

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 child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help children understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

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

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.

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10 TIPS ON INITIATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GROWTH:

Initiating conversations about growth, development, and sexuality may be difficult for some parents because they did not grow up in an environment where the subject was discussed. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or feel confused about the proper amount of information to offer. To help, here are 10 tips to:

1. First, encourage communication by reassuring your children that they can talk to you about anything.
2. Take advantage of teachable moments. A friend's pregnancy, news article, or a TV show can help start a conversation.
3. Listen more than you talk. Think about what you're being asked. Confirm with your child that what you heard is in fact what he or she meant to ask.
4. Don't jump to conclusions. The fact that a teen asks about sex does not mean they are having or thinking about having sex.
5. Answer questions simply and directly. Give factual, honest, short, and simple answers.
6. Respect your child's views. Share your thoughts and values and help your child express theirs.
7. Reassure young people that they are normal— as are their questions and thoughts.
8. Teach your children ways to make good decisions about sex and coach them on how to get out of risky situations.
9. Admit when you don't know the answer to a question. Suggest the two of you find the answer together on the Internet or in the library.
10. Discuss that at times your teen may feel more comfortable talking with someone other than you. Together, think of other trusted adults with whom they can talk.