



# Preteen, Young Teen Development

Parents often have concerns as their children approach the teen years, and this time can be uncomfortable for their children, too. Of course, young people vary greatly in when and how quickly they experience the changes of growing up. However, your preteen likely has begun the transition to the teen years, and will continue to show changes in his or her body, thinking, emotions and relations with you and others. This publication will discuss typical changes, as well as individual differences.

## Physical changes

Both parents and young people themselves notice physical changes during the pre- and early teen years. Physical growth that occurs during this time is more rapid than at any time since infancy. Besides growing bigger and taller, the maturing child begins to develop bodily characteristics that distinguish the male and female adult. For example, the beginning of breast development in girls may start as early as 9 years and as late as 13. By age 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ , half of the girls have begun menstruation. In boys, enlargement of the testes is the first sign of puberty and begins from about 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  to 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ . These changes in sexual development usually happen before rapid increase in height. This sexual maturation also is related to skin changes, which can cause embarrassment for teens, too.

Many pre- and early teens have difficulty adjusting to these physical changes. They may begin to

## *When your little girl begins to grow up (OR I can't believe how tall she's getting)*

*John and Linda wonder what's going on with 12-year-old Lisa. Always an easy child, Lisa usually gets along well with her parents. Sometimes she had problems, like fighting with her younger brother, but usually things have gone smoothly with Lisa. Almost overnight, she has become argumentative and gets irritated or angry at the drop of a hat. She spends hours in her room with the door shut or talks on the telephone with her friends. What happened to the happy-go-lucky child Bill and Linda once knew? Is her behavior normal?*



feel extremely self-conscious—as if everyone is watching them. Whether the changes occur early, late or at the same time as most youngsters, many young people feel they don't look right. Girls may have concerns about menstruation and boys may need help understanding that “wet dreams” are normal.

It helps for parents to take their children's feelings seriously while, also letting them know these changes are normal. It's important for parents to talk with both boys and girls about physical changes before they begin to experience them.

## Emotional changes

The same hormones that cause physical growth and maturation also help create changes in emotions and in relationships with others. Emotional swings can be confusing to both parents and their growing children: the young people may feel wonderful one minute and irritable, angry or sad the next minute. Although adults experience

the same kinds of feelings that pre- and young teens do, the feelings may be more intense and young people typically give in to impulses more than do adults.

It helps for parents to understand that their pre- and young teen may be just as uncomfortable with their intense feelings as are their parents.

## Changes in thinking

At the same time that bodies and emotions are changing, the youngster's ability to think in the abstract increases. Beginning at age 11 or 12, youngsters are able to analyze situations and use reason. They are able to think in terms of possibility rather than merely concrete reality. This means that adolescents are able to fantasize, speculate, and think more like an adult than younger children.

These abilities can create problems in the relationship between pre-adolescents and their parents. Now, more than ever, youth are apt to question their parents' rules and



values. Young people often are quick to feel that something is "unfair." As a parent, you may find yourself wondering what happened to your happy-go-lucky child, who pretty much went along with things and got along well with you.

### **Social changes**

■ **Importance of friends.** There is a gradual shift during elementary school toward greater reliance and importance of same-age friends. Most children by fourth or fifth grade enjoy spending much of their free time with friends. Friends become even more important during the pre- and early teen years. Parents may worry about peer pressure when, in fact, peers can provide a positive as well as negative influence. Good friends with similar values can help your child gain confidence to meet the changes and adjustments of this phase. Youth at this age typically enjoy hanging around with "the gang" or having "secret clubs" with no adults around. They may enjoy keeping secrets from parents. This is normal unless there are signs of dangerous behavior (See Pm-1547h, another publication in this Parenting series).

Some parents express sadness that children at this age spend less time with the family. While the family continues to be extremely important, preteens and teens do spend more time with their friends. Some youngsters in middle school and junior high actually seem to be embarrassed to be seen with parents. Parents may feel hurt when their child expresses this feeling but it is usually a normal sign of independence. When the young person feels more confidence with friends, the feeling often goes away.

It is important to let your child know that you still want and expect him or her to spend time with the family. At the same time, help your child know growing independence is important. It may be helpful to set aside certain times each week for family activities.

■ **Loss of self-confidence.** Some parents are surprised to find that it's common for pre- or young teens to lose self-confidence. Their youngster may appear self-assured or even cocky, but beneath the surface he or she probably feels less confident. In addition to feeling physically awkward, youth compare themselves to some image of what they should look like and they often have new concerns about getting along with peers. Youth, as well as their parents, often worry about these years: "Will I have enough friends?" "Will I make the team?" "Will my body look the way it's supposed to?"

### **Individual differences**

Physical, emotional, cognitive (thinking) and social changes are typical for pre- and young teens. However, no two young people will experience these changes in exactly the same way. Some start the transition as early as 9 while others may be 13 or older before the changes begin. Also, the child's personality and past behavior must be considered. A child who has always had difficulty with change, or who has had intense feelings as a young child, may have more difficulty with the preteen stage.

It helps to realize that about 80 percent of teens never present serious problems to their families or get into real trouble. Parents need to know that their influence remains strong into the teen years and

adulthood. Research shows that young people typically return to the values of their families in young adulthood.

### **Parenting tips**

The following ideas may help make your child's transition to the teen years easier for both of you.

- Understand that most changes you see in your child are normal.
- Listen to your child and take his or her feelings seriously.
- When problems arise, work together for solutions.
- Talk to parents of older children to get a sense of perspective.
- Schedule time for family fun.
- Realize that your child's growing signs of independence are normal and healthy.

Once you realize that changing bodies, emotions and new ways of thinking and reasoning are normal for pre- and young adolescents, you can relax and worry less about how your child is "turning out." It helps to realize that one job for preteens and early teens is to test the rules, to challenge authority, and to begin to think for themselves. It's just as normal for pre- and early teens to want to think for themselves and to do more with friends as it is for toddlers to be curious. The job of parents is to have firm expectations and continue to show love and respect for their preteen, even when their preteen challenges their authority, tests the rules and, at times, puts down their parents. This is no easy task! Reading, going to parenting workshops, and talking to other parents can make the job easier and more fun.

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For further reading, get copies of publications in the *Living with your Teenager* series, Pm-944a-d, available at any ISU Extension office.

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