid bone growth, young adolescents are often physically uncomfortable, unable to sit still for long periods of time. This makes sense when one realizes that the tailbone takes on its final form when three bones fuse together and harden in the posterior area and form the “mature” tailbone.



It is also true that the sciatic nerve is closely positioned to the skeletal structure and intensifies student discomfort. No wonder that sitting and remaining still is often such a challenge for young adolescents.

Another key change when the pituitary glands generate increases in hormones, serving as a catalyst for more rapid growth and as controller of glands that determine tissue growth and function. One outcome may lead to

the secretion of adrenaline in huge quantities when it is not needed. Imagine, a 13-year-old student working dutifully on 20 square root problems when she receives an adrenaline secretion that is substantial enough for her to run the length of a football field 10 times without stopping. This hormonal secretion is akin to an electrical power surge, and it makes the student squirm and want to move, stretch, and perhaps yell at the top of her lungs.

As young adolescents make their way through the numerous physical changes that are occurring, they believe that someone is always watching them or that they are always on stage. David Elkind first referred to this myth as the “imaginary audience.” The result of this egotism is that adolescents often form exaggerated beliefs about their own uniqueness because they do not distinguish their thoughts and feelings from what others think and feel. This is why it is not unusual for young adolescents to retreat to the privacy of their one room or someplace where they can close the door and eliminate the “imaginary audience” for a little while. Imagine how stressful it would be for you to live on a stage day after day.

From the *NEW Promoting Harmony-Young Adolescent Development and School Practices* by John Van Hoose, David Strahan, & Mark L'Esperance, available from National Middle School Association, 1-800-528-NMSA.

(In future issues of Family Connection, intellectual, sexual, and social and personal growth issues will be featured).

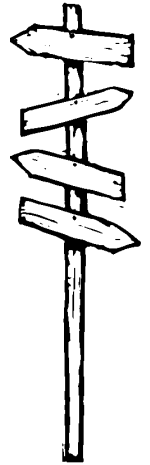
→ *The Family Connection* is published by National Middle School Association as part of its ongoing commitment encouraging family and community involvement in the education of young adolescents. NMSA is unique among educational organizations because of its commitment to addressing the needs of middle level students – youth between the ages of 10-15. Membership in NMSA is open to all persons interested in and concerned about middle level education. Teachers, administrators, parents, teacher educators, college students, and other educational professionals are well represented in NMSA's membership. Call 1-800-528-NMSA to receive further information about membership and middle level resources.

What young adolescents want — and need!

1. Every child wants to believe in himself or herself as a successful person.
2. Every youngster wants to be liked and respected.
3. Every youngster wants to do and learn things that are worthwhile.
4. Every youngster wants physical exercise and freedom to move.
5. Youngsters want life to be just.

From Chris Stevenson, *Teaching 10-14 Year Olds*, 2nd edition, 1998. Available from NMSA.

ParentsAsk



QUESTION: How do I help my 13-year-old son make good decisions?
How independent should I allow him to be?

ANSWER: A 13-year-old is not an adult and needs consistent help in making decisions about all sorts of things, regardless of how mature he appears. That is the key. Young adolescents have become increasingly “worldly” due to media and exposure to ideas, people, and events that only a few years ago they would not have known about. BUT, this worldliness is only superficial, the difference in knowing *about*, not really knowing. So, let your 13-year-old know you care about what he is doing, when he is doing it, and with whom. The buck does stop with you on lots of issues, but discuss things with your son, letting him know why you feel the way you do. Deep down he knows that “because everyone else is doing it” is not really a good rationale for what he wants to do. He is just testing you. And, of course, remember that this is not so much a time of testing the limits, as it is of setting the limits for a lifetime of good decisions.

TIPS

Helping your young adolescent be responsible

1. **Model the responsibility you want to see.** If you want your young adolescent to do the chores you assign, it often helps to work alongside your youngster so she sees what you expect. Not only is the modeling important, but you both have more fun doing it this way.
2. **Make choices.** You can't do it all and neither can your 12-year-old. While he would like to take the lead in the play, go to all soccer practices and games, and participate in the spelling bee, sometimes that just isn't possible. Learning to weigh options, recognize consequences, and plan ahead before making choices is what responsibility is all about.
3. **Think ahead.** We don't do our kids any favors when we bail them out of situations for which they are responsible. Parents who run to school every day to deliver forgotten items — lunch, backpack, sneakers, or their flute — don't teach them to plan ahead and be responsible for their belongings. Young adolescents need to be shown how to plan ahead — and then allowed to deal with the consequences of doing so, or not.
4. **Of course, it is a process.** Don't forget that the most critical aspect of developing responsibility for a young adolescent is that it is a process and not an event. It takes time. Sometimes they will be more responsible than others, so parents need to remember to be consistent and positive when irresponsibility is evident. No hammering, no lectures. Instead, simply explain what happened and why, and the result of an irresponsible choice. And most importantly, how will you avoid this problem in the future?

Celebrate Month of the Young Adolescent - October 2001

Don't Miss This Live Television Broadcast!

Mind Over Media

Monday, October 22, 12:00 Noon Eastern Time

Voices From The Middle School: Negative role models. Pressure to fit in. Exposure to sex and violence.

How does the media affect the behavior of young adolescents? And how can concerned adults help them make sense of what's on-line, on the radio, and on-screen?

In this special follow-up presentation, Court TV, the National Middle School Association, and Cable in the Classroom team up to take a second look at youth and media. We'll hear from the kids themselves on how the media influences their buying patterns, self-image, relationships, and styles of resolving conflict - and what parents, teachers, and community groups can do to give young adolescents the skills they need to make active, informed choices about what they're watching . . . and listening to.

Encourage your City Council, Mayor, or school board to sign a proclamation declaring October 2001 Month of the Young Adolescent in your community. For ideas to help your school and community plan your celebration check out National Middle School Association's Web site (www.nmsa.org).

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