



headspace

National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Adolescence is an exciting and transformative stage of life. During the ages of 12 to 25 young people experience a burst of rapid change as they work through different parts of 'who they are'.

Changes for young people during adolescence can include:

- changes in their physical development
- changes in their thinking
- changes in their emotions
- building their own identity
- risk taking and pushing boundaries
- independence and new connections.

Adolescence is essentially a stage of life where the young person is trying out new ways of feeling, thinking and behaving. This critical stage can be confusing and challenging for some young people. It can also be challenging for the adults who support them.

Parenting the adolescent you now see before you will be different to how you parented them as a young child. Understanding this stage of life can offer insight on how to adapt, parent effectively and connect with your changing young person.

Physical development

The physical changes in adolescence are rapid and dramatic, which can be both exciting and overwhelming. The onset of puberty involves the release of hormones that affect brain development, growth, sexual development, arousal and mood.

Young people will be acutely aware of the physical changes to their bodies. It is normal for young people to be observing the changes, assessing their attractiveness and comparing themselves to others. This can include:

- Feeling pleased about some of the changes such as growth in height, change of shape and building of muscle or maturing of voice.
- Being concerned that the changes are not happening at the same rate as their peers.
- Noticing unwanted changes such as acne or weight gain that can cause a young person to feel self-conscious or unhappy.

Self-image can have a big impact on young people. Encourage self-acceptance and a healthy body image by promoting and modelling physical exercise and healthy eating.

Thinking

Young people move from simplified thinking in childhood to more complex thinking in adolescence. They build capacity to grapple with social issues, ethics, and different perspectives. They are also better equipped to engage in conversations about beliefs, meaning and purpose.

It is important to recognise that the part of the brain that is related to decision-making is still developing. This explains why young people's behaviour can sometimes seem impulsive or even reckless as the brain's capacity to think things through before acting on an impulse is still 'under construction'.

Emotional intensity

In adolescence, emotions (including sadness and anger) are more intense than in other stages of life. Seeing your young person struggling with strong emotions can be hard and at times tricky for a parent. Managing your own emotions is important so that you can be a source of support for your young person. Acknowledging their feelings is a simple and effective way of supporting them and gives them more confidence about managing their own feelings.



Building identity

Young people in adolescence are working out who they want to be, who they identify with and what they believe and value. They are likely to explore different attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as a vital part of their growth. As they test these out, it might be hard for you if your young person makes choices that are different to your value system.

It's helpful to remember that this exploration is a really important part of becoming an adult. Understanding this can help parents become less anxious without rushing in to try to change the course of their young person's life.

Risk taking

Testing limits and taking risks goes with the territory of adolescence. Social change and innovation often emerge from young people's drive and fearlessness to push the boundaries and explore new ideas and possibilities.

The same willingness to take risks can sometimes result in harm. Accepting that pushing boundaries is essential in adolescence can help with managing your worry about potential dangers. You cannot control the outcomes but you do have a role in minimising risks.

Provide information about [alcohol and other drug use](#), sexual activity and physical risk-taking. Encourage your young person to always reach out to you or a trusted adult if they are in danger or in a serious situation requiring immediate action, safety or support.

Independence and connection

Human beings are 'hard wired for connection'. It is a myth that young people pursuing independence no longer need their parents. In adolescence, it's normal for young people to test limits and push against parents. However, even when there is high conflict, there is still deep attachment to family.

Your relationship is likely to change as young people choose to spend their time alone or with friends. It's helpful to view the relationship with your young person as one of inter-dependence rather than a separation that leaves parents without a role.

Giving your young person space but also 'being there' for them is a balancing act. The challenge is to encourage your young person to make their own choices and try new things (even if that means making mistakes) while remaining supportive, connected, and available for when they need you.

It can sometimes be a challenge to 'hold your nerve' as a parent. It is helpful to trust that this intense period of change in adolescence is just a developmental process for young people becoming adults.

For more information & resources for family and friends, visit [eheadspace online](#) or call 1800 650 890, or join in a [group chat](#) with other parents.