

how kids grow

Insight on Adolescent Development from the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

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THE WILD WORLD OF ADOLESCENT EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by Walt Mueller

Sigmund Freud once suggested that adolescence is a “temporary mental illness.” Anna Freud said that “to be normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal.” Is it possible these thoughts were penned while there were teenagers in the house?

Even those who have never lived with a teenager recognize the screams of elation and fear coming from kids on the wild roller-coaster ride of adolescence. Consider the experience of newspaper columnist Mark Patinkin: “So I was sitting in this restaurant, trying to eat, but it wasn’t working. I was having digestive problems, see, because of what was behind me. Teenagers, that’s what - loud ones with greasy hair. Bad complexions too. . . . Everybody knows that teenagers are low forms of vegetable life. Maybe it’s not their fault; science has shown they all have hormonal imbalances. The point is that they’ve been allowed to run around unregulated for too long.”

Parents who find themselves baffled and frustrated by the sudden onslaught of teenage emotional highs and lows can maintain their own emotional stability by developing an understanding of this troubling characteristic of normal adolescent development. The teen years can change the peaceful pond of childhood into a stormy ocean, that if allowed, can sink the ship of family stability, sending healthy parent/child relationships overboard. An informed understanding of your teen’s changing emotions will go a long way in preventing you from falling into a state of “temporary mental illness”!

Most parents would say that they experienced the easiest and most crisis-free years of parenting when their children were young. One of the reasons for this is the nature of a child’s emotions, especially if they are growing up in a loving home absent of stress-causing turmoil (death, divorce, abuse, etc.). Two words which might best describe the emotions of the “normal” child are “stability” and “predictability”. The emotional stability of most children parallels the stability of childhood in general. Because our children’s days are filled with play, a routine school life, and relatively little pressure, they remain on an emotional even-keel. Rarely is the boat rocked.

A high school student recalled how emotionally satisfying his life had been just a few years before. “I wish I could go back and be a fourth-grader again” he said. “Life is so easy when you spend your days playing and riding your bike. I was always happy. There wasn’t any strain between me and my parents.” When our children are emotionally stable, it makes parenting and life around the home that much easier.

When it comes to their emotions, young children are fairly predictable. As parents, we know what makes them happy or sad. When a child is angry, upset, or crying, a parent can find ways to calm and comfort the child rather quickly. Tears can turn to smiles in a matter of seconds, and children find it easy to forgive, forget, and move on like nothing ever happened.

The adolescent emotional experience is another story. The teen years are filled with an onslaught of changes and milestones difficult for kids to understand and handle. Imagine what we might discover by administering one of those written adult "stress tests" to the typical teen. Perhaps you've seen them or even taken one yourself. Designed to measure the amount of stress an individual is under at the time of administration, the test is based on strong scientific evidence that the greater number of "social re-adjustments" individuals make, the greater their chances of experiencing significant physical and emotional health problems. The test lists 65 different changes and milestones that people experience in life. These range in scope from death of a spouse, to geographic relocation, to change in financial status, to going away for a holiday. Each of these changes is assigned a point value based on the severity of the event. By circling those changes and milestones experienced in the last 12 months and adding up the total number of points for items circled, an adult is able to gain a picture of the amount of stress they are experiencing.

Physical growth, new sexual urges, changing relationships, and the desire to be accepted are a few of the changes that could be listed on a stress test for adolescents. It would be easy to list at least 65 stress-causing changes associated with normal adolescent growth. And all "normal" teens would be hard-pressed not to circle every one! With this flood of changes, adolescents are faced with the real possibility of experiencing a host of physical and emotional difficulties.

It helps to visualize the teen years as "the earthquake of adolescence". Those years arrive quickly, pass fast, and leave the landscape of a child's life radically altered. If we could put a face on the toll this stress can take on kids during the teen years, it might look a lot like some of the faces seen on news footage of recent California quakes. Minutes after the quake ends, live pictures show dozens of panicked people responding in a variety of ways as they wander among the crumbled buildings. Some cry. Some stand dazed. Others comfort neighbors they have never met before. Still others wander the street struggling to comprehend what happened, often without a clue as to what to do next. The pictures look an awful lot like some of the many ways kids respond to the tumultuous years of adolescence.

What are the normal emotional changes that you can expect in your child when the earthquake of adolescence shakes the foundation of your home? The easiest answer is this: *When it comes to teens and their emotions, you might never know what to expect. Mood swings from the highest of highs to what seems like the lowest of lows can occur in minutes or last for days.*

Many of these mood swings are directly related to the physical and social changes taking place. A look in the mirror can trigger a quick ride down the steepest hill on the roller coaster of adolescent emotions. Self-criticism of what they see, or what they think their friends see, can lead to feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Being an early or late developer has repercussions on a teenager's emotional well-being. After all, "how can I be happy" in a society preoccupied with appearance when "I'm not normal"? Negative mood swings can also result from academic failure, poor peer relationships, family disunity, and the anxiety of perceived rejection by members of the opposite sex.

Periods of elation, excitement and youthful exuberance are triggered in numerous ways. A young teenage girl gets a phone call from that special guy. She's up! In fact she's so up that nobody in the world, especially mom and dad, can understand the depth of love that she is feeling for this object of her affection. Still, she shares her joy with you. Other climbs up the roller coaster result from peer acceptance, academic success, making the team, and other achievements.

The bottom-line is this: *When it comes to teenagers and their changing emotions, strange behavior is often normal!*

Parents play an important role in helping teenagers to understand and handle their emotions in healthy ways. Here are some suggestions on how to offer some much needed stability when those topsy-turvy teen emotions might seem to be out of control.

First, always remain sensitive. The variety of emotions teens experience are very real to them. Many stem from a preoccupation with self and the accompanying fear of rejection. Teens expect their parents will always love and accept them. To be written-off by an insensitive parent is the type of rejection that can send a "normal" teen over the edge to clinical depression and even suicide. What teens need are parents who will hang in there and love them in spite of the load of emotional ups and downs over what may seem to be trivial things. It may appear our kids are overreacting. But to them, they are handling the confusion in the best way they know how. Listen with sensitivity as they share their joys and fears.

Second, make every effort to insure that your home environment is stable and secure. The world of a teenager can be ugly, full of rejection, and unforgiving. The home must continue to be a fortress of acceptance and love.

Third, look for and emphasize your child's positive qualities. Encourage them in the activities they do well. This approach will provide a measure of balance in a peer world than tends to be full of discouragement.

And finally, expect that some of your encouraging advances and advice might seem to be rejected. Don't take the rejection personally. Rather, continue to love and encourage your child with consistency. They may never admit it, but they desire and thrive on parental encouragement.

The emotional earthquake of adolescence doesn't last forever. Kids whose parents are there to help them rebuild on the foundation of a loving and accepting family are more likely to move into a strong and healthy adulthood with thankfulness for a dad and mom who understood and cared when the going was especially rough!

*Editor's note: A detailed overview of the changes and challenges of normal adolescent development, along with parental strategies and responses, is included in Walt Mueller's book, **Understanding Today's Youth Culture**. To order a copy, contact the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding.*

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For more information on resources to help you understand today's rapidly changing youth culture, contact the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding.