

Helping Your Child



through Early Adolescence



U.S. Department of Education
Margaret Spellings
Secretary

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Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence



for parents of children from 10 through 14

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Communications and Outreach



Foreword

Early adolescence can be a challenging time for children and parents alike. Parents often feel unprepared and they may view the years from 10 through 14 as a time just “to get through.” However, research and common sense tell us that this view is very limited. During the early adolescent years, parents and families can greatly influence the growth and development of their children. We sell our children short if we expect little from them and we sell ourselves short if we believe that we have no influence.

A growing awareness that young adolescents can accomplish a great deal is behind a national effort to improve education in America’s middle grades. At the heart of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is a promise to raise standards for all children and to help all children meet those standards. In support of this goal, President George W. Bush is committed to promoting the very best teaching programs. Well-trained teachers and instruction that is based on research can bring the best teaching approaches and programs to children of all ages and help ensure that no child is left behind. *Helping Your Child through Early Adolescence* is part of the president’s efforts to provide parents with the latest research and practical information that can help you support your children both at home and in school.

It’s not easy to raise a young teen. Many outside influences distract our children and complicate our efforts. Exhaustion, anxiety, a lack of support and limited resources may make it hard for us to be all that we want to be for our children. But whatever the challenges, we share one aim: to do the best job possible as parents. We hope that you will find this booklet helpful in achieving this goal.

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Learning as much as you can about the world of early adolescents is an important step toward helping your child—and you—through the fascinating, confusing and wonderful years from ages 10 through 14.

Bumps, No Boulders

Mention being the parent of a young adolescent and other adults may roll their eyes and express their sympathy. They see images of bedrooms in which lost homework assignments share floor space with potato chip wrappers and grubby sweatpants.

But parents' concerns run deeper than messy bedrooms. They worry about the problems that young adolescents often face: rocky emotions, rebellion, peer pressures, low motivation, drugs, alcohol and pregnancies.

During the years from ages 10 through 14, children undergo many physical, emotional and mental changes. Together these changes can throw the lives of young teens and their parents off-balance. Major problems may arise, particularly among children who are already at risk of school failure.

On the other hand, if you talk to adults who work with young adolescents—teachers, school counselors and principals—you see another view of these children. It's true that young teens can be frustrating and challenging and that they can test their parents' patience. It's also true,



however, that these same youngsters can be funny, curious, imaginative and eager to learn. As research confirms, most young teens run into bumps but no boulders. They (and their parents) hit some rough spots, but they get through the young adolescent years successfully and grow into adults who find work, create meaningful relationships and become good citizens.

The journey through these years is easier when parents, families and caregivers learn as much as they can about this time in children's lives and when they give their children support. This booklet is designed to help in this effort. It pulls together information from scientifically-based research, as well as from interviews with award-winning middle school teachers, counselors and principals—most of whom also are—or have been recently—parents of young adolescents. The booklet addresses the following questions and concerns that parents of young teens often raise:

The journey through these years is easier when parents, families and caregivers learn as much as they can about this time in children's lives and when they give their children support.

- ★ How will my child change between the ages of 10 and 14?
- ★ What can I do to be a good parent for my adolescent?
- ★ How can I communicate better with my child?
- ★ How much independence should I give my child?
- ★ How can I help my child to become more confident?
- ★ How can I help my child to form good friendships and to resist harmful peer pressure?
- ★ What can I do to keep the media from being a bad influence on my child?
- ★ What is school like for adolescents?
- ★ What's the best way for me to stay involved in my child's school and in other activities?
- ★ How can I help my child to be a successful reader?
- ★ How can I keep my child motivated to learn and do well, both in and out of school?
- ★ What can I do to help my child to develop good values and to learn right from wrong?
- ★ How can I tell—and what can I do—if my child is having a serious problem?



Changes

How will my child change between the ages of 10 and 14?

Throughout our lives we grow and change, but during early adolescence the rate of change is especially evident. We consider 10-year-olds to be children; we think of 14-year-olds as “almost adults.” We welcome the changes, but we also find them a little disturbing. When children are younger, it is easier to predict when a change might take place and how rapidly. But by early adolescence, the relationship between a child’s real age and her* developmental milestones grows weaker. Just *how* young teens develop can be influenced by many things: for example, genes, families, friends, neighborhoods and values and other forces in society.

