

What's Typical for Adolescents and What's Cause for Concern?

Typical

1. Increased moodiness
2. Increased self-consciousness, of feeling "on stage," increased focus on body image
3. Increased dawdling
4. Increased parent-adolescent conflict
5. Experimentation with drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes
6. Increased sense of invulnerability (may lead to increased sensation seeking or risk taking)
7. Stressful transitions to middle and high school
8. Increased argumentativeness, idealism, and criticism; being opinionated

Not Typical: Cause for Concern

- Intense, painful, long-lasting moods; risky mood-dependent behavior, major depression, or panic attacks; self-injury or suicidal thinking
- Social phobia or withdrawal; perfectionism and unrealistic standards; bingeing, purging, or restricted eating; obsessive about or neglectful of hygiene
- Multiple distractions to point of not being able to complete homework or projects, lack of focus that interferes with daily work or tasks, regularly late for appointments
- Verbal or physical aggression, running away
- Substance abuse, selling drugs, substance-using peer group
- Multiple accidents; encounters with firearms; excessive risk taking (e.g., subway surfing, driving drunk or texting while driving), getting arrested
- School refusal; bullying or being bullied; lack of connection to school or peers; school truancy, failure, or dropout
- Rebellious questioning of social rules and conventions; causing trouble with family members, teachers, or others who attempt to assert authority over the adolescent

(continued)

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Typical

9. Increased sexual maturation; sexual interest or experimentation
10. Becoming stressed by everyday decision making
11. Increased desire for privacy
12. Strong interest in technology; social media
13. Messy room
14. Sleep cycle shifts later (urge to be a "night owl" and to sleep late on weekends)

Not Typical: Cause for Concern

- Sexual promiscuity, multiple partners, unsafe sexual practices, pregnancy
- Becoming paralyzed with indecision
- Isolation from family; breakdown of communication, routine lying, and hiding things
- Many hours per day spent on computer, on high-risk or triggering websites; casually meeting partners online; revealing too much (e.g., "sexting," overly personal posts on Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, in blog)
- Old, rotting food; teen not able to find basic necessities; dirty clothes covering floor chronically
- Often up nearly all night; sleeps almost all day on weekends; routinely late (or missing school) because of sleep schedule

What Is Typical, What Is Not?

Remember that development is different for each individual. For some teens, developmentally typical behaviors can be taken to an extreme and become a greater problem. Parents have a difficult task here, as they need to both allow for developmentally typical behaviors *and* address problem behaviors (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007).

**DEVELOPMENTALLY
TYPICAL BEHAVIORS**

BALANCE

**PROBLEM
BEHAVIORS**

Allow Developmentally Typical Behaviors. Developmentally typical behaviors include challenging behaviors that are the result of the developmental tasks of adolescence. In other words, these are behaviors that are common and expected for adolescents but are also difficult to encounter and interact with.

Examples include frequent arguments with parents, minor violations of the rules (such as missing curfew) and refusal to talk about emotions or school tasks.

See the next sections for a detailed discussion of the developmental tasks of adolescence.

It is helpful for parents to know and recognize what is developmentally expected (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). It is important that parents not overreact to these developmentally typical behaviors. It is the parent's job to weather these storms and support his or her teen in the growing pains of development. Sometimes this support means having flexibility so that the teen can work through his or her developmental tasks.

Address Problem Behaviors. Problem behaviors stem from developmentally typical behaviors but have reached an extreme. These are difficult behaviors that are more concerning or serious than the challenging behaviors typically seen in adolescence (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Problem behaviors can create large consequences, are often harmful and reduce the quality of life for the teen and his or her family.

Problem behaviors are an extreme form of developmentally expected behaviors. Examples include self-injury, suicide attempts, mental health hospitalization and addiction issues.

It is helpful for parents to know and recognize what behaviors are beyond typical. It is important for parents to take these behaviors seriously, as they require less flexibility than the developmentally typical behaviors.

Remember to think about difficult adolescent behaviors as dialectic, and note that problem behaviors occur on the other end of the spectrum from developmentally typical adolescent behaviors.

Consider the following example:

Brianna gets in a fight with her mom about doing chores and as a result of the fight, yells, “I hate you,” runs up to her room, slams her door and gives her mom the silent treatment for the rest of the day. The next day, Brianna’s behavior is back to normal.

Although these behaviors are not pleasant and are difficult to experience and accept, they do not cause long-term harm for Brianna and her family. These behaviors are developmentally typical for adolescents.

Now consider an example on the other end of the dialectic:

Brianna gets in a fight with her mom about doing chores, yells “I hate you,” runs up to her room, slams her door and injures herself by cutting her arm. She doesn’t talk to her mom for the rest of the day but the following day discloses her self-injury to a school counselor, who later informs Brianna’s mom. When her mom asks about it, Brianna says, “It’s none of your business” and refuses to talk to her about it.

