

Copyright © 2007 by The Salem News
Reprinted with permission

June 20, 2008

By Dr. Edward Bailey
Chief of Pediatrics,
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



Navigating the road to adolescence

Adolescence is the beginning of the journey to independence and a time of dramatic intellectual growth. A teen's most important job is to separate from parents and to learn to function as a young adult. Our most important job is to make certain teens succeed.

Neither task is easy. While teens are exploring their paths to independence, their parents and caregivers must cope with severe adolescent behavior changes that turn loving youngsters into strangers. There are constant arguments about homework, curfews, and messy rooms, and both parents and teens are shaken by the emotional highs and lows, bouts of insecurity, and periods of immaturity and foolishness that accompany this quest for self-sufficiency.

How does a parent know when the behavior has moved from normal and acceptable to "concerning" and worthy of intervention?

The good (and bad) news is that the majority of these stressful behaviors are synonymous with normal adolescent development. The rapidly developing brain capacity of teenagers gives them the ability to think abstractly for the first time. We take pride in that growth when it comes to academics, especially when our teens perform well in algebra or win a debate. Those same skills become less desirable when teens argue with parents about smoking, alcohol use, and hanging with friends on weeknights rather than doing their homework.

Since most teens have a sense of immortality and a need to be in control, they may, at times, put themselves at risk. Parents need to monitor their teen's activities for associated changes that signify poor judgment. Indicators include:

- A sudden lack of interest in school activity and performance.
- Signs of depression including sleep difficulty, poor appetite, and sadness.

- Lack of interest in normal activities and friends.
- Signs of aggressive behavior and/or alcohol and other substance abuse.
- Indications of significant risk-taking behavior.

When concerns arise, talk to your teen. Let your child know you are worried and ask what's on her mind. Be patient and wait for an answer. Honest, respectful communication is always the most effective strategy. If concerns persist, speak with your teen's pediatrician, teacher, or with clergy. These are complex issues. Gain a better understanding of how others see your teen, how he spends his day, where and who he spends time with before passing judgment or coming to conclusions.

Parents and caregivers, who understand that difficult and trying behaviors define the normal maturation process, can create opportunities and help their children transition to young adulthood. Although it is the "job" of the adolescent to balk at authority, most teens respect adult role models and follow their lead. By treating teens as the young adults you would like them to become, and offering opportunities for honest, mature conversation, teens will frequently respond in a positive manner.

While it is tempting to want to be a friend, teens need the adults in their lives to provide structure and consistency. Be firm about house rules and the consequences of breaking them. Give teens space when they are moody, angry, or upset, but be available to listen when they need to vent. Support them when they make mistakes, but don't be too quick to judge or to repair their lapses in judgment.

Adolescence is a stressful time for both parents and kids. It marked by ups and downs, successes and failures, worries, frustrations, joys and heartbreaks, all of which are difficult to navigate. For most, however, the emergence of a successful young adult makes the challenges worthwhile. If your family's trip through adolescence becomes too overwhelming, seek help or advice early from your pediatrician. For further information contact me at ebailey@aap.org

Dr. Edward Bailey is chairman of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, and a father of three. He can be contacted at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Ave., Salem, MA 01907 or at ebailey@aap.org