



# Living with your teenager

## Understanding Physical Changes

### Physical Changes Are Dramatic

The years of late childhood and early adolescence contain one of the most rapid and most dramatic periods of physical change in the human life cycle. It is during these years—years that are often difficult for both children and parents—that the child physically becomes an adult. It is useful for you as the parent of a teen or teen-to-be to understand what is happening to your child. This understanding may help you support your child through this difficult time.

As early as age 7 or 8 in girls, and 9 or 10 in boys, there are the beginnings of internal changes in both the growth of organs and the presence of certain adult-type hormones. For most girls, the period of least growth is from age 9 to age 10. From about age 10 on, most girls experience a sudden growth spurt that lasts until about age 12. After 12, most girls continue growing until about age 17 or 18. Boys usually begin their growth spurt about 12 to 18 months after most girls. Boys continue to grow 3 to 4 years after most girls have finished growing, so that boys often do not finish growing until age 20 or 21. The average boy grows to be taller and heavier than the average girl.

Besides growing heavier and taller, the maturing child begins to develop the bodily characteristics that distinguish the male and female adult. While it is often difficult to tell which of two t-shirt and blue jean-clad 6-year-olds is the girl and which is the boy, the differences in the same children at the age of 11 or 12 are quite obvious.

### Preparing for Change Is Important

For girls, the onset of menstruation is a highly important event. There is considerable evidence to show that a girl's feelings about menstruation and the way she accepts its onset is influenced by her mother's feelings about it and how her mother has prepared her for it. Parents who can maintain the attitude that menstruation is an exciting developmental event, normal in all females, can help their daughters experience menstruation easily.

It is now common for girls of 9 or 10 to begin menstruating, so it is important for parents to begin preparing their daughters for its onset at an early age. Girls need to know what will happen and how they will care for themselves, as well as why menstruation occurs. In addition, a girl who understands that there is no "right" age for the onset of menstruation will have far fewer worries about being "early" or "late."

Finally, the menstruating girl should understand that she is now fertile and able to become pregnant.

Although boys do not experience an "event" like menstruation in girls, there are aspects of their maturing as men that they may worry about. For example, the appearance of facial and body hair may be seen as a sign of manhood, and the boy who is maturing later than his friends may have many concerns about his own masculinity. As with girls, the path to sexual maturity can be smoothed for boys by parents who are open and informative. Just as parents need to talk with girls about menstruation before its onset, parents also need to help boys understand "wet dreams." Boys need to know that these involuntary emissions of semen while they are sleeping are normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

In your great-great-grandparents' time, children matured, on the average, 2 to 3 years later than they do now. In addition, it was quite common for young people to marry between the ages of 15 and 18. Today, our children are sexually mature in a physical sense long before they are capable of entering into mature, adult relationships. At the same time, however, movies, television, the Internet, newspapers, and

other media put great emphasis on sexuality. Consequently, your teen may be very confused by the need to respond to physical impulses as seemingly encouraged by society but yet frowned upon at home, in school, and by their faith. There is likely no other area in which your teen will need your support, understanding, and encouragement more than in the difficult area of making decisions about sexual activity.

Although it has been shown again and again that the best way for young people to learn about mature, responsible sexuality is through their parents, many parents find it extremely difficult or impossible to discuss this subject with their children. If the parents cannot teach their children, it remains their responsibility to see that the children learn, either through providing books, through school or a doctor, a nurse, a social worker, or an informed adult who is willing to help them learn. Given the prevalence of sexually transmitted disease, including AIDS, the knowledge your teen receives can save his or her life.

### **Physical Change Can Cause Emotional Upset**

The physical growth of the child is triggered by the appearance in the body of certain hormones that stimulate the body to grow and change. It is useful for both you and your child to know and remember that these hormones are known to affect moods as well as physical growth. It is quite common for young teens to be very worried about their feelings. One girl said, "Some days I'm way up and other days I'm way down, and the way I feel doesn't seem to have much to do with what's going on around me. It really scares me that I have these feelings that come from nowhere." Once the effects of hormones on moods were explained to her, she was much less frightened of her feelings. It may be important for your child to have this information.

The sudden and extreme growth that the child goes through often can cause problems with coordination. It is not uncommon to hear

parents complain of children who suddenly become so clumsy that they "trip over their own feet." This problem is caused partly by the general change in the body that takes getting used to, and partly by the fact that different parts of the body grow at different rates. Hands and feet, for example, grow much faster than legs and arms. Consider the problems you would have if your feet grew from their present size 6 to size 9 in the next six months! Features of the face also grow at different rates, so that a young teen who is convinced that his or her nose is too big may be quite right for a time. Soon, however, the rest of his or her facial features will grow in proportion and that nose won't seem so large. Just as knowing these facts may help you to be more tolerant of your awkward child, it may also help your child be less concerned about temporary physical "problems."

### **Teens and Stress**

Stress during adolescence can come from two sources. The first is the change that takes place in a young person's body and emotions. The second source of stress for teens is the events and situations in the world outside of them. The influence of television, movies, the Internet, and videogames encourage youth to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sex to a far greater extent than in earlier times. These pressures can cause enormous tension for youth.

Research suggests that the majority of teens today experiment with drugs or alcohol. Because of the potentially destructive physical and emotional effects, it is important for parents to know the symptoms of drug and alcohol misuse. Parents need to talk openly, without blaming their youth, about drugs and alcohol. Reading pamphlets like *Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention* can inform parents about symptoms of misuse and steps to take. When parents are concerned about their teen's drug or alcohol use, it is important to seek outside help from

counselors and treatment centers. Call 1-877-4EDPUBS.

### **There Is No Set Timetable for Change**

When your child was quite small, you were constantly reminded not to compare him or her to the child next door. Babies begin to walk and talk at different ages, and unless a child is seriously "off schedule" or has noticeable problems, the parent need not worry if the child develops certain skills sooner or later than other children. The same advice holds true for teenagers. As people mature, there is even greater variability in their abilities and their sizes.

Your teen is now or will soon be going through one of the most exciting and frightening periods of life. Your support and concern at this time can do a great deal to cement happy relationships that will continue through the years of growth and change ahead.

... and justice for all

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