

Social & Emotional Development in Adolescence

AGES 11–21 YEARS

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What to Expect & When to Seek Help

 A **Bright Futures** Developmental Tool for Families and Providers

What Parents Want to Know...

As children become teenagers, parents have lots of questions about how to help their teen—and the entire family—cope with the dramatic and often confusing changes of adolescence.

All teens have different strengths and abilities, and no other teen will develop exactly like yours. Health, personality, friends, and life experiences are important to your teen's development; family, community, and cultural traditions also play important roles. For example, teens may start dating at a later age in some cultures.

Although each teen is unique, *all* teens face social and emotional challenges during adolescence. This is a time of dramatic growth, from the early teen years (11-14) through late adolescence (ages 18-21). Major challenges include:

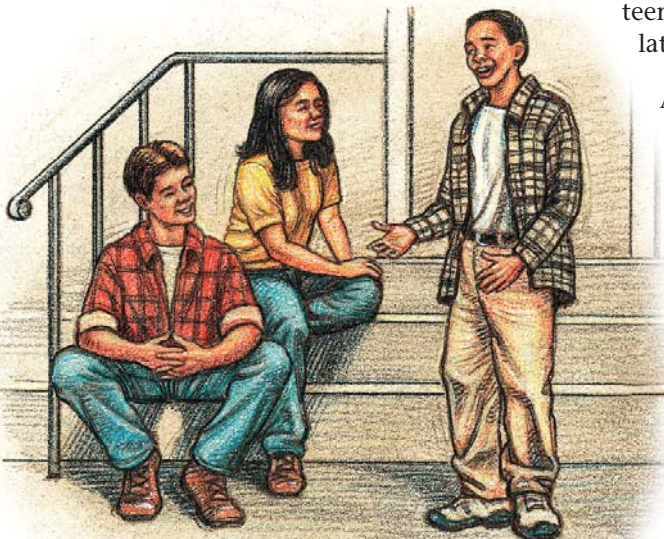
- Learning to manage feelings and moods
- Experiencing sexual development and shifts in body image

- Learning to be safe and to avoid risky behaviors
- Becoming more self-directed yet respecting needs of family and friends

As your teen is changing and facing new challenges, so are you, as parents. This tool can help by providing:

- A “snapshot” of what to expect during this time of transition
- A way to identify your teen's strengths and your abilities as parents
- A starting point for talking with your teen or with others about adolescence
- Tips for when, where, and how to seek help

If you have questions or concerns about your teen, “check it out.” Ask a trusted friend, family member, or member of your faith or cultural community; or contact your teen's health care provider or school counselor, or your local social service agency. Help is available in your community. See the last page to learn more about services and support for you, your teen, and your family. Finding answers to your questions early will help your teen continue to develop in the healthiest way possible.



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The *What to Expect & When to Seek Help: Bright Futures Developmental Tools for Families and Providers* are guided by the following principle:

Every child and adolescent deserves to experience joy, have high self-esteem, acquire a sense of efficacy, and believe that she can succeed in life. —BRIGHT FUTURES CHILDREN'S HEALTH CHARTER

Based on *Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health*, the Bright Futures developmental tools offer a framework for providers and families to begin a conversation together about how best to support healthy social and emotional development in children and teens. The tools are part of a coordinated set of print and Web materials, including the Referral Tool for Providers and the electronic Community Services Locator. The tools gently encourage families who have any questions or concerns about their child's development to "check it out"—and offer a number of tips for when, where, and how to seek help through local, state, or national resources.

Beginning the Conversation

Written in family-friendly language, the tools may be used by families and child development professionals in a range of disciplines, including health, education, child care, and family services.

Throughout the tools, a strong emphasis is placed on strengths as well as concerns. The information under "What to Expect" not only offers a guide to healthy development and parenting, but provides information that parents can find reassuring about their child's behavior and their own parenting.

The tools provide an opportunity to identify concerns at an early stage. The information under "When to Seek Help" includes issues that might be addressed with additional information, as well as those that signal the need for further assessments and services. Space is provided for families to write down their concerns as well as to create their own list of community resources and services.

