

Understanding the adolescent

Adolescence is a difficult period in which the young person is trying to cope with the inner conflict of striving for independence while still relying on adult support. There are inevitable clashes with parents, especially during the turbulent years of 13 to 16.

What are the hallmarks of the adolescent?

- Self-consciousness
- Self-awareness
- Self-centredness
- Lack of confidence

These basic features lead to anxieties about the body, and so many adolescents focus on their skin, body shape, weight and hair. Concerns about acne, curly hair, round shoulders and obesity are very common.

There are usually special concerns about boy–girl relationships and maybe guilt or frustration about sexual matters. Many adolescents therefore have a lack of self-worth or a poor body image. They are very private people, and this must be respected. While there are concerns about their identity, parental conflict, school, their peers and the world around them, there is also an innate separation anxiety.

What are the needs of adolescents?

- ‘Room’ to move
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Security (e.g. stable home)
- Acceptance by peers
- Someone to ‘lean on’ (e.g. youth leader)
- Special ‘heroes’
- Establishment of an adult sexual role
- At least one really good personal relationship

How does rebelliousness show?

It is quite normal for normal parents and normal teenagers to clash and get into arguments. Adolescents usually have a suspicion of and rebellion against convention and authority (parents, teachers, politicians, police and so on). This attitude tends to fade after leaving school (at around 18 years of age).

Common signs are:

- criticising and questioning parents
- putting down family members or even friends
- unusual, maybe outrageous, fashions and hairstyles
- experimenting with drugs such as nicotine and alcohol
- bravado and posturing
- unusual, often stormy, love affairs.

Signs of out-of-control behaviour are:

- refusal to attend school
- vandalism and theft
- drug abuse
- sexual promiscuity
- eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia, severe obesity
- depression.

Note: Beware of the risk of suicide if there are signs of depression.

What should parents do?

Wise parenting can be difficult, because one cannot afford to be overprotective or too distant. A successful relationship depends on good communication, which means continuing to show concern and care but being flexible and giving the adolescent ‘space’ and time.

Authoritative parenting

This approach is widely regarded as important to provide security during the transition to adulthood. It involves being firm and demanding of mature responsible behaviour while still being warm and nurturing. It also involves challenging moodiness gently, challenging negative thinking, encouraging positive social skills and dealing with conflicts constructively.

Important management tips are:

- Treat adolescents with respect and love.
- Be non-judgmental.
- Stick to reasonable ground rules of behaviour (e.g. regarding alcohol, driving, language).
- Do not cling to them or show too much concern.
- Listen rather than argue.
- Listen to what they are *not* saying.
- Be flexible and consistent.
- Be available and responsive to help when requested.
- Give advice about diet and skin care.
- Talk about sex and give good advice, but only when the right opportunity arises.
- Know the right questions to ask and where to seek help in a crisis.

Healthy distraction

Most authorities say that the best thing to keep adolescents healthy and well adjusted is to be active and interested. Regular participation in sporting activities and other hobbies such as bushwalking, skiing and so on with parents or groups is an excellent way to help them cope with this important stage of their lives.

Remember

Adolescent problems are a passing phase. Some authorities say it ends at 18 or 19, while others claim the ‘age of reason’ is reached at 23 or 24!