

MOVING ON TO HIGH SCHOOL

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

FACTSHEET FOR PARENTS

PARENTS' KEY ROLE

Parents often begin to feel that their role is diminishing as their children become teenagers. This is partly because young people appear to push parents away, and partly because parents become less confident about their role. However, parents have just as important a role during the teenage years as during earlier stages.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

Individual children differ hugely as to the amount of support and information they need at the time of puberty. Some will treat their physical development as a minor irritation, while others will be worried and anxious about what is happening to their bodies. Parents need to ensure that young people are prepared for what is going to happen well before such things as periods or wet dreams actually occur. Parents need to let their children know that they can ask questions about things that worry them. However, there are families where discussion of such things is difficult, and so for these young people it is important that parents find other ways of making information available, such as leaving useful books and leaflets around the house.

THE NEED FOR PRIVACY

One of the things that parents of young teenagers find especially difficult is the change from a talkative child to a silent adolescent. This often makes parents feel excluded, or that things are happening that the young person wants to prevent the adult knowing about. The real reason behind this change in behaviour is the need for privacy that develops around the time of puberty. Because of the emotional and physical changes that occur, most young people feel uncertain about themselves, and their altered body causes all sorts of confusing feelings – excitement, arousal, anxiety, moodiness and so on. All this means that young teenagers are likely to need a bit of emotional space before they are ready to share these confusing feelings with the adults around them. The need for privacy at this time is entirely normal. Parents should allow for this, and not feel resentful because they believe they are being excluded.

SAFE EXPLORATION

One of the most noticeable changes in the early adolescent years is the young person's move to greater independence. This may include a wide variety of activities, ranging from staying over with friends, visiting the local town, choosing

one's own clothes, travelling on one's own, going to parties and other social events, and beginning to sample alcohol and cigarettes. Such things may raise parents' anxieties, and can lead to conflicts over what is acceptable at different stages of development. However, parents do have to accept that behaviour will change, and that their response to this will affect the young person. If parents resist change, and try to hold the young person back, this will inevitably cause difficulties. On the other hand if the parent can assist the young person to develop independence within a safe context this will encourage healthy and positive growth.

BOYS AND GIRLS

It is around the beginning of the adolescent stage that the development of boys and girls begins to diverge most markedly. Puberty may be more problematic for girls, and clearly more support may be needed in relation to menstruation than, for example, a boy's development of facial hair or the first wet dream. In addition, the place of friendship begins to differ at this point. Broadly speaking, friends, for boys, are people with whom to share activities. Girls, on the other hand, tend to have much closer, emotional friendships, and to depend more heavily on their friends. This will also mean that friendship breakdown, or losing a best friend, will assume greater significance for girls than for boys. Other differences might include girls becoming more involved with the family, taking a larger role in domestic activities, and possibly being closer to parents.

Not all girls or boys will fit this description and one of the most important jobs a parent can do is to reassure their child.

ISSUES THAT CONCERN YOUNG TEENAGERS

Young teenagers, according to research into what they themselves say, tend to become concerned with a number of issues that they may find difficult to deal with. They include:

- pressure from their peers
- how to negotiate with other young people and learn to compromise
- all sorts of problems involving money
- their job prospects and generally, how their future may be affected by the choices they make
- legal issues involving consequences for breaking social rules and laws
- racism

It is vital for parents to keep lines of communication open with their children, and to listen and guide.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE SCHOOL

Contact with the school may become more difficult as children move from middle to high school. This may be due to do the size of the school and the greater distance between school and home. Nonetheless, there are ways that parents can remain involved.

They can make a point of asking their child about all aspects of school life. They can make a point of attending any meetings arranged at school, and try not to be put off by the formality of the setting. They can ask the school for any information they need, such as what the sex education syllabus is, and when the different topics are likely to be covered. Finally they can take a close interest in the pupil reports they receive from school and raise any related questions with school staff. As a general rule, the more the parents are involved with, and encouraging about, what is happening at school, the more motivated the young person will be.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY

Some children may have difficulties with:

- All of the work in school
- Reading, writing, number work or understanding information
- Expressing themselves or understanding what others are saying
- Making friends or relating to adults
- Behaving properly in school
- Organising themselves
- Some kind of sensory or physical needs which may affect them in school

Many children will have these kinds of difficulties at some time during their education. Schools and other organisations can help most children overcome them quickly and easily. But a few children will need extra help for some or all of their time in school. If you have concerns at any time you should arrange to talk with your child's form tutor.

