

Understanding Your Teen's Emotional Health

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<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/teens/emotional-well-being/understanding-your-teenagers-emotional-health.printerview.all.html>

What should I know about my teenager's emotional health?

The teenage years are a time of transition from childhood into adulthood. Teens often struggle with being dependent on their parents while having a strong desire to be independent. They may also feel overwhelmed by the emotional and physical changes they are going through.

At the same time, teens may be facing a number of pressures – from friends to fit in and from parents and other adults to do well in school or activities like sports or part-time jobs. The teenage years are important as your child asserts his or her individuality.

What can I do to help my teen?

Communicating your love for your child is the single most important thing you can do. Children decide how they feel about themselves in large part by how their parents react to them. For this reason, it's important for parents to help their children feel good about themselves. It is also important to communicate your values and to set expectations and limits, such as insisting on honesty, self-control and respect for others, while still allowing teenagers to have their own space.

Parents of teens often find themselves noticing only the problems, and they may get in the habit of giving mostly negative feedback and criticism. Although teens need feedback, they respond better to positive feedback. Remember to praise appropriate behavior in order to help your teen feel a sense of accomplishment and reinforce your family's values.

Establishing a loving relationship from the start will help you and your child through the teenage years.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) suggests the following ways for parents to prepare for their child's teenage years:

- Provide a safe and loving home environment.
- Create an atmosphere of honesty, trust and respect.
- Allow age-appropriate independence and assertiveness.
- Develop a relationship that encourages your teen to talk to you when he or she is upset.
- Teach responsibility for your teen's belongings and yours.
- Teach basic responsibility for household chores.
- Teach the importance of accepting limits.

What warning signs should I look for?

Remember that your teen may experiment with his or her values, ideas, hairstyles and clothing in order to define him- or herself. This is typically normal behavior and you shouldn't be concerned. However, inappropriate or destructive behavior can be a sign of a problem.

Teens, especially those with low self-esteem or with family problems, are at risk for a number of self-destructive behaviors such as using drugs or alcohol or having unprotected sex. Depression and eating disorders are common health issues that teens face. The following may be warning signs that your child is having a problem:

- Agitated or restless behavior
- Weight loss or gain
- A drop in grades
- Trouble concentrating
- Ongoing feelings of sadness
- Not caring about people and things
- Lack of motivation
- Fatigue, loss of energy and lack of interest in activities
- Low self-esteem
- Trouble falling asleep
- Run-ins with the law

What should I do if there is a problem?

Work together to maintain open communication. If you suspect there is a problem, ask your teen about what is bothering him or her. Don't ignore a problem in the hopes that it will go away. It is easier to cope with problems when they are small. This also gives you and your teen the opportunity to learn how to work through problems together. Don't be afraid to ask for help with dealing with your teen. Many resources, including your family doctor, are available.

Other Organizations

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- American Psychiatric Association
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
- National Institute of Mental Health
- National Institute on Drug Abuse
- Mental Health America

Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff

Reviewed/Updated: 11/10
Created: 09/00