Physical Changes

As they enter puberty, young teens undergo a great many physical changes, not only in size and shape, but in such things as the growth of pubic and underarm hair and increased body odor. For girls, changes include the development of breasts and the start of menstruation; for boys, the development of testes.

Adolescents do not all begin puberty at the same age. For girls, it may take place anywhere from the age of 8 to 13; in boys, on average, it happens about two years later. This is the time period when students’ physical characteristics vary the most within their classes and among their friends—some may grow so much that, by the end of the school year, they may be too large for the desks they were assigned in September. Others may change more slowly.

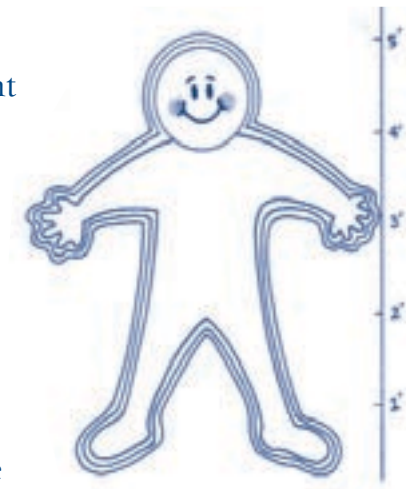
Early adolescence often brings with it new concerns about body image and appearance. Both girls and boys who never before gave much

* Please note: In this booklet, we refer to a child as “her” in some places and “him” in others. We do this to make the booklet easier to read. Please understand, however, that every point that we make is the same for girls and boys.

thought to their looks may suddenly spend hours primping, worrying and complaining—about being too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny or too pimply. Body parts may grow at different times and rates. Hands and feet, for example, may grow faster than arms and legs. Because movement of their bodies requires coordination of body parts—and because these parts are of changing proportions—young adolescents may be clumsy and awkward in their physical activities

The rate at which physical growth and development takes place also can influence other parts of a young teen’s life. An 11-year-old girl who has already reached puberty will have different interests than will a girl who does not do so until she’s 14. Young teens who bloom very early or very late may have special concerns. Late bloomers (especially boys) may feel they can’t compete in sports with more physically developed classmates. Early bloomers (especially girls) may be pressured into adult situations before they are emotionally or mentally able to handle them. The combined effect of the age on the beginning for physical changes in puberty and the ways in which friends, classmates, family and the world around them respond to those changes can have long-lasting effects on an adolescent. Some young teens, however, like the idea that they are developing differently from their friends. For example, they may enjoy some advantages, especially in sports, over classmates who mature later.

Whatever the rate of growth, many young teens have an unrealistic view of themselves and need to be reassured that differences in growth rates are normal.



Emotional Changes

Most experts believe that the idea of young teens being controlled by their “raging hormones” is exaggerated. Nonetheless, this age can be one of mood swings, sulking, a craving for privacy and short tempers. Young children are not able to think far ahead, but young teens can and do—which allows them to worry about the future. Some may worry excessively about:

- ★ their school performance;
- ★ their appearance, physical development and popularity;
- ★ the possible death of a parent;
- ★ being bullied at school;
- ★ school violence;
- ★ not having friends;
- ★ drugs and drinking;
- ★ hunger and poverty in the country;
- ★ their inability to get a good job;
- ★ nuclear bombs and terrorists attacks on the country;
- ★ the divorce of their parents; and
- ★ dying.

Many young teens are very self-conscious. And, because they are experiencing dramatic physical and emotional changes, they are often overly sensitive about themselves. They may worry about personal qualities or “defects” that are major to them, but are hardly noticeable to others. (Belief: “I can’t go to the party tonight because *everyone* will laugh at this baseball-sized zit on my forehead.” Facts: The pimple is tiny and hidden by hair.) A young teen also can be caught up in himself. He may believe that he is the

only person who feels the way he feels or has the same experiences, that he is so special that no one else, particularly his family, can understand him. This belief can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, a young teen’s focus on herself has implications for how she mixes with family and friends. (“I *can’t* be seen going to a movie with my *mother!*”)



Teens’ emotions often seem exaggerated. Their actions seem inconsistent. It is normal for young teens to swing regularly from being happy to being sad and from feeling smart to feeling dumb. In fact, some think of adolescence as a second toddlerhood. As Carol Bleifield, a middle school counselor in Wisconsin, explains, “One minute, they want to be treated and taken care of like a small child. Five minutes later they are pushing adults away, saying, ‘Let me do it.’ It may help if you can help them understand that they are in the midst of some major changes, changes that don’t always move steadily ahead.”

