

Dear Parent:

We are pleased to offer you GATEWAY, a newsletter on adolescence. As the parent of a young adolescent, you may wonder what to expect in the coming years. Our goal is to provide you with the most up-to-date findings on teens and their development, along with stories focusing on effective parenting.

Another goal is for you to look forward to the growth and development occurring in your child during the teen years. Many parents approach this age with worry and fear. But recent research shows that most teens have close relationships with their parents; don't get into trouble with drugs, casual sex, or the police; and do not give up their relationships with their parents for friendships with their peers.

We aren't saying that you won't argue with your son about cleaning his room. Or that your daughter will never break curfew. But, as we will show, such events are signs that your child is growing up and becoming independent.

We encourage you to think about the positive aspects of this period. Look for signs that your child is maturing emotionally, physically, socially, or mentally. As a parent, you eagerly awaited your child's first steps as a toddler. Feel free to look forward to his or her first steps toward adulthood: This is the major event of the teen years!

Sincerely,

Nina S. Mounts, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist

Human Development



Coming in future issues

School, school transitions, parental involvement in schools

School success

Family relationships

Coping with the changing family (divorce, single parents, stepfamilies, working mothers)

Peer relationships, peer pressure

Sexuality

Problem behaviors

Parenting topics:

Discipline and setting limits

Communication

Independence

Coping with conflict

What is a d o l

Physical changes during the teen years

The adolescent growth spurt.

The most obvious physical change during adolescence is the rapid increase in growth rate. The average adolescent grows about 12 inches during this time and gains 20 to 30 pounds. While all parts of the body grow, they do so at different times and rates. In general, the hands and feet grow first. Arms and legs grow next. Finally, the torso grows. If your teen feels self-conscious and physically awkward, it might be that the body parts are growing at different rates.

A teen's weight gain comes in both muscle and fat. Fat increases more for girls than for boys. Fat in girls tends to accumulate in the breasts, thighs, and buttocks. Muscle increases more rapidly in boys than girls. Muscle is most noticeably increased in the shoulders, chest, and arms of teen boys.

? *How do boys and girls differ in the timing of puberty?* On average, girls start physical changes 2 years before boys. Most girls begin developing between the ages of 8 and 13. For girls, these changes may be completed in only 18 months, or they can continue over 6 years. For boys, outward physical changes usually begin between the ages of 10 and 15. Boys may complete pubertal development in as little as 2 years or as much as 5 years. In either case, variation in the timing and length of puberty is great. During this time, it is important to assure your teen that the development is normal, whether your daughter towers above the boys in her class or your son is the height of kids several years younger.



Sexual maturing of girls and boys

? *What can I expect during puberty for my daughter?* For most girls, the first outward sign of puberty is the development of breast buds. Although it may take several years for breasts to develop fully, most girls are excited by this first sign of puberty. Pubic hair appears a short time after breasts begin to grow. Later, hair appears in the armpits. As your daughter grows, her hips widen. Oily skin and odor from perspiration become more noticeable. Parents can help children adapt to these changes by encouraging them to shower and change their clothes frequently. Teens who have severe acne should see their physician.

? *When will my daughter have her first period?* The start of menstrual periods (menarche) usually occurs late in pubertal development. Some girls have their first period at age 10. Others don't until age 16. In the United States today, the average falls between 12 and 13 years. Unlike the gradual changes that occur during puberty, the appearance of the first period is sudden. Girls who are prepared well in advance are better able to handle this major event. (See "Talking with Your Kids about Puberty" in this issue.)

? *How can I expect my daughter to react to her first period?* The reactions of most girls are quite mild. They may be a little upset, surprised, or excited. Many are positive about this event because it means they are more like their friends or adult women. Their main dislikes about their period are carrying around supplies and the messiness. In general, girls who mature early may be more negative about their first period because they may feel very different from their friends. Parents should be especially sensitive to the concerns of the early maturing daughter.

? *What can I expect during puberty for my son?* The adolescent growth spurt for boys generally starts between ages 10 and 16. Initial growth for teen boys is in the testes and scrotum. A short time later,



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pubic hair begins to appear. The growth spurt usually starts after these two events. Once your son's growth spurt has begun, you may notice his voice changing. You may also notice a very fine layer of hair across his upper lip. Later, your son's armpit hair begins to grow. Near the end of puberty, your son's facial hair will be much coarser, and he will have some body hair. Like girls, boys may experience difficulty with oily skin and perspiration. Daily showers and clean clothes can help your teen feel better about these changes.

