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## Help! I Have a Teenager!

### Understanding Adolescent Development: What Is Developmentally Appropriate & What is Not?

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Thank you for joining us for this discussion of adolescent development—we're glad that you're with us tonight and hope that you find this to be an informative and useful discussion. We'll be covering a number of the points below during the presentation and we welcome your participation—feel free to share your own thoughts about the information presented and to ask any questions about the items listed below, or other related issues.

#### Defining the animal

ad·o·les·cence (ăd'ī-ēs'əns)

- The period of physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to maturity.
- A transitional period of development between youth and maturity: *the adolescence of a nation*.

(SOURCE: American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language)

#### What is "normal" adolescent development?

- Mark Twain displayed a fine grasp of one of the central features of adolescent development when he wrote, "*When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned.*"
  - There are several key aspects of the developmental period we term "adolescence" which are suggested in this wry observation by Twain:
    - ◆ The tendency for adolescents to show dislike for their parents and to seemingly reject parental preferences and/or values. Although this is a generally normal and expectable development, it can lead many parents to fear that their child has not adequately incorporated their values. Also, it is difficult not to regard this rejection personally.
    - ◆ The idea that adolescence is a phase which has an endpoint. However, this begs the question as to when the endpoint of adolescence occurs, marking the entry into adulthood—*when is my kid going to be grown up?*
      - \* In our society, there was once a time when a clearer threshold from adolescence into adulthood existed. One was deemed an adult when the age of 18 was reached, or when one was about to become a parent or when one joined military service.
      - \* At this point in time, however, the endpoint of adolescence is more difficult to define. Challenge yourself to consider when and why you would say that you crossed from being an adolescent to being an adult.
      - \* The ambiguity of the onset of adulthood can be linked to a number of the difficulties presented by adolescents—some kids get discouraged and are tempted to drop out altogether.
    - ◆ The idea that after the period of adolescence has concluded and your child joins you as a fellow adult, his/her views of mom and dad may shift a bit, such that the folks are seen in a more positive light. It is expected that eventually the adolescent-as-young-adult will joined his/her parents as a fellow grown-up and have a better appreciation of the basis of their parents' views. In fact, it is common for kids to eventually show a striking similarity to the values of their parents once they reach adulthood (hence the truism, *the acorn doesn't fall far from the oak*).

□ **The central goal of adolescence: launching from the family out into the world**

- Why can this period be so difficult? There are a number of factors which can complicate the process:
  - Adolescent developmental issues/tasks are often implicated in complicated launches:
    - ◆ The cognitive changes of adolescence
      - \* It is during adolescence that the cognitive achievement of *formal operations* (to use a Piaget term) occurs, enabling abstract reasoning at a much deeper level. Many of the mood and behavioral changes associated with adolescence can be linked to the onset of formal operations—this is why kids become so emphatic about the *underlying principal* of various issues and conflicts. The good news is that, eventually, the adolescent becomes less enamored with his/her capacity to think about things abstractly and more agreeable.
    - ◆ Related to the cognitive changes are tendencies for greater affective intensity: the characteristic stormy moodiness of some teenager. This is a period of development when adolescents are still developing their ability to regulate their own experience of emotions.
    - ◆ Separation from family naturally occurs throughout the adolescent period—often a shift in the “source” of one’s self esteem, moving away from the family group towards the peer group, sometimes leading parents to feel rejected and discarded. It is common for parents of high schoolers to feel as if they have been “fired” with respect to the parenting tasks of supervision and guidance; parents sometimes feel they have been retained only to fund college or otherwise support their kids’ ambitions.
    - ◆ The tasks of adolescence, in today’s culture, make it a developmental period with a fuzzy endpoint. In our society, there was once a time when a clearer threshold from adolescence into adulthood existed. Recent studies show, however, that on average it takes five to ten years for young people to shift fully from their family of origin to their own home base. Some developmental psychologists describe 18- to 25-year olds as “emerging adults,” who need support from their parents and can benefit from a close relationship with them. In surveys, 18- to 21-year-olds say that they feel like an adult in some ways but not in others. Not until their mid-20’s do they report feeling like an adult. What are the developmental tasks of adolescence? In our society the tasks of adolescence are generally viewed as including the following:
      - ◇ The development of the capacity for lasting, committed relationships.
      - ◇ The development of a lasting sexual orientation/identity.
      - ◇ The development of career/vocational goals.
      - ◇ The completion of training or preparation for one’s career/vocational goals.
      - ◇ The development of improved frustration tolerance and impulse control.
      - ◇ The development of more lasting values and belief systems.
      - ◇ Achieving separation from one’s family of origin and then returning as a fellow grown-up.
  - During senior year, the typical struggles of adolescence about rules, achievement, and teens’ social lives can be exacerbated by launch-related dynamics such as “senioritis” and “spoiling the nest”:
    - ◆ *Senioritis* can include an academic slump, “the blahs” and power struggles.
    - ◆ *Spoiling the nest* explains the behavioral friction that precedes a child’s departure and eases the difficulty of saying good-bye. Sometimes it seems that kids deliberately exacerbate tension at home to make it easier to launch from the nest.