In addition to changes in the emotions that they feel, most young teens explore different ways to express their emotions. For example, a child who greeted friends and visitors with enthusiastic hugs may turn into a teen who gives these same people only a small wave or nod of the head. Similarly, hugs and kisses for a parent may be replaced with a pulling away and an, “Oh, Mom!” It’s important to remember, though, that these are usually changes in *ways of expressing* feelings and not the actual *feelings* about friends, parents and family.

Be on the lookout for excessive emotional swings or long-lasting sadness in your child. These can suggest severe emotional problems. (For more information, see the **Problems** section, page 68.)

Cognitive Changes

The cognitive or mental, changes that take place in early adolescence may be less easy to see, but they can be just as dramatic as physical and emotional changes. During adolescence, most teens make large leaps in the way they think, reason and learn. Younger children need to see and touch things to be convinced that they are real. But in early adolescence, children become able to think about ideas and about things that they can't see or touch. They become better able to think through problems and see the consequences of different points of view or actions. For the first time, they can think about what might be, instead of what is. A 6-year-

old thinks a smiling person is happy and a crying person is sad. A 14-year-old may tell you that a sad person smiles to hide his true feelings.

The cognitive changes allow young teens to learn more advanced and complicated material in school. They become eager to gain and apply knowledge and to consider a range of ideas or options.

These mental changes also carry over into their emotional lives. Within the

family, for example, the ability to reason may change the way a young teen talks to and acts around her parents. She begins to anticipate how her parents will react to something she says or does and prepares an answer or an explanation.

In addition, these mental changes lead adolescents to consider who they are and who they may be. This is a process called *identity formation* and it

is a major activity during adolescence. Most adolescents will explore a range of possible identities. They go through "phases" that to a parent can seem to be ever-changing. Indeed, adolescents who don't go through this period of exploration are at greater risk of developing psychological problems, especially depression, when they are adults.

Just as adults, **who** with more experience and cognitive maturity can struggle with their different roles, adolescents struggle in developing a sense of who they are. They begin to realize that they play different roles with different people: son or daughter, friend, teammate, student, worker and so forth.

Young teens may be able to think more like adults, but they still do not have the experience that is needed to act like adults. As a result, their behavior may be out of step with their ideas. For example, your child may participate eagerly in a walk to raise money to save the environment—but litter the route she walks with soda cans. Or she may spend an evening on the phone or exchanging e-mails with a friend talking about how they dislike a classmate because she gossips.

It takes time for young teens and their parents to adjust to all these changes. But the changes are also exciting. They allow a young teen to see what she can be like in the future and to develop plans for becoming that person.

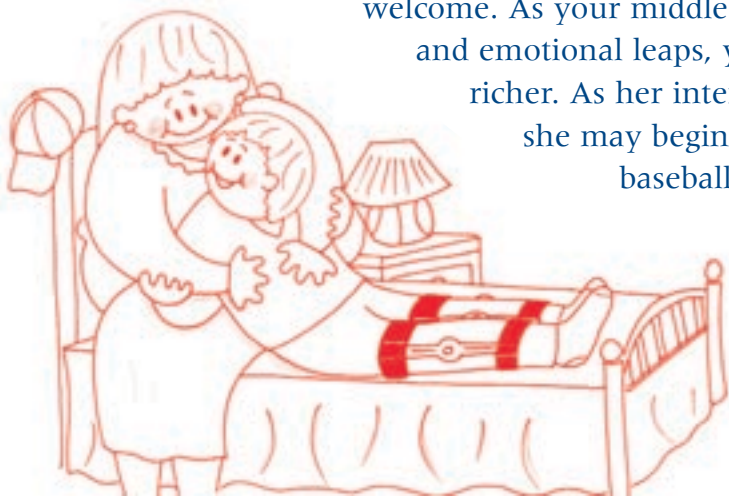
They begin to realize that they play different roles with different people: son or daughter, friend, teammate, student, worker and so forth.