Some of Brianna’s behaviors are developmentally expected for adolescents. Arguing, slamming her door and refusing to talk to her mom about her emotions and behaviors are developmentally typical. However, using self-injury to cope with an argument is more extreme and is a problem behavior. This behavior will have bigger consequences for her and her family.

Balance. There are many factors that can make it difficult to find balance in this dialectic. When teens have mental health concerns, it can be easy to become desensitized to crisis behaviors, and parents can get into the habit of treating problem behaviors with more flexibility than needed (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Conversely, parents can also begin to see every difficult behavior as a problem behavior and end up not using as much flexibility as they could with developmentally typical behaviors (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007).

Balance in this area means giving support and flexibility to your teenager’s developmentally typical behaviors while taking seriously and addressing problem behaviors. In the second example, Brianna’s mom’s main focus should be on Brianna’s self-injury and problem solving ways to help her daughter maintain safety. The following sections will provide you with information to help you find balance in allowing developmentally typical behaviors and addressing problem behaviors.

Adolescence: Developmental Tasks

Developmental tasks are new skills or abilities that we learn and achieve during particular stages of life. Developmental tasks help us to move forward in our physical, mental and emotional growth. Learning these new tasks is what helps us grow up to become effective and well-adjusted adults. Acquiring new abilities and skills in each stage of development can be difficult, and people going through stages of development tend to not be very good at each new task at first. This can create frustration for both the child and the parents.

Knowing and reminding yourself of the developmental tasks of adolescence can help you recognize what is typical—what to expect during the teenage years. Keep in mind that development is unique for each individual. Some of the tasks listed here may or may not occur with your teenager.

Establishing an Identity. Teenagers are trying to figure out who they are. This involves integrating the opinions of others, such as parents and friends, into their own understanding of themselves (McNeely & Blachard, 2010). The goal of this developmental task is to have a clear sense of their own opinions, values and beliefs and to figure out how they fit into their world.

What you might see in your teen:

- Spending a lot of time in his or her room alone.
- Not wanting to spend time with family.
- Experimentation with different types of music, clothes, makeup, jobs, interests, friend groups.
- Trying out hobbies or clubs.
- Experimentation with alcohol and drugs or sex.
- Daydreaming.
- Spending more time with friends than family.

Establishing Independence and Autonomy. Teenagers are working on independence and finding their own way in the world. This means making their own decisions and living by their own sense of what is right and wrong (McNeely & Blachard, 2010). Teenagers are focused on being less dependent on their parents, and often push their parents and family away. This pushing away is about making room for their own decisions and acting independently.

What you might see in your teen:

- Not talking to parents about school, relationships or emotions.
- Not wanting to be seen with parents or family in public.
- Spending more time with friends than family.
- Being more argumentative or critical with parents.
- Being reluctant to share where he or she is going or with whom he or she is spending time.
- Rejecting parent's help or support.
- Having mood swings.
- Being disinterested in or rejecting of things he or she enjoyed in childhood.
- Breaking rules or boundaries set by parents.

Practicing Intimacy and Closeness in Relationships. Teenagers are focused on and interested in peer relationships and are finding new ways to be more intimate with others (McNeely & Blachard, 2010). This can include emotional and sexual intimacy. Often this intimacy occurs with same-sex friendships but can also include a significant other.

What you might see in your teen:

- Intense friendships.
- Strong peer alliances and acting in ways similar to peers.
- A strong connection with a group of friends.
- A lot of time spent talking, texting or hanging out with friends or peers.
- A lot of time spent focused on a “crush” or love interest.
- Curiosity about sex and intimacy.
- Exploration of physical intimacy such as dating and sex.

Adjusting to a Developing and Changing Body. Teenagers experience significant changes in their bodies. Teens often become over-focused on their appearance (McNeely & Blanchard, 2012) and the appearance of others. This can cause them to be self-conscious or have difficulty figuring out how to dress or how they want to appear to others.

What you might see in your teen:

- Taking a long time to get dressed.
- Preoccupation with appearance.
- Increased interest in looking attractive.
- Focus on how others look.
- Acting shy or self-conscious.

Adjusting to Brain Development. Teenagers also experience significant changes in brain development. Teens are becoming better at reasoning and can now consider many options and think about things hypothetically (McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). Teenagers are acquiring the new skill of thinking abstractly, meaning they can think about what cannot be seen, heard or touched. This means they may be considering their own beliefs and values, which involve abstract ideas like trust and loyalty. Although teens have new cognitive skills, the area of the brain responsible for planning and identifying long-term consequences is not yet fully developed, so although they can see the abstract, they are still not very skilled with planning and thinking ahead.

