

Tips for Parents: Adolescence

It happens (almost) overnight

Responsible, considerate, and thoughtful sixth-graders often turn into irresponsible, preoccupied, and indifferent seventh and eighth graders—seemingly overnight. This change in behavior is often blamed on raging teenage hormones and puberty, but is actually influenced by some school and home environments.

What schools can do

Junior high or middle schools that are large, impersonal, and bureaucratic in style do not provide the kind of support appropriate for these students.

As a result, teachers and students often don't really get to know each other and the adult support system strongly needed by these kids is missing. Adolescents need adults—who aren't their parents—to talk to, be close to, and respect.

When junior high students have an opportunity to be in on the development of school rules, participate in school governance, and have input regarding their educational experiences, they are less likely to lose motivation and interest in learning.

Ask schools to change

Insist that your school district evaluate its junior high/middle school programs. Encourage more developmentally appropriate learning environments—fewer students, less departmentalization, smaller classes, and opportunities for meaningful student participation.

What families can do

Families need to adapt to a child's movement into adolescence by reinforcing and encouraging decision-making and responsibility. How do you do this?

- **Be informed.** Your preteen is undergoing some rapid and profound changes as the brain and body mature. Read articles and watch special TV programs that deal with this stage of development. Call your school district and see if they offer parenting workshops.
- **Be flexible.** Allow rules, chores, and allowances to be discussed and negotiated—within reason. If you want your children to become good decision makers, you need to provide them with the opportunities to actually make decisions. Sometimes it may be necessary to even “rethink” decisions that have already been made.
- **Be firm.** Although you want to encourage decision-making, independence, and responsibility, make sure it is done within the bounds of your family's values.

Not total freedom

Although adolescent kids want more freedom and less adult control, they do not want total freedom. Adolescents develop best when they are a part of emotionally supportive environments—at home and school.

Ten Survival Tips for Parents

- **Be understanding.** Your preteen is experiencing some of life's most rapid and profound changes. Hormones are awakening, growth may be weed-like, the brain is maturing, the body is developing, and there is a newfound need to be independent.
- **Be realistic.** You may face this roller-coaster era at a time when you are also pressured by your job, rearing younger children, paying bills, saving for college, and worrying about aging parents. By accepting the preteen changes as a normal life transition, you'll be able to preserve your sanity.
- **Be an adult.** If your preteen tests your parental authority by sassing and slamming doors you must respond as a self-controlled adult even when you are angry or exasperated. Avoid yelling and making cruel remarks. Demonstrate your ability to compromise and to resolve differences calmly and rationally. If a confrontation heats up, call a time-out and seek a solution after you both calm down.
- **Be involved.** Exchange information with your child's teachers about his or her progress and problems. Attend PTA meetings, conferences, and other school activities. Get acquainted with other parents and establish uniform standards for partying, "hanging out," and other activities.
- **Be attentive.** Listen to your child's opinions and problems, but don't lecture. Instead of nagging, write notes as reminders of tasks and appointments. Try to match household chores with energy cycles. If your child is upset or angry, a simple "Are you okay?" invites a confidence.
- **Be loving.** Your son or daughter may squirm at being seen with you in public, but he or she still needs (and secretly welcomes) your love and attention. Be available in times of crisis, real or imagined. Nurture self-esteem and avoid sarcasm or ridicule. Hugs are still important—just don't hug in public!!

For more information:

Web links:

The US Department of Education's "Helping Your Adolescent Child":
www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/adolescence.pdf

Indiana University's Center for Adolescent and Family Studies Adolescent Directory Online:
<http://education.indiana.edu/cas/adol/adol.html>

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