



BALANCE

Employee Assistance Program Newsletter
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The EAP is a professional and confidential counseling service available to you and your family to help resolve personal problems before they affect your health, family or job. There is no cost to you or members of your family for services provided by the EAP.

In those cases where referrals are necessary, they can often be made to prescreened professionals or community organizations whose charges may be covered within the allowances of your health insurance. Call **845-638-8880** to arrange an appointment with an EAP specialist.

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From the Director

Susan Mazzarella, LCSW, CEAP

One of the fundamental tasks of adolescence is to form a sense of personal identity and one's meaning in the world. Therefore we've dedicated this issue of BALANCE to understanding adolescent development and growth throughout the teenage years.

In this issue we'll explore teens and social media use as well as communication skills and limit setting for parents and caregivers of adolescents. We'll also discuss age appropriate life skills and tasks necessary for healthy teen development.

We hope you enjoy this issue of BALANCE and possibly even share it with your own developing teen.

Susan Mazzarella, LCSW, CEAP

"Adolescence is like having only enough light to see the step directly in front of you."

Sarah Addison Allen, American and New York Times best selling author.

Adolescent Development

By Marisa Kuropatkin MS LMHC

Adolescence is the developmental transition into adulthood that includes rapid changes in the brain and in the body. Adolescence can be a trying time for teens and their families, teens often struggle for increased autonomy as they develop a healthy exploration of identity. Adolescence is also a time of great potential; teens typically grow physically, try new activities, begin to think more critically and develop more varied and complex relationships which all allow them to engage more deeply with the world around them. In this article we will explore five main areas of adolescent development; physical, cognitive, emotional and social.

Physical Development

While some of the physical changes that occur during adolescence are internal, there are many changes that are visible to others. Changes such as growth spurts in height and weight show the development of muscles and bones which allow adolescence to take on tasks such as heavy lifting or running distances that younger children are not able to do. Teens may start to experience acne, body odor and more body hair as their hormone levels shift to allow for fertility. Although the physical changes will happen to everyone, the timing and order of these changes will vary from person to person. Some factors that can be responsible for the differences are: genes, extreme exercise, chronic illness, substance use as well as development in other areas such as variations in cognitive development.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive development refers to changes in the brain that prepare people to think and learn. The changes that happen in the teen brain create significant advances in cognitive abilities which allow teens to assert their independence and begin to make decisions on their own. During this time, the brain rapidly grows new brain cells and strengthens the connections between these brain cells. The changes in the adolescent brain affect thinking skills specifically in the areas of abstract thinking, advanced reasoning, metacognition and enhanced learning skills. Different sections of the brain develop at different times with the frontal lobe, the area that controls executive functions such as long-term consequences and controlling impulses, as being one of the last to fully mature. As a result, teens may struggle with impulse control, increased risk taking and may be more likely to make decisions based on emotions than on logic. Brain development often occurs at a different rate than physical development which means that adolescents thinking may not match their appearance. Other factors that affect adolescent brain development are; learning styles, disabilities, trauma, mental health disorders and substance use. Overall, the brain is not fully developed and protected until teens are in their mid-twenties.

Emotional Development

The process of emotional development allows the teen to gradually increase the ability to perceive, assess and manage emotions. Through this growth, the teen has the opportunity to build skills, discover unique qualities and develop strengths. Young people are taught and learn basic emotions early in life, as they get older they develop the ability to truly understand what emotions are and understand their impact. Hormones and brain development affect how well teens navigate the process of emotional development. Teens are often more swayed by emotions when it comes to the decision making process. There are many aspects of a teen's life that can affect their emotional development, these include; self-esteem (how someone feels about themselves), identity formation and examining their relationship with family and peers, and stressors such as abuse and bullying.