Being an Effective Parent

What can I do to be a good parent for my early adolescent child?

Parents often become less involved in the lives of their children as they enter the middle grades. But your young adolescent needs as much attention and love from you as he needed when he was younger—and maybe more. A good relationship with you or with other adults is the best safeguard your child has as he grows and explores. By the time he reaches adolescence, you and he will have had years of experience with each other; the parent of today's toddler is parent to tomorrow's teenager.

Your relationship with your child may change—in fact, it almost certainly must change—however, as she develops the skills required to be a successful adult. These changes can be rewarding and welcome. As your middle school child makes mental and emotional leaps, your conversations will grow richer. As her interests develop and deepen, she may begin to teach *you*—how to slug a baseball, what is happening with the city council or county board or why a new book is worth reading.



America is home to people with a great variety of attitudes, opinions and values.

Americans have different ideas and priorities, which can affect how we choose to raise our children. Across these differences, however, research has shown that being effective parents involves the following qualities:

- ★ **Showing love.** When our children behave badly, we may become angry or upset with them. We may also feel miserable because we become angry or upset. But these feelings are different from not loving our children. Young adolescents need adults who are there for them—people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them and show a genuine interest in them. This is how they learn to care for and love others. According to school counselor Carol Bleifield, “Parents can love their children but not necessarily love what they do—and children need to trust that this is true.”
- ★ **Providing support.** Young adolescents need support as they struggle with problems that may seem unimportant to their parents and families. They need praise when they’ve done their best. They need encouragement to develop interests and personal characteristics.
- ★ **Setting limits.** Young adolescents need parents or other adults who consistently provide structure and supervision that is firm and appropriate for age and development. Limits keep all children, including young teens, physically and emotionally safe. Carole Kennedy is a former middle school principal, U.S. Department of Education’s Principal-in-Residence (2000) and president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. She puts it this way, “They need parents who can say, ‘No, you cannot go to the mall all day or to movies with that group of kids.’” Psychologist Diana Baumrind identifies three types of parents: *authoritarian*, *permissive*

Young adolescents need adults who are there for them—people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them and show a genuine interest in them.



- completing chores, such as doing yard work, cleaning their rooms or helping to prepare meals, that contribute to the family’s well being;
- completing homework assignments without being nagged;
- taking on community activities;
- finding ways to be useful to others; and
- admitting to both the good and bad choices that they make.

- ★ **Providing a range of experiences.** Adolescence is a time for exploring many areas and doing new things. Your child may try new sports and new academic pursuits and read new books. He may experiment with different forms of art, learn about different cultures and careers and take part in community or religious activities. Within your means, you can open doors for your child. You can introduce him to new people and to new worlds. In doing so, you may renew in yourself long-ignored interests and talents, which also can set a good example for your child. Don’t be discouraged when his interests change.
- ★ **Showing respect.** It is tempting to label all young adolescents as being difficult and rebellious. But these youngsters vary as much as do children in any other age group. Your child needs to be treated with respect, which requires you to recognize and appreciate her differences and to treat her as an individual. Respect also requires you to show compassion by trying to see things from your child’s point of view and to consider her needs and feelings. By treating your young adolescent with respect, you help her to take pleasure in good behavior.

There are no perfect parents. However, a bad decision or an “off” day (or week or month) isn’t likely to have any lasting impact on your child. What’s most important in being an effective parent is what you do over time.



and authoritative. By studying about findings from more than 20 years of research, she and her colleagues have found that to be effective parents, it’s best to avoid extremes. *Authoritarian* parents who lay down hard-and-fast rules and expect their children to always do as they are told or *permissive* parents who have very few rules or regulations and give their children too much freedom are most likely to have the most difficult time as parents. Their children are at risk for a range of negative behavioral and emotional consequences. However, *authoritative* parents, who set limits that are clear and come with explanations, tend to struggle less with their adolescents. “Do it

because I said so” probably didn’t work for your son when he was 6 and it’s even less likely to work now that he’s an adolescent. (For more information on setting limits, see the **Independence** section, page 23.)

