



The Family Connection

News to Use for families of young adolescents

Volume 10 Number 2

What Makes Young Adolescents Tick?--A Primer for Parents

Youth between the ages of 10 and 15 are the most maligned and misunderstood age group in the U.S. Often referred to by derogatory terms such as “range of the strange” and “hormones with feet,” this period of early adolescence is simply not well known. This lack of understanding plays out in many areas—schools that are ill-equipped to handle their diversity of needs and characteristics and parents who often take a hands-off approach at the very time their young adolescents need more adult guidance.

During early adolescence, kids move through puberty at varying rates and times. Yet, as a group, they reflect important characteristics that have a major affect on their relationships with parents, educators, and others who care for them. Here are several critical physical and intellectual characteristics of young adolescents. In the next issue of *The Family Connection*, we will



share characteristics of moral, psychological, and social-emotional development.

In the area of physical development, young adolescents

- Experience rapid, irregular physical growth.
- Need daily physical exercise because of increased energy, and if not actively engaged in regular physical activity, often lack fitness, with poor levels of endurance, strength, and flexibility.
- Are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation and changes resulting in an increase in nose size, protruding ears, long arms, and awkward posture, concerns magnified because of comparison with peers.

In the area of intellectual development, young adolescents

- Increasingly are able to think abstractly, not only concretely; both concrete and abstract thinking styles may be in evidence in the same young adolescent, depending on the issue or situation.
- Are intensely curious and have a wide range of intellectual pursuits, although few are—or need to be—sustained.
- Are inquisitive about adults and are keen observers of them, depending on their cultural upbringing; some young adolescents also may often challenge adults’ authority.

From *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003), “Characteristics of Young Adolescents,” by Dr. Peter Scales, available from National Middle School Association, www.nmsa.org

Parents Ask

Q: As a single parent, I am concerned with the amount of time my son spends by himself after school. How much is too much?

A: You have a very legitimate concern. Research tells us that the period from 3-6 p.m. is the prime time for young adolescents to get into trouble when they are left without supervision. You can lessen the chances for problems by working with your son to plan activities and to have some basic ground rules. For example, he may be involved in sports for his school or a recreational or community team; music, art, or school clubs are of interest to other young adolescents and many take place after-school. When he does get home you two should have “negotiated” some hard and fast rules which may include beginning dinner, cleaning one room in the house, taking care of a pet, or simply relaxing a while before beginning homework.



When Parental Guidance Pays Off

When asked to write about a meaningful event that shaped her into the person she is today, a first-year college student reminds us that students do make life-altering decisions in the eighth grade and clearly need parents—and other significant adults—to support them as they take those stands. Jaime writes:

The night in middle school that I chose not to drink alcohol even when all my friends were doing it was a significant event.

At a party with friends – and no parents present – Erin decided to bring out the Green Apple Schnapps. I had always assumed that I would wait until legal drinking age to see if I would drink. It never occurred to me that I might have to make that decision before I was 21. Erin offered me the alcohol, and I said, “No, thank you.” My best friends were all drinking and pushing me to try it so I could decide for myself whether or not I liked it, but I held fast to my decision and declined the offer.

It may not seem like a big deal, and it really wasn't at the time, but looking back on it now, I see that it was then that I decided that I wanted to be my own person. I didn't want to be someone I was not. I didn't want to do things just because other people were doing them. I realized that it didn't matter if my friends made fun of me for not drinking because, in the end, if they were truly my friends, they would still be my friends at the end of the day whether I drank or not. I realized that I didn't have to do things that I didn't want to do. It was OK to make up my own mind. I had never had to decide for myself that drugs and alcohol were not for me. But that night I did, and I haven't looked back since.

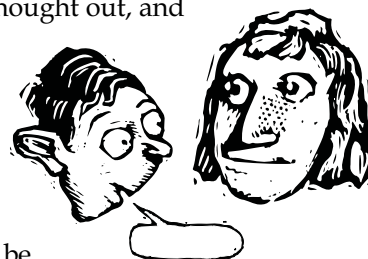
Please read this to your young adolescent and continue to support them in these tough decisions so that they, too, will “never look back.”

TIPS for Parents

Knowing When to Help, Knowing When Not To

If 10- to 15-year-olds are to become self-sufficient young women and men, they need supportive parents and caregivers who help—not interfere—with their learning. Here are several tips to help you decide the difference.

1. Help young adolescents develop their own “voice” by giving them opportunities to speak—and be heard. Be an active listener, ask good questions, make them justify their answers, and hold them accountable for their words and points of view. Model your own voice that is reasonable, well thought out, and based on data, not just opinion.



2. Help them accept the consequences of their actions. This means sometimes they will fail, be unhappy, or uncomfortable. One of the best life skills young adolescents learn is that they are responsible for what they say and do. As difficult as it is to watch our young adolescents stumble, that is often the only way they will learn. When they run out of allowance before the end of the month, do not advance them more money to go to a concert with their friends.
3. Recognize what you observe and hear from your young adolescent; this growth in reasoning and thinking abilities occurs during the middle grades years. Your sixth grader begins middle school with much enthusiasm directed largely at concrete objects and specific ideas; several years later, he has the ability to carry on a high-level conversation about global warming! This remarkable developmental journey is right in front of you, so do pay attention to it!



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