What you might see in your teen:

- Belief that he or she can take risks without severe consequences.
- Focus on life’s greater meaning.
- Thoughts about how others see him or her.
- Greater focus on what he or she thinks and how he or she feels.
- Belief that everyone else is as concerned with his or her thoughts and behaviors as he or she is.
- Belief that he or she is the only one who has these thoughts and feelings.

- Being dramatic due to a belief that no one else has felt how he or she feels.
- Difficulty seeing the shades of gray.
- Questioning family's religious or spiritual beliefs.

The developmental tasks of adolescence can be particularly frustrating and confusing to parents as well as to teens. It is helpful to understand how the actions of your teenager are developmentally typical. Additionally, parents can be effective during such a difficult period of development by finding ways to support their teen's developmental tasks.

Problem Behaviors

On the opposite end of the dialectic from developmentally typical behaviors are problem behaviors. Remember that problem behaviors are an extreme form of developmentally expected behaviors (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007). Problem behaviors can vary greatly depending on the individual.

As mentioned earlier, a behavior may be a problem when (Miller, Rathus & Linehan, 2007):

- The behavior creates more severe consequences (especially in the long term).
- The behavior creates physical or emotional harm.
- The behavior significantly reduces the quality of life for the teen and his or her family.

Problem behaviors can include:

- Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts
- Self-injury (such as cutting, burning the skin)
- Using drugs and alcohol (beyond experimentation) or addiction
- Over-eating, restricting or purging
- Promiscuity
- Refusal to go to school and truancy
- Complete disengagement from parents
- Running away from home

Problem behaviors can be maladaptive attempts to cope with a crisis. Many people have difficulty finding effective ways to deal with intense situations. Problem behaviors can be developed as a way to get through a difficult situation. These maladaptive attempts to cope, or problem behaviors, then continue because they provided relief, so people will continue to turn to that behavior when other difficult situations arise.

Although problem behaviors serve a purpose, they also come with big downsides. These downsides can include:

- Physical harm
- Hospitalization
- Conflict with others
- Loss of relationships
- Lack of self-care

- Decreased self-respect
- Failing grades
- Suspension or expulsion from school
- Health issues

Problem behaviors that create risks to someone's safety are especially important to understand and take action on.

Suicidal Ideation (SI). This includes any thoughts of suicide, from passive thoughts to more active, planful thoughts. For example, passive thoughts might include, "My family would be better off without me," and more active thoughts could include plans of how to commit suicide, which can lead to gathering the means to commit suicide and taking action on a suicide plan.

Self-Injurious Behavior (SIB). This includes any urges to or behaviors that harm oneself, without the intent to end one's life. Examples of SIB include cutting, scratching or burning the skin.

Teenagers who struggle with SI or SIB require professional help, and it is important that these teenagers are receiving mental health treatment. Therapy will help teens identify triggers for SI or SIB and create safety plans to manage thoughts and urges for suicide or self-injury. Mental health professionals are trained in how to assess safety and help create plans and interventions to ensure a teenagers' safety.

Safety issues are understandably scary for parents. Parents should take safety concerns seriously. This is a time to be focused on problem solving to ensure that teenagers are safe. It is important for parents to take a Non-Judgmental Stance toward safety issues and avoid statements that may be shaming. Remember that safety issues are a maladaptive attempt to cope with stress. Ask your teen to share his or her safety plan and how you can help with safety. If your teen is suicidal and unable to stay safe, take him or her to the nearest emergency room for a safety assessment from a mental health professional.

Parents need to make decisions about how to intervene with their teen's behaviors. Parents should strive for balance by allowing for developmentally appropriate behaviors while taking seriously and addressing problem behaviors. The challenge in finding this balance often requires parents to learn and practice new skills. The following worksheets provide the opportunity to work on these skills.

Worksheet

Typical vs. Problem Behaviors - Balance in Action

Identifying developmentally typical and problem behaviors takes knowledge, patience and practice. Take some time to reflect on difficult situations with your teen.

Describe a difficult situation you encountered with your teen. Include details and focus on the facts:

Write down the developmentally typical behaviors you noticed from your teen during this situation:

Write out problem behaviors (or behaviors more extreme than the developmentally typical behaviors) you noticed from your teen during this situation that are more extreme than developmentally typical behaviors:

Try this reflection several times to increase your non-judgmental awareness of your teen's behaviors.

Common Presentations of Dysregulation

Explosive:

Outward display of intense emotions. Can include expressions of anger or aggression, threatening behavior, or visible expressions of high levels of distress.

Implosive

Intense emotional experiences that are predominantly felt internally. Can lead to a person shutting down, withdrawing, exhibiting signs of depression or anxiety.

"I'm Fine"

Person may appear fine when they are not. Can be difficult to read. May exhibit apparent competence. Difficulty with emotion labeling and expression. May show irritability or flat affect or say "I don't know."