

Developmental Tasks for 12 - 18 Year Olds

During these vital formative years your adolescent child will go through many obvious physical changes. Less obvious are the significant cognitive, emotional and social changes they are experiencing. During this time adolescents are also developing their sense of identity and values and assessing their aspirations and options for the future. Again we remind you that all children are unique and develop at their own pace, so please bear this in mind as you read our article, remembering that comparisons to others, even siblings, is unhelpful.

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson says the adolescent child is asking the existential questions "Who am I? and What can I be?" Identity vs Confusion.

For the purposes of this article we will not focus on the obvious physical changes, but rather on the cognitive, emotional, and social changes which are occurring, except to say that the physical changes will impact your child's view of themselves. They will wonder if how they look now is "OK" or "acceptable" to their peers. Many will want to look the same as their peers. They will begin to worry about wearing the right clothes and hair do. Perhaps they will try to hide the changes as they occur. Most will be very vulnerable to criticism and vulnerable to the wrong kind of role modelling. (This is a particularly important time for parents to be a good role model with regard to acceptance of self)

There is much going on in the adolescent brain during this period. Your adolescent is moving from the concrete thinking of the primary school child to more complex abstract thinking. They are developing skills such as planning, prioritising, organising thoughts, suppressing impulses, problem solving and weighing consequences. These skills, still developing, are influencing their decision making processes.

Psychologically they are developing autonomy and independent identity. This will lead to questioning and challenging of parents and of rules, as your adolescent will seek to do things differently from their family. They will discover and create new boundaries. (Suddenly you are the worst parent for going into their room. It may also become very messy, as they choose to keep it "their" way, not "yours".) They may experience some "role confusion" (Erikson) i.e. mixed ideas about how they will fit into society. As a result they may experiment with a variety of behaviours and activities. Maybe they will want to get a job, or join a club or religious or political group (or reject those espoused by their parents).

With the change in thinking, comes a range of new emotions they may not have experienced in the same way before. Combined with the struggle to form identity, and with physical and hormonal fluctuations in the mix, your child may become moody (who'd blame them), irritable and frustrated. These changes can also see the young person developing a stronger sense of empathy, beginning to understand more about the experiences of others (although still working out how their own behaviours impact on others)

Socially, sadly, they might not want to know you. Adolescents begin to rely much more strongly on their peers for acceptance, guidance and belonging, and as they get older, they may begin to seek intimate relationships. Don't despair. They really do value you and need your ongoing love and support, and they need to see it and hear it, (just not so in front of their friends.) In brief, the main developmental tasks that are occurring include:

- The development of identity
- The establishment of sexual identity
- Independence from parents and other adults
- Negotiation of peer and intimate relationships

- Development of body image
- Formulation of their own moral/value system
- Acquisition of skills for future financial independence
- How you can best support your 12 -18 year old:
- Keep communication channels open. Be available, but not intrusive or pushy. Do more listening than talking.
- Pick your battles. Don't worry about the bedroom floor-robe, or the holes in the jeans.
- Be firm and consistent about limits, especially when safety is involved. This is essential, but involve your adolescent in negotiating the rules.
- Recognise that young people need to do things differently from their parents in order to become individuals in their own right.
- Accept that it is normal for teenagers to question everything their parents say and do. Don't take it personally. Stay true to yourself and your own values, but also be open to learning.
- Try to help your teenager find the balance between self-responsibility and accessing your support. (Encourage them in their own decision making, and in being responsible, but let them know you're there.)
- Don't panic when things go wrong. Mistakes happen. Use them to learn and to keep moving forward.
- Try to avoid always being right. Causing your teenager to lose face can cause feelings of resentment, inadequacy and bitterness. Power struggles are to be expected. Find appropriate times to capitulate and accept their view.

If you cruise through these years with a happy, easy teenager, lucky you. Enjoy. If this isn't the case for you, then you are in the majority. We have deliberately not presented best or worse case scenarios, because reality/normality can fall anywhere on the spectrum. But remember that although we celebrate heartily when our children turn 18, this is just the very beginnings of young adulthood. They still need you, your love, your guidance and your support as they become competent and productive adults. Don't underestimate the powerful role you play.

Our final piece of advice has been the same for every age group. Play with your children. Talk with them. Enjoy them. Love them. Reassure them of your love (they might pretend they don't want to hear it, but were pretty sure it's very important to them). And know that they love you (although they may seem very reluctant to admit it). If you are concerned about how your adolescent is acting/reacting or managing in general, talk to their teachers, and/or to your GP.

As always we are happy to receive your calls and emails if you think we can help in any way.

Andrea Maver and Gai Bath
SMC Counsellors

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

References and further reading

<http://www.headspace.org.au/parents-and-carers/find-information/adolescent-development>

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002003.htm>

<http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au/contact.html>

http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families

http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Adolence/?page=2