? *What do I tell my son about wet dreams?* A wet dream occurs because your son is now capable of having an ejaculation. Although he is capable of having an erection from birth, during adolescence his body begins to make sperm. Boys may discover that they can ejaculate through masturbation or from a wet dream. A wet dream is a sign that your son's body is making sperm.

Because the wet dream occurs when the boy is sleeping, he may become embarrassed that he has wet the bed when he wakes and finds his clothing wet. An open discussion with parents before this occurs can help prepare boys for this event.

? *Because boys don't menstruate, I don't need to prepare my son for puberty, right?* Although boys do

not experience an event like menstruation, they may worry about aspects of their maturing. For example, the boy who is maturing later than his friends may be concerned about his masculinity. Wet dreams, which are normal and common, may worry the boy who is not prepared for them. Boys may also experience spontaneous erections. These can occur in situations that many boys find embarrassing, such as at the swimming pool or while giving a speech in front of a group. You can assure your son that this is normal and temporary and will stop as he progresses through adolescence. As with girls, the path to sexual maturity can be smoothed by parents who are open and informative.



Emotional changes during the teen years

Parents are likely to view adolescence much as they view the "terrible twos," a time to endure. This feeling may have come from early research, the popular press, and the media, which tend to show adolescence as a natural time of storm and stress. Also, we may have short memories, viewing our children as less respectful, more self-centered, and more adventurous than we were.

Current research tells us that the emotional problems linked with adolescence have been overemphasized. Though adolescents may have wider swings in emotion, they show no higher rate of serious emotional disturbance than do adults. The wide swings in emotion are caused in part by the normal highs and lows felt when we experience anything for the first time: for example, a first driver's license, a first boy or girl

friend, a first breakup with that boy or girl, and so on!

You may ask how you can cope with your teen's emotional needs. Emphasize the successes she has, even the small ones. Don't compare your child's progress with that of another child. This time is especially important for teens to build new friendships. Comparing kids sets up competition that can be a barrier to friendships. Be

open, supportive, and set clear limits that are consistently followed.

Changes in thinking during the teen years

As your teen's thinking develops, it will be quite different from that of a younger child. The rate of cognitive changes differs from one person to another.

? *How does my adolescent think?* During this transition, adolescents move from being tied to thinking about what is here and now to being able to think about things that may happen in the future. Your teen can also solve problems without the help of actually seeing a representation

adolescence

of the problem. For example, suppose you ask some 6-year-olds and 14-year-olds to solve the following problem in their heads: If Chris is taller than Pat and Pat is taller than Kelly, who's tallest? Without hesitating, 14-year-olds give the correct answer (Chris) and can tell you why. Meanwhile, 6-year-olds tell you they don't know the answer because they can't see the people.

Your adolescent is also beginning to think more logically. Unlike younger children, teens can use a plan in solving problems. While young children try to solve problems by guessing, the adolescent plans the steps needed to reach a solution. By age 15, most teens are much like adults in their thinking.

? *Why does my teen always act like he or she is on stage?* During the teen years, your child becomes better able to look at issues from another person's perspective. By contrast, young children have difficulty understanding how other people are feeling or thinking.

As a result of these changes in thinking, teens may feel they are the center of attention, surrounded by an ever present "imaginary audience." Teens can now imagine what others think about them! They may feel as if they are on stage at all times, with others passing judgment on how they look and what they do.

This ability to take other views explains in part why your teen might think everyone stares at the tiny blemish on his face or the braces on her teeth.

? *Is it normal for teens to question parents' rules and beliefs?* Your teen's new thinking skills may sometimes be a challenge for you as a parent. Many young children accept parents' rules and beliefs without question. By contrast, your teen realizes not everyone believes as you do, nor lives by the same rules.

Your teen may now compare your standards to ideal standards and find that yours don't measure up. For example, he or she may want to forego a college education and give the money saved to poor people. Your teen may become impatient with you because he or she is embracing ideal standards, without understanding the details or costs of achieving that ideal. Or your teen may not understand that two positive ideals can conflict, creating gray areas when deciding right and wrong. For example, the desire to tell the truth and always to be kind may conflict.