MANAGING THE MOVE

Mobile phones can be very useful for keeping in contact and providing your child with the security of knowing he or she can always contact you in an emergency.

Parents can make a note of their child's tutor or year head's name, phone number, e-mail address and preferred times for contacting. In some schools there is an inclusion manager whose job it is to make sure that the specific needs of children with a wide range of disabilities and special needs are met. If this applies to your child, find out who that person is and get to know them as soon as possible. If there is not an inclusion manager, then make sure you find out who the school special needs coordinator is. This person is known as the SENCO.

Make sure your child has somewhere quiet to do homework uninterrupted, access to the Internet and the chance to relax with plenty of drinks and snacks (the healthier the better) after school. You may have internet access at home, but there are also alternatives. Often schools have library internet access after school or the local library or learning resource centre can provide access for free.

TALK TO OTHER ADULTS WHO ARE CLOSELY INVOLVED IN BRINGING UP CHILDREN

First, there will be new challenges for parents to deal with. Issues to do with discipline, values, acceptable behaviour, safety, health and so on will all come to the fore in the next year or so. It is essential that parents, carers, step-parents, grandparents or other important adults in a young person's life are able to discuss these issues with each other. Second, teenagers sometimes have the capacity to drive a wedge between parents or carers, especially when there are conflicts between adults. Parents need to be communicating well in order to prevent the young person being manipulative and causing even greater rifts than already exist. Lastly the adolescent years sometimes represent challenges for the adults as well. This may be a time when other pressures occur, when grandparents need more care, when parents themselves face problems to do with their health or their jobs, and thus communication between adults bringing up a young person assumes even greater importance.

GOOD DECISION-MAKING

Decision-making within the family will loom larger during adolescence. Decisions may be to do with learning to live together, such as changed eating habits, use of the bathroom, music played late at night, use of the television, and so on. Alternatively decisions may relate to the social life of the young person, and involve compromises about what time to come home at night, how to travel safely, or how to balance homework with leisure activities. In all these cases, and in many more besides, the young person will be learning from the parents about how to make decisions, and how differing needs and values can be reconciled. It is important for parents to show a willingness to compromise, and to respect the point of view of the young person. In families where this does not happen there is likely to be a greater degree of conflict, and less happy relationships between parent and teenager.

FATHERS, STEP-FATHERS AND GRANDFATHERS ARE IMPORTANT

All research shows that fathers in Britain have much less interaction with their children than mothers. At the point when the teenage years are beginning it is especially important that fathers, step-fathers, grandfathers or other men who are carers take an active part in parenting tasks. Young people need fathers, not only as "walking wallets" (as one father described his role) but, much more significantly, as partners with the mother in dealing with the many challenges that we have outlined above. Fathers are particularly important in decision-making, setting boundaries, and representing firm but not excessive discipline. They also act as a

role model in money management, the avoidance of risky behaviour, motivation at work, and so on. The role of fathers is equally central when mothers and fathers are living apart. Teenagers need fathers.

PRIORITIES

There are bound to be areas of disagreement between parents and teenagers, and these may well increase as the young person grows older. It is often valuable for parents to think through what is most important for them, so that they can decide where to put their foot down, and where to accept that they cannot have it all their own way. As an example, parents may decide that issues to do with health are vital, and in those areas their authority must be respected, while an untidy bedroom may be something that one has to accept as the price of a good relationship. Outlining priorities like this is particularly relevant when things are not going well for parents of young teenagers. It may feel as if there are battles on all fronts: over schoolwork, untidiness, clothing, bedtimes, unsuitable friends, bad language, and many other things. When such a situation arises, it is essential for parents to stand back and identify their priorities. Once this is done, it is essential to stick to these decisions. Some things will be important, others less so. The parent should agree the priorities with their partner, and make sure that the young person knows what these priorities are.