



---

# Living With Your Teen: Understanding Changes in Thinking

At about age 11 or 12, children's thinking begins to change. They are likely to become self-centered, to question family beliefs and to engage in thinking that allows them to believe they are protected from the harmful consequences of risky behavior.

This new way of thinking often causes problems in the relationships between pre-teens or teens and their parents. While the 12- or 13-year-old may understand that people may hold different opinions on a particular topic, he or she may not be aware that others are concerned with many topics besides those that interest teens.



## **Preoccupation with self**

The subject of greatest interest to the young adolescent is often himself or herself. Typically, the young teen prims in front of the mirror or worries about acne. The hours spent in self-admiration or self-criticism are directed toward impressing the audience the young teen feels is always there. Adults often find the teen's preoccupation with himself or herself annoying. From the adult point of view, this concern about appearance and behavior seems selfish and unhealthy.

During these times, parents should remember that this self-preoccupation is the result of the young teen's way of thinking and that this style of thinking occurs in all children. Parents also should remember that the concern of teens with what others think may be justified. Often young teens are very critical of one another.

Following fads appears to play an important role in achieving a positive self-image for the teen. The teen who looks and acts "right" gains approval from friends. Although adults should veto fads that are too costly or unhealthy, they should consider permitting some fads. By allowing them to follow some fads, parents may help teens develop self-confidence. The relationship between parents and teens may grow stronger when parents show their understanding and support.

During early adolescence, many teens think that everyone is interested in them. As a result, they may develop the notion that "the world revolves around them." Teens show this

egocentrism or self-centeredness when they say no one has ever felt the way they do, suffered so much, loved so deeply, or been so misunderstood.

The child who once thought you understood everything and anything may suddenly burst out with “You don’t understand!” In this case, parents may find it helpful to respond, “I may not understand, but I’m sorry you’re unhappy. If you want me to, I’ll be glad to try to help.” In this way, parents can express caring without having to argue over whether they do or don’t understand. In addition, the door is open for teens to ask for help if they want it.

### **Belief in personal magic**

Along with their self-centered beliefs, young adolescents develop a belief in a personal magic that will protect them from the bad things that happen to other people. Belief in this magic may make a girl think she can’t get pregnant or a boy think he won’t get a girl pregnant if they have sex.

Belief in this personal magic can make the teenage years difficult for both parents and teens. Parents see that their teens are behaving carelessly and irresponsibly. Teens, on the other hand, feel overprotected and want to be treated as adults.

Even experts in adolescent psychology admit they have no perfect solution to this problem. Many parents find it helpful to give teens greater responsibility in non-dangerous areas, such as selecting their own clothes or determining bedtime, while retaining control over potentially harmful situations.

Parents can help to smooth conflicts and also teach teens important critical thinking skills at this time. Discuss the consequences and/or rewards of certain behaviors. For example, ask your teen what might be the consequences of going to a party where alcohol is served. What are the advantages and disadvantages of smoking marijuana before school? What might be the outcome of driving friends around in the car after midnight?

Don’t forget to discuss and encourage teens to think about outcomes of acting in positive ways. For example, ask your teen why it’s important to treat other kids and teachers with respect, even if you don’t always agree with what they say or do. Ask, “What could you do if you’re with a group of kids and they start to bully or harass another person? What can you do if your boy (girl)friend is trying to talk you into having sex? What are the advantages for you in waiting until you’re older, or married? On your 28th birthday, why might you feel grateful you worked hard and got good grades in high school?”

Rather than saying “No,” parents can help teens learn to act responsibly by encouraging them to solve problems and think through the consequences of actions.

### **Questioning beliefs**

During adolescence, teens may question their religion, their parents’ political beliefs and other values that their parents hold. They may suddenly refuse to go to religious services with the family. This refusal may be accompanied by statements like “I don’t believe in that anymore.”

Teens may develop elaborate religious or political beliefs of their own. They may believe they have plans to solve world problems. Many parents have found it difficult to get children of this age to follow family values. It is often best for parents to simply state their beliefs and refuse to get into a debate. It is important to recognize and acknowledge teens' right to have different opinions or beliefs than other family members. Nevertheless, parents should emphasize there are some family rules teens must obey.

### **Growing awareness**

Experts believe egocentrism begins to diminish by the time a young person is around 15. The teen begins to recognize there is a difference between what he or she is interested in and the interests of others.

Teens begin growing aware that not everyone is looking at their appearance or behavior all the time. Some teens realize there are people who are interested in them as individuals. The belief in the power of personal magic gives way to an understanding that no one has special protection. Talking about their personal thoughts, feelings, ideas and listening to those of other teens helps adolescent thinking to mature.

As teens begin to think more like adults, they are better able to form adult relationships. They begin to think more realistically about their places in society. At about this time, teens often reestablish the warm relationship with their parents that might have become strained during the early teen years.

Parents must now be prepared to recognize that their teens think like adults. The parent-child relationship can never return to what it was before adolescence. The task becomes one of establishing the special relationship that can exist between two adults who also happen to be parent and child.

#### **Sources:**

Cooperative Extension publications by Judith A. Hooper, University of Wisconsin Extension, Betsy R. Schenck, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, Billie H. Frazier, University of Maryland Cooperative Extension.

### **UNH Cooperative Extension County Office Telephone Numbers**

<b>Belknap</b> (603) 527-5475	<b>Carroll</b> (603) 539-3331	<b>Cheshire</b> (603) 352-4550	<b>Coos</b> (603) 788-4961	<b>Grafton</b> (603) 787-6944
<b>Hillsborough</b> Milford (603) 673-2510 Goffstown (603) 621-1478	<b>Merrimack</b> (603) 225-5505 (603) 796-2151	<b>Rockingham</b> Brentwood, NH 03833 (603) 679-5616	<b>Strafford</b> (603) 749-4445	<b>Sullivan</b> (603) 863-9200

*Visit our website: [ceinfo.unh.edu](http://ceinfo.unh.edu)*

*UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veterans status.*

**Revised 4/02**