- ★ **Being a role model.** Young adolescents need strong role models. Try to live the behavior and values that

you hope your child will develop. Your actions speak louder than words. If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child stands a better chance of following your example. As adolescents explore possibilities of who they may become, they look to their parents, peers, well-known personalities and others to define who they may become.

- ★ **Teaching responsibility.** We are not born knowing how to act responsibly. A sense of responsibility is formed over time. As children grow up, they need to learn to take more and more responsibility for such things as:

If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child stands a better chance of following your example.



How can I communicate better with my child?

Young adolescents often aren't great communicators, particularly with their parents and other adults who love them. Emily Hutchison, a middle school teacher from Texas notes that young teens "often feel they can talk with anyone better than their parents—even wonderful parents." "They tend to be private," explains Patricia Lemons, a middle school teacher in New Mexico. "They don't necessarily want to tell you what they did at school today."



Many psychologists have found, however, that when parents know where their children are and what they are doing (and when the adolescent knows the parent knows, what psychologists call *monitoring*), adolescents are at a lower risk for a range of bad experiences, including drug, alcohol and tobacco use; sexual behavior and pregnancy; and delinquency and violence. The key, according to psychologists, is to be inquisitive but not interfering, working to respect your child's privacy as you establish trust and closeness.

It's easiest to communicate with a young teen if you established this habit when your child was little. As school counselor Carol Bleifield explains, "You don't suddenly dive in during the seventh grade and say, 'So what did you do with your friends on Friday night?'" But it's not impossible to improve communication when your child reaches early adolescence. Here are some tips:

★ **Realize that no recipe exists for successful communication.** What works for getting one child to talk about what's important doesn't always work with another one. One middle school teacher and mother of two says her daughter is open and talkative; her son is quieter. But because her son likes to listen to music, to write and to read, this mother often goes with him to a local bookstore. Here, in a place where he's comfortable, the son describes stories and book characters as a link to what he is thinking and feeling. By listening to music with him and proofreading his writing when he's willing to let her this mother encourages her son to open up.

★ **Listen.** "You need to spend a lot of time *not* talking," suggests Diane Crim, a middle school teacher in Utah. To listen means to avoid interrupting and it means to pay close attention. This is best done in a quiet place with no distractions. It's hard to listen carefully if you're also trying to cook dinner or watch television. Often just talking with your child about a problem or an issue helps to clarify things. Sometimes the less you offer advice, the more your young teen may ask you for it. Listening can also be the best way to uncover a more serious problem that requires your attention.

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★ **Create opportunities to talk.** To communicate with your child you need to make yourself available. Young adolescents resist "scheduled" talks; they don't open up when you tell them to, but when *they* want to. Some teens like to talk when they first get home from school. Others may like to talk at the dinner table or at bedtime. Some parents talk with their children in the car, preferably when the radio, tapes and CDs aren't playing. "I take my daughter to



why your child made or wants to make a poor choice is more constructive: “Dropping out of your algebra class will cut off lots of choices for you in the future. Some colleges won’t admit you without two years of algebra, plus geometry and some trigonometry. Let’s get you some help with algebra.”

★ **Avoid over-reacting.** Responding too strongly can lead to yelling and screaming and it can shut down conversation. “Try to keep anxiety and emotions out of the conversation—then kids will open up,” advises eighth-grade teacher Anne Jolly from Alabama. Instead of getting riled up, she says, “It’s better to ask, ‘What do you think about what you did? Let’s talk about this.’”

Middle school teacher Charles Summers adds, “Kids are more likely to be open if they look at you as somebody who is not going to spread their secrets or get extremely upset if they confess something to you. If your kid says, ‘I’ve got to tell you something. Friday night I tried beer,’ and you go off the deep end, your kid won’t tell you again.”

