



Living with your teenager

Understanding Emotional Changes

The increased emotionality of pre-teens and young teens makes these years very difficult for many parents and their children. Both parents and the teens themselves are distressed by the teens' emotional outbursts but all have difficulty managing their feelings of distress.

Experts generally agree that the period of extreme emotionality begins at about age 11 or 12. Thirteen- and 14-year-olds are often irritable, excite easily, and are more likely to explode than succeed in controlling their emotions. Fifteen-year-olds, on the other hand, try harder to cover up their feelings and, therefore, are more apt to be moody and withdrawn. By the time teenagers reach about 16 or 17, they are more capable of taking a calmer approach to life and experience fewer worries and far less moodiness.

Physical Changes and Emotions

One source of increased emotionality in preteen and teenage children is physical change. The same hormones that set off physical changes at puberty also are responsible for affecting moods and general emotional responses in children. The young teen's worries about physical changes—height,

weight, facial hair, developing breasts in girls, etc.—are also a source of heightened emotions. Other physical conditions that are not directly related to puberty also can be responsible for the heightened emotionality of teens. Many teenagers, for example, have unconventional meal patterns. Skipping breakfast and fasting to lose weight are common, especially among females. Lack of rest, too, may lead to moodiness and gloominess, irritability, and a tendency to fly-off-the-handle. Some parents have found that making sure their teens eat a well-balanced diet and encouraging adequate rest make emotionality less of a problem. In addition, by explaining the effect of hormones on emotions, some parents help their teens feel less worried about their feelings.

Changes in Thinking

Another source of emotionality in young teens is the strain caused by changes in their thinking. New ways of thinking make young teens convinced that everyone is concerned about the same things they are concerned about and everyone is looking at them and talking about them.

While it is fruitless to try to convince the young teen that not everyone is watching or that the feelings they are experiencing have been shared

by others, as a parent you may find it helpful to tell your teen that you realize he or she is feeling badly and offer your support and encouragement. You might, for example, say "I'm sorry you're feeling unhappy. If you would like to talk about what's troubling you, I would be happy to talk with you."

Changes in Expectations

There are also changes in the expectations of people around teens. Any and all of these changes can leave the teen feeling insecure and more emotional. Children who begin to look more like adults also may be expected to behave like adults. The expectation of adult behavior can put tremendous pressure on young teens and lead to emotional outbursts.

During the early teen years, there is considerable concern about learning to behave correctly in social situations, what to talk about, and how to be popular with members of the opposite sex. While learning all this, the teen may be extremely nervous and generally excited. Any incident that makes teens feel like they've made a mistake is likely to result in an emotional outpouring complete with tears, slammed doors, and general depression.

Who Makes the Decisions

Conflicts over control of the teen's life are at the root of most problems between parents and teens. On the one hand, parents are frequently correct when they say, "He is not responsible or careful enough to be allowed to do...." On the other hand, teens are probably also partially correct when they say, "My parents continue to treat me like I was 10 years old." There are few things more difficult about being parents than trying to figure out how to give teens freedom enough to learn responsibility and self-reliance while still keeping control over behavior that is potentially damaging to them. However, it seems to be true that parents who begin quite early allowing children to make decisions appropriate to their age are less likely to have problems with teenagers who are demanding "freedom now!" Children who decide what to wear at age three, whether or not to join scouts at age eight, when to do chores at age 11, and so on, are better able to make responsible decisions about behavior at age 15 and less likely to be constantly demanding more decision-making rights.

Parents who have tried to control every aspect of a child's behavior in his or her young years are rightly worried about their child's demand for more freedom in their teen years. Chances are that such a child is unprepared to make decisions for himself or herself. Many parents find it helpful to give teens as little restriction as they can handle, while still making it clear that there are certain aspects of behavior over which the parents will retain control.

During the teen years children may become aware of the importance of doing well in school for future job success. In some cases, this results in anxiety over school that was not present at an earlier age. Similarly, teens may begin to worry about what to do after school is finished. Parents who do not push their children toward a particular vocation, but instead offer support, encouragement, and help, can make these worries less troublesome for

their child. Helping a teen explore various career possibilities, expressing interest in continued education, training programs, or apprenticeships, and discussing the pros and cons of various career interests are all ways in which you can show encouragement without "pushing" your child.

The emotional storminess of the teenage child is difficult for both the child and parents. Parents who are able to take a calm, sympathetic but firm approach find that they can maintain good relationships with teens most of the time. Parents who are able to say things like, "I'm sorry you are upset; I am getting upset, too, so let's talk later," find that they can continue to communicate with their teens without getting ulcers in the process. It is often useful to remind teenagers that it is easier to treat them as adults if they act like adults. And it is very useful to adult parents to remember that they were once teenagers themselves.

... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.)

Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

This publication was written by Judith O. Hooper, assistant professor of family studies, School of Family Resources and Consumer Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison and division of Professional and Human Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension. Adapted for use in Iowa by Virginia Molgaard, extension family life specialist, Iowa State University. Revised in 2008 by Kim Greder.

PM944a Revised November 2008
File: Family Life 4