

Guiding Teens into Adulthood

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My husband and I have raised three children who have now finished college and are all employed. Each stage of their lives brought new challenges to us as parents. Infancy meant bottles, diapers and not getting enough sleep. As they reached school age it became homework, after-school practices, friends, and making sure *they* got enough sleep. As they evolved from students to adults our role as parents became more of a 'watch and wait' phase. Watch what they were doing (thank heavens for Facebook) and wait until they need some advice, money or just someone to talk to.

Every parent approaches the role of parenting differently. Much of what we do as parents is a replication of how we were raised. Some parents describe the teen years as full of conflict—a time of storm and stress. Their once compliant child rebels against Mom and Dad, wants more freedom, doesn't want to help out around the house, and makes choices that scare parents. "Why do they do that?" is a frequent question that parents ask each other.

Child development experts look at the issue differently. They describe the developmental tasks of the adolescent as children becoming young adults. How your child handles this transition can be affected by their temperament, surroundings, the relationship they have with others, their ability to think and reason and their knowledge and beliefs.

Researchers have determined that teens must accomplish four major tasks to develop successfully; establish an identity, establish independence, develop moral standards and prepare for a job or career.

Establishing an identity involves learning to accept their physical appearance, which changes greatly between the ages of 10 and 20. It can be one of the reasons why they spend so much time in front of the mirror trying out new hairstyles, facial expressions or putting on makeup. Teens tend to be emotional—and those that live with them have to deal with mood swings as a result. Teens are learning to separate from their family while still being a part of it. They may try new ideas, attitudes and values during this time, eventually developing a more stable identity, often based on their childhood experiences.

Teens need to establish their independence. Parents can help by giving their children roots and at the same time allowing them to have wings. Roots provide the security, wings the opportunity to explore the world outside the family unit. At this age, teens believe that they are invincible or immune to the laws of mortality so they drive too fast and make poor choices. Teens believe that "bad things only happen to other people, not me". As parents we want to protect our children. This protection can cause conflict. Ultimately to become independent, adolescents must begin to make decisions and accept the responsibility for their own actions. This responsibility helps teens to feel worthwhile, confident and competent.

A teen is developing moral standards. They start to understand the ideas of morality, democracy and honesty. As they learn about the values and attitudes of others, they begin to question the values of their parents. Parents can work with teens to help them develop individual standards of morality. As teens see the adults around them obey laws and show honesty and fairness they realize the need for the rules that help people live peacefully with one another.

Finally, the last developmental task of adolescence is to prepare for a job or career. Teens may start by baby-sitting or shoveling snow for neighbors. When they do a good job, they get rehired. Each job adds to their skills for getting better jobs and more money. Teens learn that being on time, working hard, and being responsible can be rewarded. They also discover what they like to do and may choose jobs based

on these interests. For example an animal lover may work for a local veterinarian and may chose to major in pre-vet studies in college. These decisions are part of learning to make goals for their future life.

All these developmental tasks rely on having support from parents or guardians as teens transition from childhood (where they depend on adults to make all their decisions) to adulthood (where the choices that they make impact themselves and their families).

Young adults have many “firsts” awaiting them: a first new car, getting that first full-time job, and buying that first home. Our role as parents is to look forward to these events, watch them happen and take pride in a job well done.