□ **Why is limit-setting with a teenager more complicated than with a younger child?**

- It’s appropriate for adolescents to begin to separate from their parents but sometimes this can take the form of increased defiance and disrespect.
- During this time of separating from parents, it is common for parents and teenagers to be in conflict regarding the speed at which increased privileges and responsibilities are granted by parents.

- It's at this point in time that kids begin to develop the ability to think about things *abstractly* and, often, this contributes to a tendency to argue repeatedly over the "principle" of a given rule or expectation.
- Another development event occurring at this point in time is the growth of a moral sensibility, which often leads at this time to a greater wish for kids to decide, for themselves, what is right and wrong, rather than simply complying with external rules. In some ways, this is a very healthy and positive development. However, this developmental event can also contribute to an increase in parent-teenager conflict.
- Teenagers are increasingly identifying with their peer group, rather than the family, and they may orient themselves towards a lifestyle or behavioral pattern which is endorsed by the peer group, which is in conflict with the family's norms.
- Adolescence is characterized by some degree of normal moodiness and this volatility can add to the degree of conflict between parents and teenagers.
- Parents have real—and legitimate—fears regarding their kids' safety. Teenagers, on the other hand, are famous for their sense of invulnerability, leading parents to be cautious and worried for their kids' basic safety. Often, these conflicting views of risk contribute to tension between parents and their adolescent children.
- Parents' expectations and approach to the job of being a mom or dad is often shaped by the most powerful role model in their own lives: their own parents. The task of parenting a teenager can be complicated by having a poor role model or by rigid adherence to how your own parents went about the task of raising children.
- Conflicts between you and your spouse, regarding expectations, limits and consequences, can significantly add to the stress.
- At one time, it was believed by some mental health providers that some parents achieved vicarious satisfaction through their children's acting-out. Certainly this is not often the case. But...are you sure that you are not giving your children mixed messages regarding how to be popular or the normalcy of "sowing one's wild oats" during high school years?
- Blended families, which are much more common than in years past, add a new level of complexity to the task of raising teenagers.
- Adolescence itself is a longer period of development than was once the case, which can add to frustration on the part of both parents and kids.

□ **Other specific areas of concern**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Depression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Know the major signs &amp; symptoms</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Other major psychiatric issues—be aware of the major signs &amp; symptoms and know where to seek professional help <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Other mood disorders</li> <li>● Eating disorders</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Substance abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Don't underestimate the risks and recognize the power of parental influence and/or the model you set</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Academic success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do your best to recognize accomplishment and structure your home to promote academic success</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Risk-taking behaviors: need to educate and still monitor your child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dangers out in the world</li> <li>● Online dangers</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Sexual promiscuity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be aware of the risks and try to have an open dialogue with your child</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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## □ Tips for parents

### ○ General points

- Consider what the goal has actually always been: to allow your child to separate and then later return as a fellow grown up. If parents allow themselves to think about “why” they’ve elected to have children and why work so hard for their kids’ health and success, the “answer” is often rooted in the prospect—the hope—of eventually being rejoined with their children as fellow adults, once successful launching has occurred. Parents need to have faith in this process—their children generally do return as fellow adults, so long as reasonably healthy launching occurs. The goal is to try to keep your kid intact until such time that he/she can return, emotionally, as a fellow adult.
- Have faith that your values and goals have actually been successfully transmitted to your teenager—know that he/she is simply unlikely to allow you to see that your values have been embraced, at this time in his/her life.
- Don’t underestimate your power to influence your teenager’s thinking, choices and behavior. Research shows that kids still value parental input, even though they are unlikely to show much acknowledgment of the validity of your wisdom.
- Pick your battles and know the differences between more serious issues vs. probable growing pains.
- You need to have regular interactions with your kids in order to sustain a relationship. Don’t underestimate the importance of regular family meals, events, activities, trips, games—anything to sustain ongoing contact and communication.
- Reflect on how you launched from your family of origin—if it was complicated or overly strained, be mindful of the risk that you may inadvertently use your experience as a model.

