

What are the non-school-related issues that my child may face?



Adolescence is often described as a time of transition from childhood to adulthood. This time in an adolescent's life is typically marked with increased confusion as he/she begins to change physically, mentally, and socially. Highlighted below are some key factors that may prove challenging for your child during this stage of development, plus tips on how you can help him/her handle these issues:

Separation

Although your child is in active pursuit of independence during this stage of development, it is very important to remember that adolescents still need guidance and support. Additionally, your child may start to send you mixed messages when communicating, and at one moment may want to be around the house or near you, but in the next instant, your adolescent may have a completely different interest.

- **What to do.** Allow your child the time and space to be independent during this difficult time; however, continue to stay involved in your adolescent's life. Spend quality time with your child. Spending time and communicating with your child about whatever is going on in his/her life will help you to better understand this new, developing individual, and it will also show him/her how supportive you are.

Exploration

Your child is more curious than ever and may attempt riskier behaviors and activities. He/She may develop new hobbies or habits that may be positive, such as dancing or participating in sports, and some that may be negative or socially unacceptable, like drinking alcohol or hanging out with the wrong crowd.

- **What to do.** Watch your child's activities in and out of school. Enroll him/her in extracurricular courses and/or activities, and be sure to expose the child to a variety of role models. Be honest when speaking with your child about news and current events.

In addition, your child may go through a rebellious stage. Talk with your child and help him/her to see the consequences of the choices he/she makes. Talk with your child about how his/her choices will affect and perhaps limit future opportunities. Regularly express your support and love for your child. Make sure that he/she knows that you will always be there to support him/her no matter what.

Lack of Focus

During adolescence your child may forget things, display a lack of motivation, and be unable to concentrate on simple tasks and events. He/She may even have trouble completing homework or projects on time.

- **What to do.** Begin to teach your child time-management and goal-setting techniques. Buy a planner or calendar and show him/her how to use it. Have your child write down a plan and keep it in a place where he/she can see it, check off completed tasks, and monitor progress. Remind him/her of any goals, priorities, and assigned tasks as needed.

Violence

Children today are growing up in a violent society. They witness violent acts everyday, whether it is on television, in school or in their neighborhood. Children may not feel safe in this society, and this feeling may interfere with how well they do in school.

- **What to do.** Keep an eye on your child's activities. Studies show that children are twice as likely to be victims of crime during after-school hours (from 3-6 p.m.); therefore, engaging your child in after-school activities and programs may decrease his/her likelihood of becoming a victim or witness to a crime. Talk with your child and educate him/her about current events. Give your child the knowledge and techniques to protect him/herself. Talk to your adolescent about events at school and in the neighborhood. Be sure to regularly let your child know that you are there for him/her to talk to and that he/she should feel comfortable telling you what is going on in their lives.

Peer Pressure

During the adolescent stage, children care about what their friends think and like and are likely to change their likes, dislikes, and attitudes to match that of their friends. Peer pressure can be both positive and negative. Positive peer pressure may involve participating in academic programs, volunteering in the community, or engaging in recreational activities. Examples of negative peer pressure might include drug or alcohol use or participation in criminal activities.

- **What to do.** Talk to your child about the potential consequences of negative peer pressure. Encourage your child to be a leader and to think independently.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a major social issue in the lives of adolescents. Self-esteem is fragile and can be gained or crushed in a moment's notice. Your child may begin to be extremely critical about the way he/she looks and extremely sensitive about what people say to or about him/her.

- **What to do.** Frequently compliment your child and help him/her identify positive qualities about him/herself. Emphasize inner and outer beauty. Help him/her to understand the realities of media images, and expose him/her to a variety of role models with varying looks and styles.

Gangs

Gangs exist in every community. Middle school students represent the fastest-growing population involved in gangs or gang activities. Not only are children more susceptible to being influenced or recruited by gangs, they may also fear being the victim of gang activity and as a result, fear going to school or going outside to play.

- **What to do.** Learn about gangs and gang activities within your community and city. Discuss the consequences of getting involved with gangs and gang members with your child. Monitor your adolescent's activity, and enroll him/her in positive academic and social after-school activities and programs. Most importantly, be conscious of warning signs that your child may be involved in or a victim of gang activity.

Gang involvement: Take note of any gang tattoos, memorabilia, hand signs, writings, language, publications, or attire that your child may display or have in his/her possession. Additional warning signs include an involvement in delinquent or criminal activities, the use of drugs and alcohol, and/or getting into trouble at school or with law enforcement.

Victim of gang activity: Take note of any unexplained bruises or markings on your child. In addition, be aware of sudden mood changes, lack of desire to engage in social activities, and paranoia.

For more information on gang involvement and prevention, consult your local Police or Gang Task Force or visit the National Youth Gang Center website:

<http://www.iir.com/nygc/>

Drugs and Alcohol

Exploration with drugs and alcohol represents a major area of concern for parents of adolescents. Children experiment with drugs and alcohol for a variety of reasons, including pressures from friends, as an attempt to cope with school and life problems, and/or as a false means to gain self-esteem or an improved self-image.

- **What to do.** Educate your child about the effects of drug and alcohol use and abuse. Be aware of the following drug or alcohol use warning signs such as: smell of nicotine or alcohol on your child's breath or clothes, fatigue, mood swings, poor academic performance, depression, lack of motivation about or interest in previously enjoyed activities, and irresponsible or unexplainable behavior.

To learn more about alcohol and drugs, both you and your child may want to consider visiting this website:

<http://www.freevibe.com>

Conflicts

During this period, your child may be involved in more fights at home and at school. Your child may begin to question and challenge authority and rules.

- **What to do.** Your child is trying to gain independence; therefore, it may be time to re-think any household rules that have been set. Discuss what will happen if rules are broken.

Nutrition

Studies have shown that a lack of a sufficient amount of food or healthy foods can affect your child mentally, physically, academically, and socially. If a problem exists, your child may have trouble concentrating, feel chronically sick, and/or experience weight loss, weight gain, migraine headaches, or mood swings.

- **What to do.** Educate your child about making proper food choices. Make sure that you have plenty of healthy snacks to eat at home. Teach your child how to prepare healthy meals. Talk to him/her daily about what he/she ate and drank and what additional nutrients may be needed. You may want to consider giving your child a multivitamin daily. In addition, ensure that your child drinks plenty of water.

Puberty

Puberty can be a difficult time for your child. In addition to hormonal changes, your child may experience mood swings, acne, weight gain or loss, and identity issues. Girls will also start their menstrual cycle.

- **What to do.** Educate your child about the changes occurring in his/her body. Help him/her to expect, understand, and prepare for these changes. Explain to your child that what he/she is experiencing is a natural part of growing up. Encourage your child to confide in you and ask questions as needed.