

Emotional Development in Teens

What is “emotional or psycho-social development”?

There are five recognized psychosocial issues that teens deal with during their adolescent years. These include:

Establishing an Identity. This has been called one of the most important tasks of adolescents. The question of "who am I?" is not one that teens think about at a conscious level. Instead, over the course of the adolescent years, teens begin to integrate the opinions of influential others - parents, other caring adults, friends, - into their own likes and dislikes. The ideal outcome is a person who has a clear sense of their values and beliefs, occupational goals, and relationship expectations. People with secure identities know where they fit (or where they don't want to fit) in their world.

Establishing Autonomy. Some people assume that autonomy refers to becoming completely independent from others. They equate it with teen "rebellion." Rather than severing relationships, however, establishing autonomy during the teen years really means becoming an independent and self-governing person *within* relationships. Autonomous teens have gained the ability to make and follow through with their own decisions, live by their own set of principles of right and wrong and have become less emotionally dependent on parents. Autonomy is a necessary achievement if the teen is to become self-sufficient in society.

Establishing Intimacy. Many people, including teens, equate intimacy with sex when in fact, intimacy and sex are not the same. Intimacy is usually first learned within the context of same-sex friendships, then utilized in romantic relationships. Intimacy refers to close relationships in which people are open, honest, caring and trusting. Friendships provide the first setting in which young people can practice their social skills with those who are their equals. It is with friends that teens learn how to begin, maintain, and terminate relationships; practice social skills; and become intimate.

Becoming Comfortable with One's Sexuality. The teen years mark the first time that young people are both physically mature enough to reproduce and cognitively advanced enough to think about it. Given this, the teen years are the prime time for the development of sexuality. How teens are educated about and exposed to sexuality will largely determine whether or not they develop a healthy sexual identity. Just over one-third of high school students report being sexually active; almost half (46 percent) report ever having had sex (Centers for Disease Control, 2005). Many experts agree that the mixed messages teens receive about sexuality contribute to problems such as teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Achievement. Our society tends to foster and value attitudes of competition and success. Because of cognitive advances, the teen years are a time when young people can begin to see the relationship between their current abilities and plans and their future vocational

aspirations. They need to figure out what their achievement preferences are - what they are currently good at and areas in which they are willing to strive for success.

How do these changes affect teens?

Look over the following statements about teenagers and try to determine which psychosocial issues they are trying to address:

Teens begin to spend more time with their friends than their families. It is within friendship groups that teens can develop and practice social skills. Teens are quick to point out to each other which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. It is important to remember that even though teens are spending increased amounts of time with their friends, they still tend to conform to parental ideals when it comes to decisions about values, education, and long-term plans.

Teens may have more questions about sexuality. They may ask about adults' values and beliefs. They may ask how you knew it was time to have sex or why you waited.

Teens may begin to keep a journal. Part of achieving identity is thinking about one's thoughts and feelings. Teens often begin journaling as a way of working through how they feel.

When they are in their rooms, teens may begin to lock their bedroom doors. Locking doors is a way to establish privacy. As long as teens continue to interact with the family, locked doors are usually nothing to worry about.

Teens may become involved in multiple hobbies or clubs. In an attempt to find out what they are good at, teens may try many activities. Teens' interests also change quickly. Today they are into yoga, and tomorrow they are into soccer.

Teens may become elusive about where they are going or with whom. When asked what they'll be doing for the evening, teens typically reply with "nothing" or "hanging out." When asked whom they'll be with, teens reply, "just some friends."

Teens may become more argumentative. Teens may question adults' values and judgments. When teens don't get their way, they may say, "You just don't understand."

Teens may not want to be seen with parents in public. They may make parents drop them off a block from their friends' houses or from school.

Teens may begin to interact with parents as people. Even though they may not want to be seen with parents in public, teens may begin to view parents more as people. They may ask more questions about how a parent was when he or she was a teen. They may attempt to interact with adults more as equals.

What can mentors do?

Encourage involvement in multiple groups or activities both within school and after-school. Realize that teens are trying to gain a sense of achievement - a sense of being uniquely good at something. Don't get frustrated if they frequently change their minds. At the same time, encourage them to stick with a project or activity long enough to establish some skills. Find out about new opportunities at their school or around their community and encourage them to sign up.

Praise teens for their efforts as well as their abilities. Many students feel that their effort is not valued unless they are successful. Make sure you show appreciation and respect for their efforts even before they see results.

Help teens explore career goals and options. Take teens to work so they can see what adults do. Set up opportunities for them to "job shadow" others. Ask them questions about their future career goals. Remember that figuring out what they don't want to do is just as important as figuring out what they like!

Give teens an opportunity to establish their behavioral guidelines and consequences. Allow teens to have input into curfew and other family rules. Their advanced cognitive skills coupled with their need for autonomy makes this a perfect time for them to provide suggestions and to demonstrate responsibility for their own behavior.

Establish rituals to mark significant passages. Few rituals in our modern society mark the passage of teens to adulthood. Have a mother-daughter luncheon when the daughter gets her first period. Have a father-son outing when the son begins to shave. Have a family celebration when the teen moves from junior high to high school. Celebrate the teen's first driver's license and his or her ability to vote.

Be aware of who your teens' friends are and what they are doing. Such parental monitoring should not end when youth enter their teen years. Despite teens' objections, make sure you know who their friends are and where they are going. Meet the parents of teens' friends. Provide fun things to do at home to encourage teens to "hang out" at your house so you'll know where they are and what they are doing.

Continue to provide a structured environment. Teens should be allowed to have more independence, but not enough to place them in jeopardy. Despite their complaints, teens rely on adults to provide them with the sense of safety and structure they need to deal effectively with all the psychosocial tasks of adolescents.

Source: Adapted from Virginia Cooperative Extension, Publications and Resources-Child Development. www.ext.vt.edu