### ○ Issues around limit-setting

- Everything goes better if you can establish and sustain a working level of communication with your teenager.
- Be mindful of the longer term goal: to help your teenager leave you and return, later, as a fellow adult. Your job is to safely guide your teenager into late adolescence/early adulthood and to have faith that he/she will return as a fellow adult. Your goal is not to simply win battles and assert your authority—you are trying to usher your child into adulthood and simply need to exercise power, on occasion, to support that goal.
- Avoid power struggles, pick your battles, sort out what’s really important and be prepared to let natural consequences shape your kids’ behavior, if necessary.
- Be mindful of, and have confidence in, fundamental principals of learning:
  - ◆ Carrots *always* work better than sticks.
  - ◆ Understand the concept of rewarding “successive approximations” of the desired behavior and be prepared to reward, even for small displays of positive behaviors.
  - ◆ Figure out what rewards at your disposal are salient to your kid and don’t overlook the power of praise and recognition of accomplishments.
  - ◆ Consistency in the application of carrots & sticks is essential. Among other things, this means:
    - \* Pick consequences *you* can live with. You undercut your own authority if you fail to impose consequences you’ve set. Don’t threaten or bluff with extreme punishments.
    - \* Ensure that you and your spouse are consistent in the application of rules.
    - \* Hold yourself accountable not to overreact or look the other way.
- Expect that you will have to adjust your privileges and expectations as your teenager advances through adolescence and, often, it is important to the teenager that he/she enjoy some different freedoms and responsibilities than younger sibs.
- With respect to your system of rules, expectations and consequences:

- ◆ Model your approach after the criminal justice system of our larger society:
  - \* Rules must be clear in advance. While “ignorance of the law” is a poor defense, make sure that you’ve communicated expectations (family contracts may be useful for this reason, in some circumstances).
  - \* Just as occurs in the real world, there should be a temporal separation (e.g., gap in time) from the point of interrupting a behavior (e.g., the “arrest”) and the dispensing of a consequence (e.g., “sentencing”). Avoid issuing a consequence in the heat of the moment.
  - \* During this gap between “arrest” and “sentencing”, it’s best for parents to work jointly and to clearly indicate to the teenager that decisions are arrived-at collaboratively by mom and dad. Keep your deliberations private, however.
  - \* Be matter-of-fact and businesslike when dealing with issues of controlling behavior and limit-setting, following the example of law enforcement and jurisprudence.
  - \* The best consequences have some logical connection to the offense—this is not always possible, but use this concept when applicable (e.g., punishing curfew violations by penalizing future time out of the house).
  - \* Use small consequences—never squander your “big gun” (whatever that may be). There always must something “worse” if your teenager refuses to comply with a given set of consequences.
- Use of a family contract: there are pro’s & con’s to this approach but it can sometimes be a useful tool to enhance cooperation. For a copy of Dr. Jochem’s family contract please contact him at [jjochem@aol.com](mailto:jjochem@aol.com) .
- Issues around launching
  - ◆ A parent's job during the launching years remains the same as it has always been: to nurture qualities that support the development of a resilient, responsible, productive, socially and emotionally competent young person. But during this period of time parents need to come to terms with their own sense of loss, deal with empty-nest anxiety and cope with worries regarding their kids’ capabilities and their own need to develop a new form of parenting.
  - ◆ Some parents channel their launch anxiety into a vigorous, intense pursuit of the absolute best college placement for their kids. Given the competitive nature of college admissions, this is understandable, but an excessive sense of pressure and urgency surrounding the college admission process can aggravate conflicts between parents and their teenagers.
    - \* The dilemmas of parenting do not necessarily automatically improve when your high school grad heads off to school: colleges report that more students than ever are arriving on campus freshman year already overwhelmed some because of unstable family situations. The numbers of students suffering from mental health problems are at an all-time high, with counseling referrals for eating disorders, stress disorders, and depression outstripping the resources of most colleges. Whether pertaining to alcohol abuse or mental health issues, problems of this severe a magnitude typically necessitate parent involvement.

***Good Luck!***

*Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem’s practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at [jjochem@aol.com](mailto:jjochem@aol.com) .*