Growth and Development, Ages 13 to 17—What You Need to Know

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. The following developmental guidelines apply to most young people in this age group. However, each adolescent is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other teens the same age. When concerns arise about a specific teen's development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other adolescent development professional.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The sudden and rapid physical changes that adolescents experience typically lend this period of development to be one of self-consciousness, sensitivity and concern over one's own body changes, and excruciating comparisons between oneself and peers.

During the teen years, adolescents experience changes in their physical development at a rate of speed unparalleled since infancy. Physical development includes:

- Rapid gains in height and weight. During a one-year growth spurt, boys and girls can gain an average of 4.1 inches and 3.5 inches in height respectively. This spurt typically occurs two years earlier for girls than for boys. Weight gain results from increased muscle development in boys and body fat in girls.

During this early stage of adolescence there is a sharp increase in physical growth. Coming off the childhood spurts of 10 yrs for girls and 10 ½ yrs for boys, changes occur in early adolescence at around age 11. Girls become taller and heavier. Their pubertal growth spurt happens about two years earlier than boys. At around age 14, however, the boy’s growth spurt begins again and they pass the girls, as the girls are almost finished growing. Body changes occur during puberty that reverse some of the basic growth trends of childhood. For example, the hands, legs, and feet accelerate and then the torso, resulting in the adolescent height gain (Wheeler, 1991). This explains why adolescents often seem out of proportion for a while. They are awkward and gangly with long legs, and feet and hands that don't seem to fit the rest of their body. Then the body fills out. This explains the need for clothes that change sizes with the filling out of the frame (Berk, 2000).

Boys tend to end up larger than girls. This is a result of two extra years of preadolescent growth. Their legs are longer in relation to their body and they have broader shoulders in relation to their hips. Meanwhile, girls end up with hips that are broader in relation to their shoulders and waist. This is a result of the sex hormones acting on skeletal growth. Gains in large muscle development have leveled off by age 14 for girls. But, boys continue to experience a dramatic spurt in strength, speed, and endurance.
Because physical changes may not occur in a smooth, regular schedule, adolescents may go through stages of awkwardness, both in terms of appearance and physical mobility and coordination.

Most teens ages 13 to 17 will:

- Complete puberty and the physical transition from childhood to adulthood
- Reach nearly their adult height, especially females [Males continue to grow taller into their early twenties.]
- Teens frequently sleep longer. Research suggests that teens actually need more sleep to allow their bodies to conduct the internal work required for such rapid growth. On average, teens need about 9 1/2 hours of sleep a night.

**COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

- Attain cognitive maturity—the ability to make decisions based on knowledge of options and their consequences
- Continue to be influenced by peers [The power of peer pressure lessens after early adolescence.]
- Build skills to become self-sufficient
- Respond to media messages but develop increasing ability to analyze those messages
- Develop increasingly mature relationships with friends and family
- Seek increased power over their own lives
- Learn to drive, increasing their independence

**Movement Towards Independence**

- Struggle with sense of identity
- Feeling awkward or strange about one's self and one's body
- Focus on self, alternating between high expectations and poor self-concept
- Interests and clothing style influenced by peer group
- Moodiness
- Improved ability to use speech to express one's self
- Realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their faults
- Less overt affection shown to parents, with occasional rudeness
- Complaints that parents interfere with independence
- Tendency to return to childish behavior, particularly when stressed

**Future Interests and Cognitive Changes**

- Mostly interested in present, limited thoughts of future
- Intellectual interests expand and gain in importance
- Greater ability to do work (physical, mental, emotional)
EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Have the capacity to develop long-lasting, mutual, and healthy relationships, if they have the foundations for this development—trust, positive past experiences, and an understanding of love
- Understand their own feelings and have the ability to analyze why they feel a certain way
- Begin to place less value on appearance and more on personality
- Teens tend to become very cause-oriented. Their activism is related to the ability to think about abstract concepts. After reading about cruelty to animals a teen may become a vegetarian and a member of "People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals" (P.E.T.A.). Another teen may become active in "Green Peace" or "Save the Whales" campaigns.
- Teens tend to exhibit a "justice" orientation. They are quick to point out inconsistencies between adults' words and their actions. They have difficulty seeing shades of gray. They see little room for error.

Morals, Values, and Self-Direction

- Rule and limit testing
- Capacity for abstract thought
- Development of ideals and selection of role models
- More consistent evidence of conscience
- Experimentation with sex and drugs (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana)

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

- Understand that they are sexual and understand the options and consequences of sexual expression
- Recognize the components of healthy and unhealthy relationships (can recognize, but not be able to choose healthy relationships – romantic and friendship)
- Recognize the role media play in propagating views about sex
- Have the mental capacity to learn about intimate, loving, long-term relationships
- Display shyness, blushing, and modesty
- Girls develop physically sooner than boys
- Increased interest in the opposite sex
- Concerns regarding physical and sexual attractiveness to others
- Frequently changing relationships
- Worries about being normal

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