Social Development

Building new connections and establishing an identity outside the context of the family is a healthy part of social development. Friendship and peer acceptance are at the center of this area of development as teens strive to find out where they "fit in." Teens will find an increase in their ability to empathize and to appreciate unique differences in others. As a teen's social circle expands, they spend less time with their families and focus more time with their peers. This expansion can allow for teens to learn how to maintain healthy relationships in different contexts and identify roles they can play in their broader community. The changes that teens experience in their brains, emotions and bodies allow them

to take on more complex social roles.

Although every adult has gone through this developmental growth, it is important to learn about adolescent development and continuously seek education on the realities of adolescent lives today. Teens lives are complex, can change quickly and present issues that did not exist (e.g. social media), or were not fully acknowledged (e.g. mental health disorders) for prior generations of adolescents. It is through this knowledge and awareness that adults can provide more effective support and encouragement for the adolescents in their lives.

If you would like further information on adolescent development, please contact the EAP at 845-638-8880 or e-mail us at EAP@montefiorenyack.org.

Resources:

[Youth.gov](https://www.youth.gov) – Adolescent Development

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs. Adolescent Development Explained, November 2018.

Communicating with Teens

Susan Mazzarella, LCSW, CEAP

Communication with teens can be challenging. Research has found that open communication decreases risk-taking behaviors in teens, can reduce the likelihood of adolescent substance abuse and that positive communication with parents can support overall teen mental health. Although deep conversations with teens is not always easy the following are some suggestions for opening the door and starting those conversations:

DO: Ask specific yet open-ended questions like, “How was your get-together?” or “How did the test go?”

DON'T: Ask “Is everything fine?” Doing so will likely give your teen the message that you want everything to be fine. Your teen may be more likely to just nod in response and let you believe that everything is fine, even if it's not.

DO: Give your teen the sense that you are open to anything they have to share, whether positive or negative, without offering unsolicited advice. Choose moments when your teen seems relaxed and open, rather than stressed or irritable.

DON'T: Ask questions that are too general, for example, “How was your day?” In doing so you will likely get one or two word answers that do not give you any real information about what is going on in their life or what they are feeling.

Additional tips to communicating with your teenager include:

- Talk about trivial things sometimes. Not every conversation has to be about important issues. Discuss trivial things like the latest celebrity gossip or fashion, and compare your views. Avoid being overly critical or negative as the idea is to stay in practice so that deeper conversations aren't as difficult to have.
- Build in family time. Spending family time together to talk and catch up can help to reduce the likelihood of potential conflicts. Establish a time that works well for everyone and don't rush through conversations. Ask questions like “What worked well for you/us this week?” making it easier to process issues when you're not at a crisis point.
- Play a sharing game during dinner. For example, each person shares their best moment of the day, their most challenging moment of the day and lastly something their excited or hopeful about. This is a great way to start a longer conversation and keep communication open.
- Find opportunities for communication in your daily routine. Driving, walking or even saying goodnight are each opportunities for your teen to open up in a non-threatening way.
- Write to your teen. If you find it difficult to talk directly with your teen, try using texts or e-mails to communicate. Written words are sometimes easier to absorb for teens, whether it's an explanation of why you set a limit or simply an expression of love or appreciation. Talking about their life in writing may be easier for them than finding the words in the pressure of the moment.

Most importantly, the need to regulate your own emotions is essential, especially during a heated conversation, in order for the conversation to go well. Remember to breathe, avoid taking things personally and remind yourself that you are the role model. If you find that the conversation is no longer effective, rather than continue talking, take a timeout.

Let your teen know that you're going to pause the conversation and revisit it later. Avoid allowing several days or weeks to go by without resuming the conversation.

If you or a family member would like more information or advice on talking with your teenager, please contact the EAP for confidential guidance and support at 845-638-8880 or e-mail us at EAP@montefiorenyack.org.

Excerpt from, info@newporthealthcare.com, March 30, 2023.

