

## Adolescence: The Four Questions<sup>1</sup>

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Adolescence is filled with intellectual and emotional changes in addition to the major biological and physical changes presented in Part I of this series. It is a time of discovery of self and one's relationship to the world around himself or herself.

This bulletin, the second of a three-part series, provides information about how to interact with your adolescent to enhance his or her positive development.

### Major Questions Facing Adolescents

Abstract thinking ability takes place during adolescence. In early adolescence thinking is still concrete. By the end of this period, individuals are able to fully comprehend abstract concepts. They think of good arguments for their positions. As they begin to think abstractly, adolescents are more likely to question things that were unquestionable before. For example, an adolescent who has been attending religious services may begin questioning religious beliefs. Challenging the status quo is a normal part of adolescence even though it may appear rebellious.

For positive development, parents and adults who work with adolescents should allow them some freedom to explore their beliefs. Their questioning nature makes parenting and working with them a challenge. Keep a balance between your support and love and the boundaries and limits that you set with them.

Experimenting with risk behaviors is also a normal part of adolescence. Some of it is to be expected. However, experimentation can lead to habit-forming "risk behaviors" if not limited. Examples of risk behaviors are: alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, and early unprotected sex.

Parents and adults who work with youth should monitor youth activities, but not over react when the adolescent is caught experimenting. Parental monitoring means that parents always ask their adolescent the "W" questions:

- Where are you going?
- With whom are you going?

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- **What are you doing?**
- and **When will you be home?**

Start monitoring early. It is easier to establish the habit in childhood and continue through adolescence than to start monitoring when the child becomes an adolescent. Parents should also answer these questions when they go out. This shows caring rather than controlling to your adolescent.

What if you catch your adolescent experimenting in a risk behavior, like drinking? Try waiting a few hours or a day to discuss the situation. This will usually give you enough time to calm down and collect your thoughts. Then you can give logical reasons why they should not participate in the risk behavior. Also, they may be uncomfortable or embarrassed about what occurred and a day gives them time to reflect. Keep the consequence unpleasant but not extreme. Remember, to reward them when they do good things.

There are four basic abstract questions that adolescents begin to ask themselves:

- Who am I (pertaining to his or her sexuality and social roles)?
- Am I normal (do I fit in with a certain crowd)?
- Am I competent (am I good at something that is valued by peers and parents)?
- Am I lovable and loving (can someone besides mom and dad love me)?

For positive development, it is important to give adolescents chances to work on their own answers to these questions. As parents and adults, we need to provide safe environments where the adolescent feels free to ask such difficult questions.

- **Who am I?** Only through exploring his or her world can the adolescent begin to come up with their own answers to these questions.
- **Am I normal?** In order to feel normal about who they are, adolescents sometimes need to be more like their peers than their parents. If you are a parent, do not be too worried about it. According to 30 years of research, adolescents generally choose peers whose values are similar

to their parents. The research also shows the importance of parental monitoring in guiding adolescent peer relations. Remember to ask the "W" questions of parental monitoring.

- **Am I competent?** Parents and adults who work with adolescents need to encourage adolescents to test their interests. Help them find at least one skill that they are good at and can "master." Move from being an authority figure to being a facilitator. Facilitators:

- Assist adolescents with their challenges and problems but do not solve them.
- Ask questions, instead of telling. Use "could" questions like, "What are some things you could do?"
- Guide, but do not direct.
- Present only real choices. For example, offer ideas about what other people have tried.

- **Am I lovable and loving?** Like any human being, adolescents need to know that they are loved by parents and other adults. Adolescents develop best when they have a supportive family and community life with:

- warmth and mutual respect;
- serious and lasting interest of their parents and other adults;
- parental and adult attention to their changes including cognitive, emotional, social, and physical changes;
- clear standards regarding discipline and close supervision;
- communication of high expectations for achievement and ethical behavior; and
- democratic and helpful ways of dealing with conflict.

Although these questions come up in adolescence, they usually are not completely answered in adolescence. These questions are often

asked again as an adult, though perhaps not so intensely as during adolescence.

## Conclusion

Adolescence marks the onset of complex thinking that includes in-depth questioning. Parents and adults need to expect searching and uncertainty when interacting with adolescents. Adolescents are taking steps toward independence; but, they are not independent.

Parents and adults need to provide factual information and opportunities to enable adolescents to explore their feelings and their world. For example, parents and adults may want to provide opportunities for adolescents to be involved in community service somewhere outside their normal settings, such as going across town or going to another state.

Parents and adults can be good resources for adolescents who are searching to find their destiny. Opportunities to explore and interact with parents and adults are important to the positive development of adolescents. Indeed, through example and guidance, parents and adults can have a positive impact on the lives of adolescents.

## Resources

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