

Growth and Development, Ages 18 and Over

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 young adults aged 18 and over will:

- Complete the process of physical maturation, usually attaining full adult height (Secondary sexual characteristics, such as size of penis and breasts, are completed.)

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

- Move into adult roles and responsibilities and may learn a trade, work, and/or pursue higher education
- Fully understand abstract concepts and be aware of consequences and personal limitations

- Identify career goals and prepare to achieve them
- Secure their autonomy and build and test their decision making skills
- Develop new skills, hobbies, and adult interests

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

- Move into adult relationships with their parents
- See the peer group as less important as a determinant of behavior
- Feel empathetic
- Have greater intimacy skills
- Complete their values framework
- Carry some feelings of invincibility
- Establish their body image

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

- Enter into intimate sexual and emotional relationships
- Understand their own sexual orientation, although they may still experiment
- Understand sexuality as connected to commitment and planning for the future
- Shift their emphasis from self to others
- Experience more intense sexuality

WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO DO TO RAISE SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

To help young adults ages 18 and over develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

- Keep the lines of communication open and accept that the person is an adult, not a child.

- Offer choices, acknowledge responsibilities, and avoid dictates.
- Continue to offer physical and emotional closeness, but respect their need for privacy and independence.
- Appreciate them for their strengths and qualities.
- Facilitate their access to sexual and reproductive health care.
- Continue offering guidance and sharing values.

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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.