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To learn more about the tools, download a copy, or inquire about training, consultation and technical assistance, visit www.brightfutures.org/tools

Feelings

What to Expect

Teen:

- May have frequent mood swings or changes in feelings (tearful one moment, happy the next)
- Has better understanding of own emotions and those of others
- Has positive feelings most of the time
- Is learning to accept disappointments and overcome failures
- Understands that sadness and “bad” feelings are temporary and will pass
- Usually does well in school or at work

Parents:

- Support teen’s efforts and praise accomplishments
- Listen to and talk openly with teen
- Avoid criticism, judging, nagging
- Are available for help and advice when needed
- Help teen resolve conflicts, solve problems
- Recognize that teen’s feelings are real; are careful not to minimize or dismiss them
- Provide opportunities for teen to use own judgment

When to Seek Help

If teen:

- Is sad or depressed, in a bad mood most of the time
- Seems very worried or anxious
- Has extreme mood swings
- Eats or sleeps less (or more) than before

- Is no longer interested in things she used to enjoy
- Has negative thoughts or opinions of himself
- Is easily discouraged by disappointments or failures
- Feels hopeless, unable to make things better
- Talks about hurting or killing herself; has tried to hurt or kill herself
- Uses alcohol or drugs to escape negative feelings
- Has difficulties in school or at work

If parents:

- Have concerns about changes in your teen’s
 - moods or emotions
 - eating or sleeping habits
 - school achievement
 - work habits
- Have trouble talking with your teen
- Frequently have conflicts with your teen
- Think your teen is abusing alcohol or drugs
- Are concerned that your teen may drop out of school or quit work
- Think your teen might try to hurt or kill himself
- Are worried that your teen might be able to get guns or other weapons

Friends and Family

What to Expect

Teen:

- Gets along with parents, family, and friends most of the time
- Listens to parents though often seeming to ignore their guidance or advice
- Is becoming more independent
- Sets goals and works towards achieving them
- Usually dresses and acts like other teens, but gradually develops own taste, sense of style
- Has one or more “best” friends and positive relationships with others the same age
- Respects opinions and values of friends, others
- Has improved social skills
- Accepts family rules; completes chores, other responsibilities



continued

Friends and Family Continued

Parents:

- Respect teen's privacy and encourage teen's desire for independence
- Understand teen's need to be like other teens or to be influenced by them
- Tolerate (within reason) teen's developing likes and dislikes in clothes, hairstyles, music
- Continue to offer guidance and support
- Show interest in teen's relationships and activities
- Establish fair and consistent rules (school, work, curfew, car use, chores)
- Encourage teen's goals, plans for the future (school or career)
- Plan activities for family and teen to enjoy together

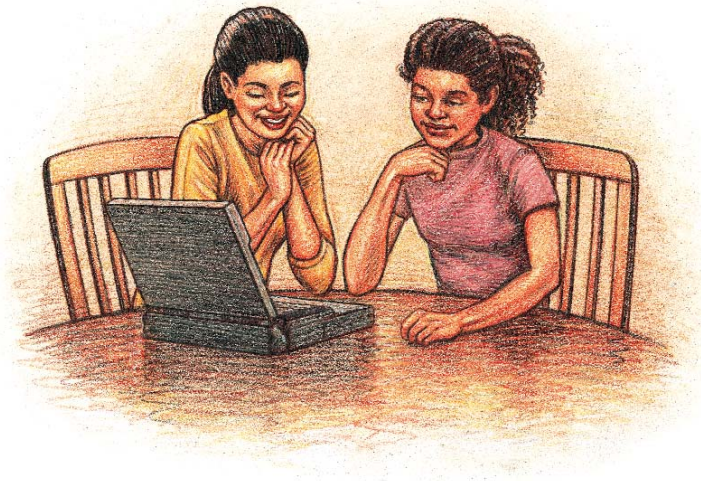
When to Seek Help

If teen:

