

Teenage Development

Understanding your child starts with knowing which behaviors are typical for his or her age.

Please note: Every child is different and may not follow exactly these milestones. This information is just a guide for “average development.” If you have any concerns about your child’s development, please talk to your doctor.

Physical Development

- For girls, puberty spans ages 10-11 yrs to 16 yrs. For boys, puberty spans ages 11-12 yrs to 17 yrs.
- Physical changes in girls include: an increase in body fat, development of breasts, and widening of the hips. The average age for girls to get their first menstrual period is 12 yrs.
- Common changes in boys include deepening of the voice and increased muscle mass.
- Hormonal changes in both girls and boys cause the development of body hair and more body oils (which may cause acne and body odor).
- All teens have noticeable changes in their genitals. It’s important for parents to discuss these changes in an appropriate manner.

Emotional/Social

- Teens start to develop meaningful relationships, such as close friendships and dating relationships. These relationships may be filled with ups and downs and a bit of drama.
- Teens spend much of their time with friends, and peer pressure can become a strong influence. The newfound independence that comes with having a driver’s license gives teens even more ability to spend time with their friends. Although many parents report that their teens are never home, teenagers report that their parents are still very important to them.
- Teens are learning how to become adults, and they experiment with new behaviors which may include drinking alcohol, trying drugs, smoking, and/or being sexual. Maintaining open dialogue between teens and parents can help young people make healthy choices.
- In figuring out their sense of self, teens often push the limits and test boundaries, which can cause tension and conflict in their relationships with their parents.
- Shifting and strong hormones may result in mood swings.



Cognitive (Mental Ability)

- Teenagers start to understand the world in more complex ways than before. They often question why rules are made. Although it may feel like they are trying to challenge authority, they may actually be developing abstract ways of thinking. For example, they may ask, “Why it is ok to kill in war but not at other times?”
- Teens develop the mental ability to understand complicated information, such as chemistry, mathematics, and economics.
- Some teens develop a sense of being “invincible,” the belief that bad things will never happen to them (which can help explain why they engage in some risky behaviors).
- Young teenagers often are quite self-centered, thinking the world revolves around them and that they are unique. You may frequently hear, “But, Mom/Dad, you just don’t understand!” As teens mature, they typically become better able to consider the feelings/needs/perspectives of others.
- The teen’s brain is still not fully developed, and some higher skills (such as complex reasoning) may not emerge until the mid 20’s.

A note about boys and girls: Although every child is unique, in general boys and girls develop at different rates. You may notice differences between your children, and understanding these gender differences can be useful. For example:

- Boys often engage in more risky behaviors than girls.
- Because girls begin puberty earlier than boys, they may feel insecure about their developing bodies.
- Girls are more likely to be influenced by media portrayals of what they should look like, and may develop eating disorders in an effort to maintain an “ideal” (often unrealistic) body weight.

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