

DEVELOPMENTAL NORMS IN ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a stage in life when a child becomes an independent and self-sufficient adult. Definitions vary; however, it is generally considered to span roughly from 10 to 19 years of age. This period can be challenging for teenagers, their families, and teachers. It is a time when hormonal changes occur, which are often perceived as the cause of adolescent moodiness and unpredictable behaviour. Nonetheless, it is also a unique period of opportunity and challenge for positive development.

At times, you might notice that your teenager's behaviour appears very mature and adult-like, while at other times it may seem rather immature or illogical. From a biological point of view, we know that the brain continues to grow and develop until early adulthood. Brain development is specific to age, and different regions of the brain mature at different rates. While the more impulsive and emotional part of the brain (the limbic system) accelerates in its development, the part of the brain that allows us to think about the future, understand consequences, and generally make better decisions (the prefrontal cortex) develops much more slowly. Typically, around the age of 25, the brain completes the adolescent phase and its long process of structural development.

This developmental phase is characterized by various factors such as heightened emotions, self-consciousness, self-questioning, inner conflicts, stress, uncertainty, and disorientation, which can threaten the stability of the self and identity. That being said, teenagers are no longer children; therefore, greater demands, tasks, and responsibilities are placed upon them. In addition to these processes, adolescents experience first loves or rejections, a desire to belong, the impact of parental conflicts, or increased pressure to perform. All of this can lead to increased stress, which is often difficult to manage, especially given the hormonal changes that are taking place.

It is important to emphasize that everyone goes through similar developmental changes before reaching adulthood. Such adolescent traits can have many evolutionary advantages. For example, when something negative happens, the emotions an individual experiences can help them avoid similar situations in the future. Emotions also help us connect with other people.



IT IS PERFECTLY NORMAL THAT...

- ...teens respond with curiosity or anxiety to changes in their bodies. Hormonal changes cause growth spurts and the development of secondary sexual characteristics. Girls, in particular, are more likely to experience increasingly negative perceptions of their bodies. Adolescents may also feel confused about their gender and sexual identity during this time.

Did you know...? Adolescents develop not only physically, but also intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

- ...the importance and intensity of peer culture increases. Through peer relationships, adolescents learn about group conformity and social norms. As children grow up, relationships have a significant impact on shaping their sense of self and identity. They need to figure out who they are and where they "fit." Peer groups often determine whether an adolescent feels a sense of belonging.

Did you know...? Although peer influence increases during adolescence, parents and teachers remain strong socializing agents.

- ...romantic relationships gain importance. During this period, young people spend a considerable amount of time in mixed-gender groups. Like relationships with family or friends, romantic relationships can help adolescents better understand who they are.

Did you know...? It is necessary for adolescents to practice intimacy outside their immediate family as they learn how to form and maintain healthy relationships.

- ...teens need more independence and privacy. As teens grow up, they want to be trusted to do more than they were allowed to when they were younger. They also want to be perceived as mature, responsible, and independent. They learn to establish a balance between dependence and independence within social relationships. Increasing independence and risk-taking drive them out of the parental nest and into the wider world, which is important for their individual growth. Although they seek greater independence from their parents, they still aim to maintain a positive relationship with them.

Did you know...? Giving teens space and privacy can significantly support their development. Not only do they feel trusted, but they also feel capable and confident.

- ...compared to adults, adolescents show greater activation of the brain's reward centres when learning new tasks. This heightened activation helps them learn from their environment in a more adaptive and efficient way. These changes may increase vulnerability to negative risk-taking behaviours, such as experimenting with drugs, getting into fights, or engaging in unsafe activities. However, there are also positive risks, such as trying out for a sports team, enrolling in a challenging course, or initiating a new friendship.

Did you know...? In adolescence, we encounter hormonal fluctuations, risk-taking behaviour, moodiness, impulsivity, and haste, but also sensitivity, idealism, exuberance, passion, creativity, and care for others. These are qualities that can significantly and positively contribute to improving society

The brain develops unevenly, and adolescents today are exposed to a wide range of stressors. Approximately one in seven children experiences mental health problems. It is essential for families to support children during this developmental stage, to understand adolescents' need for greater autonomy, and to foster positive relationships with them. Parents and teachers are among the key individuals who can recognize mental health difficulties in children.