- Is disrespectful, defiant, unwilling to compromise
- Often argues; causes family conflicts
- Seems overly dependent, unwilling or unable to make own decisions
- Is alone most of the time; seems happier alone than with others
- Withdraws from family and friends
- Ignores family rules (car use, curfew, phone, computer)
- Is easily influenced by friends who lack good values or who take part in negative or harmful behaviors

If parents:

- Have trouble "letting go" as your teen becomes more independent
- Need tips on discipline and setting limits for your teen
- Feel uncertain about changes in your teen's behavior (what's typical, what's not)
- Are concerned about your teen's choice of friends and their influence
- Often experience stress or conflict in your home
- Would like to join support or discussion group for parents of teens



Preventing Injuries and Risky Behavior

What to Expect

Teen:

- Has developed safe and healthy habits (drives safely, uses seat belts, follows speed limits, no drugs and alcohol)
- Avoids riding in a car with someone who has been drinking or using drugs
- Knows how to resist peer pressure to smoke, drink, use drugs, speed, or try other risky behaviors
- Has friends who disapprove of and avoid alcohol and drugs
- Is able to calm down and handle anger
- Is assertive without being aggressive

Parents:

- Set a good example (use seat belts and helmets, avoid drinking and driving, manage anger)
- Host alcohol-free parties for teens; supervise
- Praise teen for staying away from alcohol and drugs
- Educate teen about the risks associated with alcohol and drug use (impaired judgment, car crashes, unprotected sex, violent behavior, drowning)
- Establish rules for safe driving (number of passengers, night driving, speed limits, no alcohol or other drugs)
- Have "rescue" plan (teen can call for a ride; parents remove teen from unsafe situations)
- Have removed guns from the home or stored them safely (unloaded and locked up)

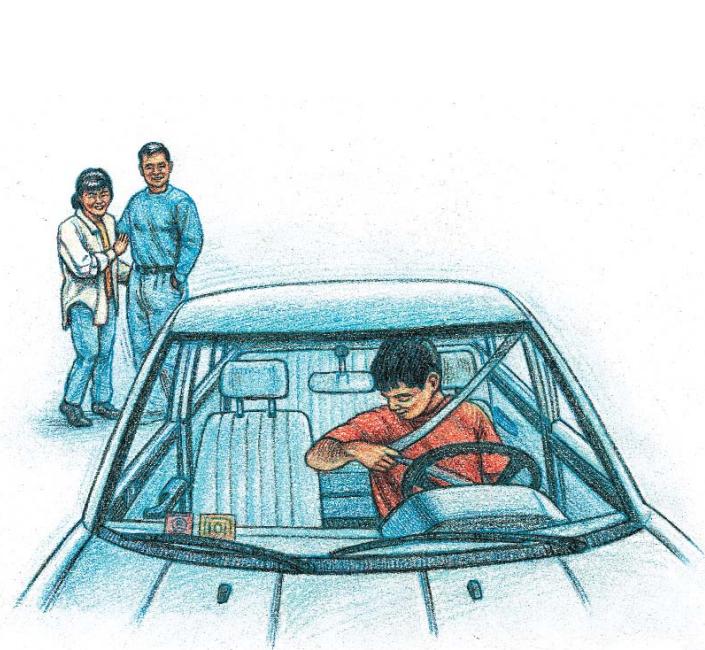
When to Seek Help

If teen:

- Takes part in harmful behaviors; ignores dangers
- Often gives in to negative peer pressure
- Belongs to a gang; takes part in illegal activities
- Gets angry; loses temper; becomes violent or abusive
- Bullies or harms others; has been bullied or harmed
- Carries a weapon (guns, knives) for protection
- Has an abusive boyfriend or girlfriend
- Has experienced or witnessed violence in home or neighborhood
- Is exposed to a lot of violence in movies, videos, television, and music
- Is experimenting with or is addicted to alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Seems to have money from unknown sources
- Drives aggressively, speeds, drinks and drives

