



THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF PUBERTY

(GROWING UP IS HARD TO DO)

by Jennifer Shaw-Brachfeld, M.D.

Attending Pediatrician, Saint Barnabas Medical Center
and Touchpoint Pediatrics, PA, Chatham, N.J.

Parents, teachers, doctors and other supportive adults do all they can to instill self-esteem in our growing children. Yet, despite our best efforts, adolescents continue to struggle with the process of becoming independent, responsible adults with a strong sense of self and of belonging.

Accomplishing this metamorphosis often involves experimentation with different styles of dress, behavior and friends. Peers become all important and there is intense preoccupation with one's own body and self. Early adolescents stick together in same sex packs and dress alike, often emulating a sports or entertainment idol. Self-consciousness and a need for validation from others going through the same changes lead to long private phone conversations and hours spent with friends "just hanging around."



While young adolescents are curious about sex, it is often based on their concern about their own normalcy and popular media images. Any opposite sex friends tend to be holdovers from childhood, although by middle adolescence, (14 to 17 years). many of those boundaries blur and larger groups of teens of both sexes start to spend time together. Experimentation with sex, tobacco, drugs and alcohol may begin, so it is important to give teens accurate information through literature or a physician. Teens tend to feel invulnerable ("it will never happen to me"), so when expressing concerns, speak in terms of immediate effects, such as staining

teeth and losing memory instead of mentioning only lung cancer and the danger of drug overdose.

Testing authority and rejecting parental values are part of the separation process. Middle adolescence is the time of peak experimentation, risk-taking behaviors, peer group identification and parental conflicts. Self-centered 13 year olds become idealistic 16 year olds with somewhat inflexible ideas of right and wrong. Eventually, abstract reasoning develops and teens begin to focus on consequences to society as well as to the individual. Thoughts of the future and the need for social and economic success and stability are tempered by a more realistic understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses-but often that does not occur until they reach their twenties.

Teens have such intense ideals, emotions and need for acceptance that they may feel isolated and depressed if they have a different sexual orientation, an altercation with friends or a major disappointment, such as not making the team or not getting into the college of their choice. They may not be comfortable discussing these events with parents, feeling as if they have failed to meet family expectations. Make sure your teens feel comfortable speaking about their physical

and emotional health with their physicians, or help them find someone they can talk to about their body image, sexuality and state of mind.



Help your adolescents feel that wherever they are on the wide spectrum of normal physical changes, they are still attractive. Teens who mature physically earlier or later than their peers are at higher risk for emotional and behavioral problems. Be careful not to tease your sensitive teens about their changing physiques.

Provide a solid base of unconditional love and balance criticism with praise (i.e. "You've done a great job taking care of the dog lately, but it seems as if you've been forgetting to take out the garbage.

What can we do to work this out?") Get to know their friends and help your teens develop a strong base of peer and adult support. (Let them dress like their friends when they're with them, but request they dress in a way that you prefer on family outings.)



Make sure that family rules are in place and clearly understood. Point out the rules by which children and adults need to abide, such as the need to clean one's own dishes or to inform the family of anticipated time expected home. Encourage a sense of independence, capability and responsibility in terms of odd jobs like walking the dog, raking leaves, baby-sitting.

Point out that they have certain expectations of you for transportation, food, shelter, medical care and financial security. In return, they need to abide by house rules and be present for family functions, be it visits to grandparents or Sundays at church.

No matter how good a relationship a parent has with a child, part of growing up means renegotiating that relationship. As the teen strives for equality, the parent strives for stability. As the teen seeks to make more independent decisions, the parent wants to provide guidance and retain control to insure safety and success. As the teen seeks new experiences, the parent tries to instill a sense of personal accountability and reassurance that the risks taken are not too great.

Naturally, these changes lead to conflicts. The house rules that were established during the toddler years regarding discipline, negotiating and mutual respect need to be solidly in place to survive the adolescent years. The same tenets of positive parenting hold true whether dealing with a 3 year old or 13 year old. Acknowledge the other person's feelings,

allowing them to be heard, but if tempers flare, separate until discussion can be resumed without tantrums. If final decisions have been reached, end the discussion. Try to provide choices within the parameters of what is acceptable. Stay specific-say what you mean and mean what you say. Do not forget to comment on responsible behavior.

Teens need to acknowledge that being part of any group means following rules and performing duties. College dorms have rules, all jobs have expected standards of behavior; a family is a microcosm of society and the first rules that need to be followed are those within the family. Privileges need to be earned by a pattern of fulfilling responsibilities and behaving in an increasingly adult manner. Parents must be clear that television, video games, allowances, transportation and late curfews are privileges not rights.

Freud believed the two most basic human needs were to feel lovable and to feel capable. Truly, no one needs that affirmation more than a teenager or the parent of a teenager.