At a time when they are already judging themselves critically, adolescents make themselves vulnerable when they open up to parents. We know that the best way to encourage a behavior is to reward it. If you are critical when your teenager talks to you, what he sees is that his openness gets punished rather than rewarded.



a mall—not the closer one, but the cooler one that is an hour and a half away,” says a middle school teacher and mother. Many of the best conversations grow out of shared activities. “Parents try to grab odd moments and have this deep communication with their child,” notes Sherry Tipps, an Arkansas teacher. “Then they are frustrated because it doesn’t happen.”

★ **Talk over differences.** Communication breaks down for some parents because they find it hard to manage differences with their child. It’s

often easiest to limit these differences when you have put in place clear expectations. If your 13-year-old daughter knows she’s to be home by 9:30 p.m.—and if she knows the consequences for not meeting this curfew—the likelihood that she will be home on time increases.

When differences arise, telling your child your concerns firmly but calmly can prevent differences from becoming battles.

Differences of opinion are easier to manage when we recognize that these differences can provide important opportunities for us to rethink the limits and to negotiate new ones, a skill that is valuable for your child to develop. For example, when your daughter is 14, setting a later curfew for some occasions may be fine. Such negotiations are possible because of your child’s growing cognitive skills and ability to reason and consider many possibilities and views. Because she can consider that her curfew should be later on the weekend than on school nights, your insistence that “it doesn’t matter” will only create a conflict.

When differences arise, telling your child your concerns firmly but calmly can prevent differences from becoming battles. Explaining





★ **Talk about things that are important to your young teen.** Different youngsters like to talk about different things. Some of the things they talk about may not seem important to you, but, as school counselor Carol Bleifield explains, “With kids, sometimes it’s like a different culture. You need to try to understand this, to put yourself in their place and time.” She cautions against pretending to be excited about something that bores you. By asking questions and listening, however, you can show your child that you respect his feelings and opinions. Here are topics that generally interest young adolescents:

—*School.* If you ask your child, “What did you do in school today?” she most likely will answer, “Nothing.” Of course, you know that isn’t true. By looking at your child’s assignment book or reading notices sent home by the school, you will know that on Tuesday, your 10-year-old began studying animals in South America that are headed for extinction or that the homecoming football game is Friday night. With this information, you then can ask your child about specific classes or activities, which is more likely to start a conversation.

★ “Music has been the signature of every generation. It defines each age group. Parents ought to at least know the names of popular singers.”

—*Hobbies and personal interests.* If your child loves sports, talk about his favorite team or event or watch the World Series or the Olympics with him. Most young adolescents are interested in music. Barbara Braithwaite, a middle school teacher in Pennsylvania notes that “Music has been the signature of every generation. It defines each age group. Parents ought to at least know the names of popular singers.” It’s important, however, to tell your child when you believe that the music he is listening to is inappropriate—and to explain why. Your silence can be misconstrued as approval.



—*Emotions.* As was pointed out earlier, young adolescents worry about a lot of different things. They worry about: their friends, being popular, sexuality, being overweight or scrawny, tomorrow’s math test, grades, getting into college, being abandoned and the future of the world. The list goes on. Sometimes it’s hard to know if a problem seems big to your child. School counselor Carol Bleifield says that if she is unsure, she asks, “Is this a small problem, a medium problem or a big problem? How important is it to you? How often do you worry about it?” Figuring out the size and importance of the problem helps her decide how to address it.

—*Family.* Young adolescents like to talk about and be involved in plans for the whole family, such as vacations, as well as things that affect them individually, such as curfews or allowances. If you need back surgery, your child will want to know ahead of time. She may also want to learn more about the operation. Being a part of conversations about such topics can contribute to your child’s feelings of belonging and security.



—*Sensitive subjects.* Families should handle sensitive subjects in a way that is consistent with their values. Remember, though, that avoiding such subjects won’t make them go away. If you avoid talking with your child about sensitive subjects, he may turn to the media or his friends for information. This increases the chances that what he hears will be out of line with your values or that the information will be wrong—or both.



Sharon Sikora, a middle school teacher from Colorado, explains that middle schoolers have wrong or inaccurate information about many important subjects. They will say they know about certain sensitive topics but they really don't. Discussing a sensitive subject directly may not work, Ms. Sikora notes, "You can't just sit down and say, 'Today we are going to talk about marijuana use.' That shuts down the conversation before you ever start."