If parents:

- Need help identifying signs of alcohol or drug use
- Are having problems with alcohol or other drugs
- Fight with your teen much of the time; often lose your temper
- Feel unsafe in your home or neighborhood
- Want information about safely disposing of guns or storing them
- Are afraid your teen might harm you or others
- Need tips for teaching your teen safe driving habits



Body Image and Eating Behaviors

What to Expect

Teen:

- Spends a lot of time and effort on physical appearance
- Is very concerned about body weight, shape, and size
- Feels very self-conscious, compares physical appearance to other teens or celebrities
- Will have a growth spurt sometime during adolescence (may be early or late)
- Generally eats healthy foods and is physically active
- Begins to develop an identity and self-worth beyond body image and physical appearance

Parents:

- Talk with teen about the physical changes in puberty that affect height, weight, and body shape
- Encourage teen to join the family for meals, and keep mealtimes relaxed
- Eat healthy foods and are physically active
- Avoid critical statements or nagging about eating, weight, or appearance
- If teen is overweight, encourage weight loss through healthy eating, physical activity, and social support
- Help teen to identify and value overall strengths (kindness, courage, talents), not just appearance

When to Seek Help

If teen:

- Show no signs of growth spurt and other physical changes, compared with most teens the same age
- Is very unhappy about her weight, height, or body image
- Thinks he's overweight (when he's not), or is afraid of gaining weight
- Diets excessively, even when not overweight
- Has poor appetite; eats unhealthy foods or skips meals much of the time
- Has binge-eating episodes
 - eats unusually large amounts of food
 - lacks control over eating
- Binge-eats but does not gain weight (may purge through vomiting or laxatives)
- Refuses to eat in front of others
- Exercises too much or overtrains for sports
- Is gaining a lot of weight and has little or no physical activity
- Uses steroids to build muscles

continued

Body Image and Eating Behaviors Continued

If parents:

- Are concerned that your teen is maturing very early (9-10 years) or very late (17 or older)
- Worry about your teen's weight (losing too much or gaining too much weight)
- Have very strict expectations about family meals
- Need tips to talk with your teen about healthy body image, good eating habits, and physical activity
- Need to know more about possible signs of eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia



Sex and Sexuality

What to Expect

Teen:

- Develops sexually (may be early or late in adolescence)
- Worries about “developing” in the same way as other teens
- Needs time for emotions and reasoning skills to catch up with rapid physical changes
- May feel pressure to experiment sexually
- May explore sexuality with same-sex friends
- Gradually develops sexual identity and sexual orientation (straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual)

Parents:

- Talk with teen about the sexual development that takes place during puberty
- Listen to teen's concerns and answer questions about sexuality; are clear and respectful
- Talk about ways to resist sexual pressures
- Encourage teen to delay sexual activity
- Explain the risks of sexual activity, such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and teen pregnancy
- Discuss “safe-sex” practices (condoms, birth control, limited partners)
- Encourage teen to talk with health provider or counselor about sexuality and sexual health
- Are alert to signs of possible sexual abuse or assault
- Offer clear, easy-to-read materials if teen wants to learn more

When to Seek Help

If teen:

- Shows no signs of sexual development by mid-teens
- Is being pressured to have sex
- Is sexually active or at risk for early sexual activity
- “Acts out” sexually (has unsafe sex or a number of sexual partners)
- Seems upset or worried about sexual orientation
- Is interested in dating at a young age (11-13 years)

If parents:

- Need tips for talking with your teen about sexuality (values, pressures, safe sex)
- Have concerns about your teen's dating relationships
- Think your teen is having sex or may become sexually active soon
- Are worried that your teen may be pregnant or at risk for STDs
- Think your teen may have been sexually abused or assaulted
- Want to know how best to support your teen's healthy sexual development and sexual orientation

NAME _____ AGE _____

Your Questions and Concerns

Feelings

Friends and Family

Preventing Injuries and Risky Behavior

Body Image and Eating Behaviors

Sex and Sexuality