Social Media for Parents of Tweens & Teens

Yandira Melon, LCSW, CEAP

Parents and caregivers (guardians) can identify with the phrase, *"Put your cell phone down"*. Sometimes we may feel our tweens and teens are part of their mobile devices rather than using them. As parents we can relate to that stage of wanting to fit in, wanting to know what friends were doing (now known as *FOMO-Fear of Missing Out*), and to have the latest of whatever was popular at the time. Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth in all areas, physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally.

For teens today self-expression, communication and problem-solving all begin with the use of electronic devices predominantly mobile phones. Parenting has always involved being aware of what our children are doing and learning in and out of the home, but nowadays parents also need to include knowing what they're children are doing on cyber and iCloud worlds, social media platforms and other apps, (applications.) Parents and caregivers should know more than Meta (Facebook) since most teen's primary platform now is YouTube, followed closely by TikTok, IG (Instagram) and Snapchat.

The developmental impact of screen time is a new science with much focus on toddlers. However, as technology is becoming more a part of our lives, the research is widening to include adolescence. The outcome of such research has looked at how the unique areas of development during tween and teen years are affected.

An article by the American Psychological Association focused on the benefits, asks the question as to why social media use during adolescence is a matter of concern and how parents can intervene.

*"Brain regions associated with a desire for attention, feedback, and reinforcement from peers become increasingly sensitive beginning in early adolescence, and regions associated with mature self-control are not fully developed until adulthood. Therefore, parental monitoring (i.e., coaching and discussion) and developmentally appropriate limit-setting is critical, especially in early adolescence." * (May 2023)*

Areas of Concern

Social media does have its positives however using social media in excess has negative consequences other than just being time consuming. Areas of physical and social development should be taken into consideration.

Sleep:

Adolescents should have a minimum of 8 hours of sleep each night. Exposure to the blue light of devices at night can interfere with sleep cycles and affect brain development in processing and retaining information. Researchers are also looking at how this may affect the size of adolescent's brains including information processing and learning.

Physical Health:

Exercise is important in all stages of life however, for children physical activity and exercise is recommended for both physical **and** psychological wellbeing including a lower risk for depression. Therefore being too sedentary has risks. Also, eating sweet snacks or foods high in saturated fats are usually the go to for children that spend time in front of screens thus increasing the risk of weight gain and/or obesity.

A recent NY Times article cited how social media affects youth body image as well.

*"Social media platforms can contribute to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, social comparison and low self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls. A significant percentage of adolescents feel worse about their body image."***

Social Connection:

Social media connects many people more than an actual event, marked by seeing the number of “likes” or “follows” a post has. However, there are times when sending a “like” or “follow” can have the opposite effect, like causing a teen to feel lonely if they do not have the right number of “likes” or the right “number of followers”. Comparison is also a part of adolescent social connection, thus seeing others in designer clothes, using high priced technology/games and driving expensive cars with the intentions of fitting in and getting those “likes” can create an additional level of stress.

Peer Pressure:

Peer pressure does not have to be in the real time presence of others. There is peer pressure on social media. When a negative or dangerous behavior, like cyber bullying, receives “likes” by a group the adolescent impulsive brain may go with others as a way to fit in and belong without recognizing the damage caused to the victim.

Parent/Caregiver Options

Eliminating all screen time is not possible however being aware of children’s use and restrictions on what is seen is possible. Parents can help balance their children’s screen time by considering the following suggestions:

1. **Take a look** at your own use of technology. As parents/caregivers we should be role models by setting parameters around healthy screen time.
2. **Establish** a healthy balance between digital time and social time. Set reasonable rules and restrictions pertaining to your child’s use of online social media. This can include no technology at the dinner table, during family time, or in the car to and from school. This includes you.
3. **Connect** with your child on social networking sites, e.g., become friends with your child on Meta (Facebook), IG (Instagram) and/or Snapchat.
4. **Educate** your child, starting in tweens (10 -14 years) about the risks of social networking, and make sure they know what to do if they are bullied online. Discuss what “likes” and “follow” mean to them and consequences, for instance inappropriate use involving sharing personal information, cyberbullying and sexting. Social media sites should be age & developmentally appropriate, allowing for social support and healthy socialization.
5. **Teach** your child to use caution while on social media sites. For example, encourage them to think twice before posting pictures, comments or status updates that can impact their reputation. Create dialogues with them about what they see, do they think everything they see on the internet is accurate, can they tell if the website is trustworthy or is it others opinions.
6. **Encourage** your child to get involved in an activity they like or are interested in; ex. sports, music, martial arts, dance, volunteering in the community. An outside interest can boost their self-confidence rather than the number of followers they have. This will allow for an opportunity to interact in real life with others including their peers.
7. **Balance** your child’s online social life with face-to-face interaction 1:1. Encourage your child to spend face-to-face time with friends, maintain strong family relationships by spending quality time together **off line**.

As parents, limit their time using technology which can present more opportunities to strengthen the parent child relationship allowing adolescents to feel a sense of security. Tweens and teens need to know that you are available to them, even when they do not verbalize it. If not they will turn to the internet to give them the information they need, however it can also steer them to unreliable, dangerous or undesirable sites. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has a website for parents with information and tools to help parents develop a family plan.

As a parent it’s beneficial to your child to weigh the positives against the negatives and decide what a healthy level of online technology use is. If you’re having difficulty managing your child’s technology use don’t hesitate to contact the EAP at 845-638-8880 or email us at eap@montefiorenyack.org for additional information and counseling services.

References

www.Childmind.org/article/How-Using-Social-Media-Affects-Teenagers

Ten Things to know about how social media affects teens’ brains, Cory Turner, Feb 2023

*Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence, APA, May 2023

**US Surgeon General Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory, NY Times, May 23, 2023

* AAP: <http://www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan>

Talking with your Teenager about Discipline and Setting Limits

The teenage years can be challenging for parents as teens struggle to build autonomy and independence, while also dealing with hormonal shifts and sometimes tumultuous emotions. It's important that parents let their teen be their own person and have their own life. However, establishing age appropriate limits is often necessary. Parents should allow teen to make choices within safe limits and experience consequences of their life choices. Setting clear boundaries around issues like technology use, school attendance, chores, car usage, or staying overnight at friend's house is important.

In doing so parents need to respect teens enough to explain the reasons behind their decisions. "Because I said so" is not a helpful statement when communicating limits with a teen, and in fact, can increase your teen's frustration and make them not want to speak with you or follow your limits.

The following four steps can assist you when communication limits with your teen:

1. Start the dialogue with an attitude of acceptance and listen closely. Before you speak, let your teen give their input and don't interrupt. Listen patiently and show them with your facial expressions and a nod or two that you care about what their saying.
2. Acknowledge how they feel and what they want. It's important for teens, like all of us to feel validated and understood. Once they've shared with you their case, make it clear that you believe their request or complaint is important and worth discussing. Remember your teen's request may be valid for them, even if it doesn't appear valid to you. You may want to bounce things off one another about how to find an acceptable compromise.
3. If you disagree, explain why you don't think it's the right thing. Speak honestly, for example by saying "I understand why you want to do this, and here's why I don't think it's a good idea", then list the reasons. Don't elaborate extensively on the details, but rather stick to your conclusion about the matter.
4. Clarify your decision and communicate clear expectations and explain consequences if they choose to ignore those expectations. Remind them that they have the choice to respect or reject the rules but that rejecting the rules will lead to appropriate consequences. Always strive to negotiate if you feel there's room for compromise and avoid power struggles at all costs.

Recognize and validate what may be behind their resistance to your limits, for example, are they sad, disappointed, or angry about the limits and if so reassure them that it's okay they have those feelings and that you honor and respect their feelings.

If you or a family member are having difficulty speaking with your teen about these issues consider contacting the EAP for confidential guidance and support at **845-638-8880** or e-mail us at EAP@montefiorenyack.org.

