Growing Up Too Fast

While today's moms and dads are trying everything from tummy tucks to the newest skin creams to revive that youthful glow, their kids are piling on makeup, sliding into tight clothes, experimenting with drugs and hanging out with older teens – all to feel older.

The youthful desire to appear more mature has been going on for years. Our parents dealt with long hair on boys, miniskirts on girls and the relentless thump of music cranked to deafening decibels. Today's parents fight under dressed "singers," adult-themed "cartoons," the "athletes" of the WWF and others who, like it or not, are taking their place as role models for our young. So what's a parent to do? Well, put down the Oil of Olay and let's look at why our children are growing up too fast and what we can do to reclaim our youth.

Stuck in the Middle

Every child, at one time or another, feels he is ready to make some choices on his own. According to Barbara Jessing, director of family service of Greater Omaha in Omaha, Neb., this desire for independence has both physical and emotional roots. "The age of puberty has inched downward in recent years with some girls experiencing physical changes as early as 9 or 10 years of age," she says. "These changes can be confusing to a youth who is beginning to look like an adult on the outside, but still feels very much like a child on the inside."

Throughout history, a girl was considered a woman when she began to experience menstruation, but today we know that growth comes in spurts with the pace of development going up and down like a seesaw.

Going through typical development from child – teenager – to adult, you'll see a child begging to wear makeup and going to concerts one minute, then playing with Barbies or G.I. Joes the next... This is classic adolescent behavior – the feeling of being
stuck between childhood and adulthood – and it affects both boys and girls in varying degrees. It is the parent’s role to provide guidelines and boundaries in which the child can make individual, but safe decisions.

The Dangers of Growing up Too Fast

With change comes challenges, so some problems are going to pop up surrounding “growing up.” There are some very real dangers associated with a child’s desire to test the waters of adulthood.

A 12-year-old who looks, dresses and acts like a 15- or 16-year-old tends to draw the attention of 18- to 20-year-olds who very often have adult activities in mind. These activities are acceptable between consenting adults, but they are not OK for children. Children often look like and think they can handle a compromising situation, but in most cases, they can't. A parent’s role is to be there in the background, having set up basic rules of behavior, ready to pick up the pieces if necessary or to be the hero or the “evil” parent; depending on the situation. Thanks to new technology, we now know that our children’s brains are still developing well into their late teens and early twenties. The frontal cortex (the part of the brain in charge of impulse control and decision making) is still developing in our children’s teenage years. What does that mean? It means we need to help our kids make the correct, safe decision that they might not make on their own. Now, are our children going to all of a sudden say “oh, mom and dad are so right and I should not go to that party?” No way! So it is up to us to set the boundaries and rules so that they get practice making the safe decisions.

A child can find himself in an unsafe environment, become exposed to chemicals that can alter his consciousness or fall prey to sexual predators. Experiences like these can rob a youth of his childhood and tear down his self-esteem.
What Parents Can Do

As in most child-rearing issues, the parents' response is vital. Parents need to rein in their child's inappropriate impulses and help the child get through the potential dangerous results of an impulsive decision. Acknowledge the changes your child is experiencing, but gently inform him that with growth and maturity comes more serious issues, choices and responsibilities and it is your job as a parent to make sure they are safe.

Do not to fall into the trap of being fooled by your child's grown-up appearance and actions. Some parents unintentionally take a "hands off" approach when they should be keeping a closer eye on what their child is doing and who they are doing it with. Many times your child is testing you - wondering, 'How far can I go before you reject me?' It is the parent's job to puzzle it out by talking with the child. Ask questions, 'How are you feeling? What is happening that makes you feel old enough to accept more responsibility?' Work through it together. Don't be afraid to say 'No,' but don't be afraid to give in sometimes, too." Remember, you are the parent not your child's best friend! A parent who is too permissive gives the message "I don't care enough about you to make sure you are safe" and can sometimes do more harm than if you were a little too strict.

Deciding when the time is right for adult fashions, hairstyles, makeup and dating depends on the family and the individual child. Look at the child's maturity level and their comfort level (and your own) and go from there. Use your own experience as a guide, if it's within your bounds of decency and your family values, let it go. This is a normal part of growing up. Biting our tongues is one of the best things a parent can do. Ask your self "how important is it?" Remember bell-bottoms and hot pants? Let them test the waters and enjoy watching their sense of self evolve – even if it involves more hair gel than you have used in your entire life. But setting limits and boundaries that say "I care about where you go and who you are with" sends a lasting
message of love that instant gratification or always getting their way can never convey.

Karen Headlee

kheadlee@eegov.com