



Adolescent Development

As caregivers, it is important to understand adolescent development so that we can better appreciate how and why young people behave the way they do, and how we can help them make better decisions. Basic biological and brain-related changes that occur during adolescence can influence both their thinking and behavior.

“Typical” adolescent development

While each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and interests, there are also many developmental milestones—or issues—that everyone faces during adolescence. In this training, we’ll focus on typical adolescent development – that is, the growth, behaviors, and feelings that developmental scientists have found to be common and predictable for the majority of adolescents.

Some basic facts about teenagers

Individual teens develop in different areas (physical, cognitive, social, etc.) at different rates, and advanced development in one area doesn’t mean that a teen is equally advanced in all areas. Development in any area is a gradual process with stops and starts and regressions.

Puberty

Puberty describes the physical changes associated with adolescence.

There are big individual differences in the onset and progression of puberty, or the physical changes associated with adolescence.

There are also gender differences. Puberty typically begins:

- For girls, around 8 to 13 years of age
- For boys, around 9 to 14 years of age

The Effects of Puberty

Puberty happens because of the release of chemicals (hormones) in the brain. This fluctuation of hormones causes changes in not only physical development but also in emotional development.

Increases in hormone levels may be associated with a range of emotional changes, including irritability, impulsivity, and aggression or depression.

It is a myth that hormones are responsible for all erratic or impulsive teenage behavior. The effects of social and environmental factors, like family turmoil or interpersonal difficulties, are understood to affect adolescents' mood and behavior, as well.

Timing of puberty

The timing of puberty can affect adolescents' social and emotional development in various ways. Because young people who physically mature earlier appear older, they're often treated as if they're more socially and emotionally mature, even though this isn't necessarily true. Some research suggests that youth who experience faster physical development are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior than their peers and that teens who develop more slowly than their peers may be more likely to face bullying.

How Parents and Caring Adults Can Support Adolescents

To help young people with some of the negative effects of maturing early:

- Provide connection to caring adults.
- Provide clear messages about delaying sexual activity.
- Treat them as the young teens they are, even when they look older.
- Let adolescents know what they're going through is normal.
- Encourage adolescents to have a positive view of their bodies.
- Teach adolescents to avoid drugs.
- Help adolescents eat well.
- Get active with adolescents.
- Make sure adolescents get enough sleep.

The Adolescent Brain

Basic Facts

Key Term: Frontal Cortex

The Frontal Cortex, the area of the brain responsible for rational thinking, is still developing during adolescence.

Adolescents differ from adults in the way they behave, solve problems, and make decisions. Recent research shows that there is a biological explanation for this difference; the brain continues to develop during adolescence and even into early adulthood.

Brain Development: The Amygdala and the Frontal Cortex

The amygdala and the frontal cortex are two key regions of the brain that develop at different times. The **amygdala**, which processes **stress** and other emotions, and is responsible for instinctual reactions like **fear** and **aggressive behavior**, matures early.

On the other hand, **the frontal cortex**, the area of the brain responsible for **judgment, self-control, emotional regulation, rational thought, goal setting, morality, and understanding consequences**, is not yet fully developed in teenagers. In fact, this area of the brain develops quite dramatically during adolescence and into the mid-20s.

What does this mean for adolescents?

Pictures of the brain in action show that adolescents' brains function differently from those of adults when making decisions and solving problems. Adolescents' actions are guided more by the amygdala and less by the frontal cortex. That means that teens' responses to situations are rooted in emotion rather than rationality. In other words, the last part of the brain to fully develop is one of the most important—it's the area that gives people the ability to make rational decisions.

Because **the part of the brain that helps us think before we act isn't fully developed until adulthood**, in stressful situations or when faced with difficult decisions, teens are more likely to:

- Think one thing and feel another
- Act from impulses that differ from thoughts or feelings
- Misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- Engage in risky or inappropriate behavior

How you can help

There are several ways you can help teens make healthy choices. Adolescents' brains go through a "use-it-or-lose-it" pruning system: brain cells and neural connections that get used the least get pruned away and die off; whereas those that get used the most become stronger.

Best Practices:

Walk adolescents through the decision-making process **BEFORE** they encounter a risky situation.

To help teens make healthy choices, walk them through the decision-making process before they encounter risky situations. This will help them to make life-impacting decisions with less stress. Teens who undergo learning and positive experiences help build complex, adaptive brains.

Strategies to support healthy adolescent brain development

- Encourage teens to have healthy lifestyles and offer opportunities for positive experiences
- Provide meaningful opportunities for teens to exercise logic and apply analytical and decision-making skills to build up those brain functions.
- Encourage teens to take healthy risks. Taking such risks will help to develop a stronger frontal cortex, effectively giving the teen more valuable life skills.
- Allow teens to make mistakes so that they can learn from them.

Gender and Sexual Identity

Key Terms: Gender and sexual identity

'Gender identity' describes the gender a person identifies with.

'Sexual identity' refers to a person's pattern of attraction (physical, emotion, sexual and romantic) to others.

Along with their emerging sexuality, adolescents are also learning to integrate gender identity and sexual orientation into their self-concept. Gender identity and sexual orientation are often confused.

- **Gender identity** describes the gender(s) people consider themselves to be (masculine, feminine, or transgendered).
- **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's pattern of attraction to other people including physical, emotional, sexual, and romantic attraction.

Questioning gender and sexual identity

During adolescence, most youth begin to question what it means to be a man or a woman, and youth wonder how their gender identity fits into their overall identity. It's common, too, for youth to be uncertain about their sexual orientation during adolescence.

How you can help

Key social developmental milestones

Teens have lots of questions, and they're looking for answers.

- Help teens develop a strong sense of self by talking with them about how to choose healthy behaviors.
- Talk about what makes a healthy relationship, what it feels like to be in one, and what to do if they feel like they're in an unhealthy relationship.

Gender and sexual identity

Sorting out gender identity and sexual orientation questions can be confusing for adolescents, especially because lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth are so often bullied and stigmatized. This mistreatment harms these young people's self-esteem and also increases their risk for developing other more serious problems, like depression or drug abuse, or engaging in risky behaviors. Because of the negative experiences, LGBT teens may feel particularly alone, cut off, or even defective.

All adolescents may experience a period of confusion and exploration before accepting and committing to their gender identity or sexual orientation. An understanding and caring adult can be an invaluable resource for all young people, and especially LGBT teens.