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# childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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## Developmental Milestones in Adolescence

by Lauren Callow, Psychologist

As a parent you may have found a lot of information is available on typical milestones for your infant and young child. There are many books and common resources on sleep, speech, feeding, and motor skill stages, while adolescence tends to be shrouded in a cloud of "teen angst" and boundary pushing.



*"It is also worth noting, studies have shown a peek "sensation-seeking" period between 10 and 15 years of age"*

Sociocultural research has in fact identified that the adolescent "rites of passage" are a universal and cross-cultural phenomenon. Research identifies three areas of consistent change during the adolescent period: parent-youth conflict, mood swings and increased engagement in high risk behaviours. But what is considered a part of typical development? What are the biological reasons your child's behaviour changes as they approach the transition from childhood to adulthood?

### Neurological Development

Prior to the 1960's it was a widely held belief that brain development ended in early adolescences. However, research has now shown that the prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for capacity for attention, decision making and response inhibition) continues to evolve into early adulthood. There is even evidence that there may be a period of decline in these areas at the onset of puberty (11-12 years old). There are also notable gender differences, with females brains typically being fully developed by early 20's, and males by late 20's (yes, it's a scientific fact!). The combination of this significant brain development, hormonal

changes and increased impulsivity is linked to teens increased risk-taking. Statistically, this results in more accidents, suicides and crimes during this period. It is also worth noting, studies have shown a peek "sensation-seeking" period between 10 and 15 years of age, which is thought to be linked to increased risk for drug and alcohol experimentation. It may be beneficial for parents to remember that due to the heightened activity in the emotional centres if their brain, teens are more likely to be influenced by emotions (as opposed to rationale consideration) in their decision making.

### Physical Development

Until around 10 years of age, growth is similar across genders. However physical growth and sexual maturity starts to vary when approaching adolescence, with girls likely to experience a growth spurt between 10 and 12 years of age, and boys typically between 12 and 14 years. Interestingly, early onset of this stage for females, and late onset for males, tends to be associated with greater risk of negative outcomes. Research has found that psycho-social factors such as stress, exercise and nutrition can influence the timing of puberty.

This period of middle childhood, is also associated with increased body dissatisfaction in girls. Although males typically appear less at risk than females, studies have shown an increase in rates of body dissatisfaction in boys over the past 15 years. Disorders of body image, such as body dysmorphic disorder often presents for the first time in adolescence. If your teen is showing signs of body dissatisfaction, please mention this to your psychologist for additional information on this topic.

### Social Development

During adolescence, your teen will likely be focused on building other important relationships during this time, and "practicing" what they have learned from their families about relationships with others. Teen's immediate social network (friends, family, teachers, community) can have a powerful impact on patterns of thinking and behaviours.

Additionally, the influence of the media in shaping teens attitudes towards body image and substance use has been well documented in the research. An interesting social phenomenon during this period is referred to as "adolescent egocentrism" which is associated with excessive pre-occupation with oneself. This can cause teens to retreat into their own private world, for fear of judgement from others, or increased extroversion, to perform for their perceived audience.

It may be important to encourage your teen to share and relate to other peers during this time, as increased social isolation is associated

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## Adolescence con't

ated with vulnerability to symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Adolescence is a time of increased individual challenges and a time for negotiation to meet a growing need for independence and autonomy.

Research shows the most successful strategies for parenting through these challenges are a combination of firm boundaries, balanced with support and encouragement of their increasing need for independence.

Research also shows a secure and warm relationship between parent and adolescent acts protectively in navigating conflict while balancing the two (sometimes seemingly contradictory) approaches.

## Home Schooling and Autism

Withdrawing students from mainstream education is on the increase among parents with children with autism. Many of these parents feel that management and treatment of their child's autism is best done without a fulltime mainstream classroom placement.

There are three advantages to homeschooling. The first is that children can have a safe place to learn at their own pace. The second is that it is possible to individualise a curriculum. Finally, home schooling provides one on one teaching.

The decision by parents to pull their child out of mainstream schooling often comes after years of failure. Often the child is disruptive and suspended frequently despite the best efforts of all involved.

For parents considering home schooling it is important to think about the practicalities. Parents should talk to other parents who have taken this path. In general if your child is defiant with you and difficult to control then may be this is not the best solution.

It is advisable to have an educational consultant if you decide to home school your child. The distance education branch of Education Queensland does provide a lot of support however. We find in our practice that the ability to provide an educational consultant but also a psychologist is helpful for coordination of services.

## our NEWEST group program!



## mindful kids and teens

"Mindfulness has emerged as a popular strategy to not only address problems with anxiety and depression, but avoid them altogether"

(Dr. D. Tracey, 2016, Western Sydney University)

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