- Parents' lives, hopes and dreams.* Many young adolescents want a window to their parents' world, both past and present. How old were you when you got your ears pierced? Did you ever have a teacher who drove you crazy? Did you get an allowance when you were 11? If so, how much? Were you sad when your grandpa died? What is your boss like at work? This doesn't mean you are obligated to dump all of your problems and emotions into your child's lap. You are a parent not a peer and an inappropriate question may best be left answered. However, recounting some things about your childhood and your life today can help your child sort out his own life.
- The future.* As the cognitive abilities of young adolescents develop, they begin to think more about the future and its possibilities. Your child may want to talk more about what to expect in the years to come—life after high school, jobs and marriage. He may ask questions such as, "What is it like to live in a college dormitory?" "How old do you have to be to get married?" "Is there any chance

that the world will blow up some day?" "Will there be enough gasoline so that I can drive a car when I get older?" These questions deserve the best answers that you can provide (and those that you can't answer deserve an honest, "I don't know.").

- Culture, current events.* Ours is a media-rich world. Even young children are exposed to television, music, movies, video and computer games and other forms of media. Remember, though, that the media can provide a window into your adolescent's world. For example, if you and your child have seen the same movie (together or separately), you can ask her whether she liked it and what parts she liked best.

- ★ **Communicate with kindness and respect.** Young teens can say or do things that are outrageous or mean-spirited or both. However hard your child pushes your buttons, it's best to respond calmly. The respect and self-control that you display in talks with your child may some day be reflected in her conversations with others.

How you say something is as important as *what* you say. "Stop picking at your face" can reduce a young adolescent to tears. "Your room looks like a pigsty" isn't as helpful as, "You need to spend some time picking up your room. The job will be easier if you spend 5 minutes right now picking the clothes up off the floor—putting the dirty ones in the hamper and hanging the clean ones up. After lunch you can spend 5 minutes straightening up your bookshelf." Youngsters also pay attention to the tone of your voice. A 10-year-old can easily tell a calm voice from an angry one.

However hard your child pushes your buttons, it's best to respond calmly.



Kindness goes hand-in-hand with respect. As Joan Lipsitz, a nationally recognized authority on educating middle-grade students and the mother of two grown children, explains, “When I

was an active parent and teacher, I

had a rule that grew out of a classroom experience: ‘I will never knowingly be unkind to you and you will never knowingly be unkind to me.’ That turned out to be the most powerful rule I ever set, either in the classroom—it changed the culture—or at home.”

Communicating with respect also requires not talking down to adolescents. They are becoming more socially conscious and aware of events in the world and they appreciate thoughtful conversations. Jerri Foley, a middle school counselor in South Carolina, tells the story of a trip she made with a group of adolescent girls when the state was debating whether to continue flying the Confederate battle flag from atop the state house. “We were driving along the highway when we got into a big discussion,” she recalls. “We got so intense talking about it that we missed the exit to come home.”

Independence

How much independence should I give my child?

As children enter adolescence, they often beg for more freedom. Parents walk a tightrope between wanting their children to be confident and able to do things for themselves and knowing that the world can be a scary place with threats to their children’s health and safety.



Some parents allow too much of the wrong kind of freedom or they offer freedom before the adolescent is ready to accept it. Other parents cling too tightly, denying young teens both the responsibilities they require to develop maturity and the opportunities they need to make choices and accept their consequences.

Research tells us that adolescents do best when they remain closely connected to their parents but at the same time are allowed to have their own points of view and even to disagree with their parents. Here are some tips to help balance closeness and independence:

- ★ **Set limits.** All children sometimes resist limits, but they want them and they need them. In a world that can seem too hectic for adults and adolescents alike, limits provide a security. Oftentimes, adolescents whose parents do not set limits feel unloved. Setting limits is most effective when it begins early. It is harder but not impossible, however, to establish limits during early adolescence.

★ **Be clear.** Most young teens respond best to specific instructions, which are repeated regularly. As middle school teacher Sharon Sikora notes, “Don’t just say, ‘I want your room clean,’ because they don’t know what that means. Say, in a non-argumentative way, ‘This is how I perceive a clean room.’ They may say, ‘I don’t really want the lamp over here, I want it over there.’ Give them the freedom to express themselves.”