Though it may not seem so at the time, it is good for adolescents to question the rules and beliefs of their parents. Until your teen understands the logic of and embraces values for herself, she has little guidance to fall back on when those values are seriously challenged by others.

New thinking skills can also help your teen argue better. When you told your small child to clean his room, he or she might have complained but couldn't offer a good reason for not doing it. With new thinking skills, your teen can give you very clear reasons for not doing as you ask! When you ask for the teen's room to be cleaned up, you now may hear a lecture that cleaning a room is a personal choice not a law or moral rule, and his or her choice is not to clean the room.

Each part of an adolescent's cognitive development is important. But these changes can perplex parents. Understanding the changes in an adolescent's ability to think can help us deal with them in a positive way.

Social changes during the teen years

Any parent of a teen can tell you that dramatic changes in social relationships occur during the teen years. Because another issue of this newsletter discusses peer relationships, here we'll briefly describe four ways that they change during adolescence.

Your child now spends more time with friends or on the telephone talking with them. This is common for many adolescents.

Unlike earlier years, now your teen doesn't need (and often doesn't want) your supervision when with friends.

Your teen is more mobile than younger children. Teens can ride their bikes, walk to a friend's house, take the bus, and, later, drive to meet friends. This mobility makes it possible for your teen to be involved with many more friends and activities.

A final change that you'll see is increased contact with opposite-sex peers. This trend will become more noticeable as your child progresses through adolescence. This change may come as a surprise to you. Perhaps a few months ago, your child was horrified at the prospect of going to a party with both boys and girls, and now he or she can't wait to go to one!

Tips on teens

When your teen continually questions your authority or says "just leave me alone," you may want to say "all right, I will; I give up!" But that isn't the solution. Your teen needs your help to develop into a well-adjusted adult. Your child needs to learn responsibility, decision making, morals, and values—all of the things that you can teach.

Here are some suggestions to help you work with your adolescent. Keep in mind, you may need to experiment and find out what works best for you and your teen. Parents need to be flexible and creative when relating to their child.

1—Be honest. Adolescents are developing their thinking abilities. They want to know the reasons for everything, and they expect consistency from their parents. They are critical of the parent who is dishonest or two-faced.

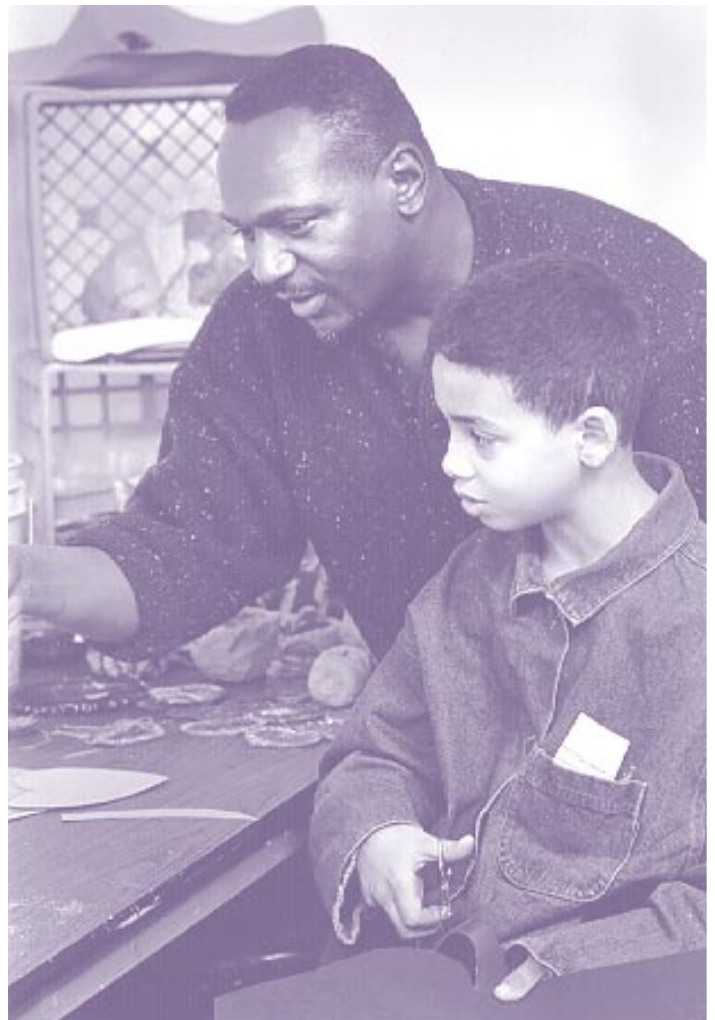
2—Be open. Adolescents want to be able to talk with their parents; they also need their privacy and independence. The adult-adolescent conversation needs to be two-sided, with both people sharing their thoughts and feelings. Adolescents want to know if, as adults, we are also struggling with some of the same concerns they are.

