

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **The Emotional Lives of Adolescents: Building a Bridge Between Dependence and Autonomy**

Although adolescence was once believed to be a time of rebellion and tumult, we now know that this developmental stage is calmer than previously assumed. The “rebellion” often seen in teens is likely due to the increased physical, cognitive and social changes that occur in development. During this period, parents may feel as if their teen has turned into another person. Teenagers are often described as “moody,” “irritable,” “argumentative,” “indecisive” and “consumed with oneself.” The once docile school-aged child is now snapping back to her parents when she isn’t able to wear a particular outfit to school. The child who listened and agreed with his father’s reasoning for the way things work in the world is suddenly questioning his father’s explanations and values. Still at other times, your adolescent appears understanding and accepting of your advice. Typical experiences include both of these extremes, vacillating between occasions where your teen reaches out and requests your support with occasions where your opinions are rejected. Family conflict that ensues commonly centers on everyday issues. For example, you may be likely to argue with your teen over the clothing he chooses, amount of time she spends on the computer, or setting a curfew.

Why the observable differences in your child? Throughout this phase of development, a bridge is forming between childhood and adulthood. The teen begins to develop independence and autonomy while also remaining reliant on the family. The period of adolescence is fraught with many changes, and as we look at them in context, we begin to understand the responses that typify teenage behavior.

### **Cognitive Changes**

Adolescents develop an increased awareness of their own thoughts, which enables them to make more developed judgments and decisions. An increase in abstract, idealistic, and logical thought allows the teen to develop alternate solutions for problems. Perspective taking increases as well, allowing the teen to see another person’s point of view more readily. While these changes have positive long-term effects on development, in the present moment they may lead to increased argumentativeness and indecisiveness in your teenager. This behavior is quite normal. Teens often begin to challenge family beliefs and morals. They will exhibit greater analysis of problems and engage in critical thinking. These thought processes help the teen to become more independent and play a role in identity formation. During this phase, teens begin to de-idealize their parents. Parents should be prepared for this! Your teen may no longer automatically believe your reasoning and thus challenge your explanations. This behavior is expected as the teen’s abstract reasoning and quest for independence increases. Parents should also be aware that these skills are developing throughout adolescence. Therefore, while teens may report they have excellent foresight in determining consequences of their decisions, parents should be observant, offering guidance and advice in important matters.

### **Physical Changes**

Increases in hormonal levels occur with the onset of puberty, causing bodily changes in both males and females. On average, females hit puberty earlier than males, which may lead to an increase in self-conscious thoughts for both sexes. Additionally, adolescents often get less sleep than needed. Despite requiring about 9 hours of sleep, most teens sleep an average of 7.5 hours each night, mostly due to later bedtimes paired with early school start times. This pattern of decreased sleep may lead them to be more irritable, particularly in the morning. You may also find your teen is spending more time sleeping on the weekends. While sleeping in on Saturday and Sunday helps offset their lack of sleep during the week, teens should not be sleeping in past noon, as this may contribute to a disrupted sleep cycle.

## **Social Changes**

Peer relationships change at this time as well. Teens are more likely to form groups or “cliques” with their peers. They often feel as if they are the center of attention; thinking others will notice the smallest slight. These problems often seem much bigger to the teen than to his parents. Adolescents will often try to fit in with peers in a variety of ways. You’ll likely see an increase in the teen’s interest in her appearance or social life. Much of this fits in with the adolescent’s quest to form an identity; that is, discovering who she is as well as determining personal values. On the other hand, teens are more susceptible to negative peer pressure as they attempt to fit in. It is important for parents to monitor their teen’s peer group and to intervene if they believe the teen is involved in dangerous behavior.

### **What can parents do?**

- Parents can provide both emotional support for their teens as well as freedom to explore. Treat the adolescent as a developing adult by allowing him increased decision-making within the family.
- Encourage healthy sleep habits. Help them find ways of relaxing prior to bed. Minimize caffeine and napping after school to aid in earlier bedtimes. Be a role model!
- Parents should be consistent with their limits but also allow their teens independence by demonstrating warmth and acceptance. Parents should continue to have discussions with their teens regarding the need for limit setting and house rules. These discussions will help the teen trust your guidance.
- Monitor your teen’s peer group. Be aware of how and with whom she is spending her time. As mentioned earlier, teens are susceptible to deviant behavior exhibited by other peers. Monitor your teen’s social life with a degree of separation that allows the teen to make decisions and gain trust on his own. Keeping a “tight leash” on your teen often does not help any more than allowing “free reign” to do as he pleases.
- Support teens in activities that are important to them -- such as sports, clubs and special interests. This increases their competence and self-esteem.
- When dealing with family conflict, parents can choose particular “battles.” Continue to set limits and monitor the teen’s whereabouts while minimizing minor arguments (i.e., sleeping in on weekends or changes in hair style).
- Finally, parents should continue to attempt to engage their teen in discussion despite the fact that many times he or she may act uninterested. Keep at it! There will be occasions where your teen requires and values your advice.

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

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**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health**  
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