★ **Give reasonable choices.** Choices make young teens more open to guidance. For example, you can tell your son that his algebra homework must be done before bedtime, but that he has a choice of

completing it either before or after supper. And you can tell your 14-year-old daughter that she can’t hang around the video arcade with her friends on Saturday night, but she can have a group of friends over to your house to watch a movie.

Using humor and creativity as you give choices may also make your child more willing to accept them. One middle

school teacher couldn’t get her own child to hang up clean clothes or put dirty clothes in the laundry basket. So she gave her daughter two options—either all the clothes had to be picked up or everything would go on the floor. “I was washing the clothes, then putting them in piles on the floor,” the teacher recalls. “It made me crazy, but it worked.” After two weeks, her daughter got tired of the stacks on the floor and she began picking up her clothes.



★ **Grant independence in stages.** The more mature and responsible a young teen’s behavior is, the more privileges parents can grant. You might first give your young teen the right to choose which sneakers to buy within a certain price range. Later you can let him make other clothing purchases—with the understanding that price tags won’t be removed until you approve the items. Eventually, you can give him a clothing allowance to spend as he likes.

★ **Health and safety come first.** Your most important responsibility as a parent is to protect your child’s health and safety. Your child needs to know that your love for her requires you to veto activities and choices that threaten either of these. Let your child know what things threaten her health and safety—and often the health and safety of others—and put your foot down. Doing this is made more difficult, though, because adolescents have a sense that nothing can hurt them. At the same time that he feels that everything he experiences is new and unique, an adolescent also believes that what happens to others will not happen to him. His beliefs are based on the fact that adolescence is the healthiest period of time during our lives. In this period, physical illnesses are not common and fatal disease is rare. The important thing to emphasize to your child is that, while he may be very healthy, death and injury during adolescence are most often caused by violence and accidents.

Your child needs to know that your love for her requires you to veto activities and choices that threaten either of these.

★ **Say no to choices that cut off future options.** Some things aren't worth fighting about. It may offend you if your son wears a shirt to school that clashes wildly with his pants, but this isn't a choice that can cut off future possibilities for him. Young teens may have a growing sense of the future, but they still lack the experiences required to fully understand how a decision they make today can affect them tomorrow. They may have heard that smoking is unhealthy, but they do not fully understand what it means to die of lung cancer at the age of 45. Talk to your children about the lifelong consequences of choices they make. Help them understand there are

★ You can guide by being a good listener and by asking questions that help your child to think about the results of her actions.

good and bad decisions and that knowing one from the other can make all the difference in their lives. Let your child know that you are "the keeper of options" until he is old enough and responsible enough to assume this responsibility: He may not skip school and he may not avoid taking tough courses that will prepare him for college.

★ **Guide, but resist the temptation to control.** The earlier section on being an effective parent discussed the importance of striking a good balance between laying down the law and allowing too much freedom. With most young teens, it's easiest to maintain this balance by guiding but not controlling. Young teens need opportunities to explore different roles, try on new personalities and experiment. They need to learn that choices have consequences. That means making some mistakes and accepting the results. But parents need to provide guidance so that young teens avoid making too many poor choices.

★ You can guide by being a good listener and by asking questions that help your child to think about the results of her actions: "What could happen if you let someone who is drunk drive you home?" Your guidance may be better appreciated if you ask your child's advice on a range of matters and follow the advice if it seems reasonable: "What should we cook for Daddy's birthday?" "I don't have to work on Saturday. Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

★ The fine line between guiding and controlling may be different for different children. Some children, whether they are 7 or 17, need firmer guidance and fewer privileges than do other children at the same age. One middle school teacher explains how the different behavior of her own two teens created a need for different limits: "My daughter understood a midnight curfew to mean that she either had to be in the house with the door locked by 12 or else she must have placed the call from the emergency room informing her parents that she had broken her leg. My son, who was 15 months younger, understood a midnight curfew to mean that he could call at 11:59 p.m. to inform his parents that he'd be home after the pizza he'd ordered with his buddies had arrived and been consumed and he'd driven home his 6 friends."



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