3—Be calm. Adolescents like to try out their arguing skills. If you get angry and yell or scream, this is an ideal time for them to practice. Avoid getting into power struggles and arguments with your adolescent. If you talk calmly, your child can see you as in control of the situation.

4—Set clear and consistent limits. Younger children abide by the rules set down by the parents just because they are rules. Adolescents are more likely to question the importance of the rule and why there has to be one at all. You should respect your child's need to have the rule explained. Take time to explain why this rule is set and allow time for negotiation of certain rules such as curfew. However, don't hesitate to say when something is not open to negotiation, such as riding in a car with kids who have been drinking or taking drugs.

5—Remember that growing up means becoming independent. In situations where your child's well-being is not in danger, you may need to accept that your child makes choices you wouldn't have made. Or that your child has behaved in ways that you don't approve. That's independence. Does it really matter if your child dresses weird, has long hair, or has a pierced ear? Is it worth the argument? Your teen is showing individualism and independence from you. Try to overlook some of the outside appearances and concentrate on the inner strengths of your teenager.

6—supportive. Independence does not mean isolation. It means establishing a different kind of relationship with parents, not terminating it. Almost all adolescents say their parents are the most important people in their lives. Adolescence is a time when you are needed—when teens are trying to figure out who they really are. No matter how frustrated you may feel at times, your child needs you as a base of support!



Suggested reading

For more information on adolescent development, we suggest: *You & Your Adolescent*, by Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine (1990); New York: Harper Perennial.

Talking With Your Kids

The late grade-school years may appear to be a relatively quiet time in your child's development, and your job as a parent may seem easier. Your child is taking more responsibility for self care but has not yet entered the more demanding teenage years. However, these years can be challenging for your child. Simply dealing with the bodily changes may seem like a big task. That is why it is important for parents to be available to their child to talk, listen, and be supportive.

Puberty is a time of fast-paced changes in your child's life and in your relationship with your child. With so many changes, it's important that your child has at least one constant—a good relationship with you. The changes in your child's life raise many questions. You can enhance your relationship with your child by being there to answer questions, give information, and calm the fears.

Many factors play a part in how your child reacts to this stage of life. One factor linked to difficulty during puberty is how your child's physical development compares to that of peers. If your child is developing much earlier (or later), he or she is more likely to feel strange or out of place. As you discuss development with your child, be sensitive to this. A child whose development is "off-time" in comparison to peers' may need extra support and encouragement from parents reminding that his or her development is normal.

When should I begin talking with my child about puberty? It's never too early. Many children ask questions at a very young age. Use these occasions to share information that is appropriate for their age. As your child gets older, you can include information about changes that will occur as puberty begins.

Seek out opportunities to talk about puberty informally, taking advantage of times when it is convenient to include aspects of puberty in conversation. Many opportunities to talk about puberty arise, such as when your child has an older sibling going through puberty or when the issue is raised in a TV show. By the time your child is about 9 years old, it is important to begin discussing in more detail the bodily changes that will occur.

But what if I haven't begun talking with my child about this? Am I too late? Absolutely not. What's most important is that you start talking with your child soon. Making sure that your child is prepared for changes before they happen is a key to successfully managing the years during puberty.

Why is it important to talk to my child about puberty? One reason is to prepare your child for what lies ahead. Because many changes will take place in your child, puberty is a time when your child can benefit from your guidance and a strong and consistent relationship. If your child enters puberty unprepared, the experience is likely to be more difficult. The more informed your child is, the more he or she will know what to expect and be less likely to be taken by surprise.

It is particularly important to talk with your child about aspects of puberty that begin suddenly, such as menstruation (periods) and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams). These events can be very scary for a child who does not understand that what has happened is normal and expected. Your forthrightness helps decrease the likelihood of your teen's feeling strange and alone.

