

Growth and Development, Ages 13 to 17 – What Parents 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.

Sexuality is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a young person's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for an adolescent's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help young people understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

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

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.]

Cognitive Development

Most teens, ages 13 to 17 will:

- 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

Emotional Development

Most teens, ages 13 to 17 will:

- 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

Sexual Development

Most teens, ages 13 to 17 will:

- Understand that they are sexual and understand the options and consequences of sexual expression
- Choose to express their sexuality in ways that may or may not include sexual intercourse
- Recognize the components of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Have a clear understanding of pregnancy and of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and the possible consequences of sexual intercourse and have the ability to make reasoned choices about sex based on knowledge
- Recognize the role media play in propagating views about sex
- Have the capacity to learn about intimate, loving, long-term relationships
- Have an understanding of their own sexual orientation [This is different than sexual behavior]

What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Adolescents

To help teens ages 13 to 17 develop as sexually healthy youth, families should:

- Clearly articulate your family and religious values regarding sexual intercourse. Express that, although sex is pleasurable, young people should wait to initiate sex until they are in a mature, loving, and responsible relationship.
- Express that we all have a variety of options for experiencing intimacy and expressing love.
- Discuss together the factors, including age, mutual consent, protection, contraceptive use, love, intimacy, etc., that you and your teen believe should be a part of decisions about sexual intercourse.
- Reinforce teens' ability to make decisions while providing information on which they can base those decisions.
- Discuss contraceptive options and talk about the importance of condom use.
- Discuss teens' options, should unprotected intercourse occur—including emergency contraception and STI testing and treatment. Discuss teens' options, should pregnancy occur, including abortion, parenting, and adoption.
- Discuss exploitive behavior and why it is unhealthy and (in some cases) illegal.
- Help youth identify various physical and verbal responses to avoid/get away from sexual situations that make them feel uncomfortable.
- Acknowledge that teens have many future life options, that some may marry and/or parent while others may remain single and/or childless.
- Use inclusive language that recognizes that some youth may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.