Another important reason to talk with your child is to establish yourself as a source of information. Children learn about puberty from many sources. Some sources, such as their friends, often give incorrect information. Having an open relationship with your child can help you to correct any false notions that friends may provide. In addition, talking openly now will make it much easier to talk about other topics (sex, dating, peer pressure) as your child gets older.

How do I talk with my child about puberty? Every child is different, and only you know the best approach for your child. You may want to spend time finding out what questions your child has. Other possible methods are sharing a book about puberty, watching a video together, or showing your child a magazine article about puberty.



About Puberty

If you choose to give your child information to read, follow up by sitting down and answering questions. Or, if your teen is too shy to ask questions, you may want to talk about your own experiences during puberty. This sharing can keep your child from feeling "put on the spot," and at the same time it helps to open up communication.

Especially during this time of high peer pressure, most children in the early teens want to fit in with their friends. Unfortunately, the different growth rates among adolescents make many children feel unusual. You can help your teen by assurances that he or she is normal and not alone.

Try to remember what it was like for you as a child. You may find it helpful to reflect on your years as an early adolescent. Where were you in sixth grade? Who were your friends? Who was your teacher? What important events happened that year? What was important to you?

If you are comfortable doing so, you may want to share some of your memories from early adolescence with your child. It may help your teen to see "living proof" that the process of becoming an adult isn't so bad.

Is it normal for my teen to be so embarrassed when talking about puberty? That doesn't mean they don't want to talk about it. In fact, most teens say they want to talk about puberty, and parents are their preferred source of information. The most difficult part of discussing puberty with your child will likely be your first conversations. Several talks may occur before both you and your child begin to feel comfortable discussing these issues.

Parents or children may feel shy about topics related to the development of their bodies. If you are concerned about talking with your child, rest assured that you are not alone. Many parents have worried that they won't be able to answer their child's questions, will be embarrassed, or won't be able to get their child to talk. Whatever your fears may be, don't let them keep you from talking with your child. It is important to develop an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality, and that may take some time. You can be confident that even if you don't know all the answers, your child appreciates having someone to talk with, someone to trust.



To Keep in Mind

To help you understand what your child may be thinking, here are some sample questions: Why do girls start periods at different times? What is an erection? What causes wet dreams? Why am I developing sooner (or later) than my friends? What is a tampon? And how is it used?

- Listen to all your child's concerns carefully, and take each one seriously. Although teenagers' fears may seem foolish to you as an adult, remember how strange it all seemed when you were young.
- Remember that your child may not be as old as he or she looks. This may sound funny, but it's true. Puberty is a time not only of physical growth, but mental, social, and emotional growth as well. Unfortunately, it doesn't all happen at the same time. Though your child may look more mature than peers, remember that adult ways of thinking may not be in place yet. As your child grows, you can get an idea of where he or she is along the way to adulthood. Just be careful that your expectations are reasonable.
- Be sensitive to your child's preferences to talk with a parent or adult of the same sex. Some boys and girls feel embarrassed talking about puberty with someone of the opposite sex—even a parent. Others don't mind. Try to be sensitive to your child's preferences.
- For single parents who have children of the opposite sex, you may find it helpful to have a member of your extended family or a close friend who is the same sex as your child talk with him or her. This is necessary only if your child expresses discomfort in talking with you because you're the opposite sex. Generally, though, children prefer to talk with parents.
- And, finally, enlist the help of other resources. If you have difficulty talking with your child about the changes of puberty, see if your family doctor, school nurse, or the local library can provide helpful materials. You might share this newsletter with your child, and then discuss what you have read. Use the method that is most comfortable for you and your child.

G W A Y T E

GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 1105 West Nevada Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801.
Phone 217.244.7356 Fax 217.333.9061

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Project Director
Assistant Director
Planning Team

Nina Mounts
Meridith Foster
Hazel Andros
Wendy Griesemer
Sheri Seibold
Sandy Shetler
Judith Taylor

Contributors

Meridith Foster
Nina Mounts
Sheri Seibold
Sandy Shetler
Judith Taylor

Editor
Photographer
Designer
Consultants

Mary Overmier
David Riecks
Michele Plante
Aaron Ebata
Robert Hughes
Christine Todd

GATEWAY
Cooperative Extension Service
University of Illinois
1105 West Nevada
Urbana, IL 61801

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