

The Ten Tasks of Adolescence*

1. Adjust to sexually maturing bodies and feelings

Teens are faced with adjusting to bodies that as much as double in size and that acquire sexual characteristics, as well as learning to manage the accompanying biological changes and sexual feelings and to engage in healthy sexual behaviors. Their task also includes establishing a sexual identity and developing the skills for romantic relationships.

2. Develop and apply abstract thinking skills

Teens typically undergo profound changes in their way of thinking during adolescence, allowing them more effectively to understand and coordinate abstract ideas, to think about possibilities, to try out hypotheses, to think ahead, to think about thinking, and to construct philosophies.

3. Develop and apply a more complex level of perspective taking

Teens typically acquire a powerful new ability to understand human relationships, in which, having learned to “put themselves in another person’s shoes,” they learn to take into account both their perspective and another person’s at the same time, and to use this new ability in resolving problems and conflicts in relationships.

4. Develop and apply new coping skills in areas such as decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution

Related to all these dramatic shifts, teens are involved in acquiring new abilities to think about and plan for the future, to engage in more sophisticated strategies for decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and to moderate their risk taking to serve goals rather than jeopardize them.

5. Identify meaningful moral standards, values, and belief systems

Building on these changes and resulting skills, teens typically develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice and care, questioning beliefs from childhood and adopting more personally meaningful values, religious views, and belief systems to guide their decisions and behavior.

6. Understand and express more complex emotional experiences

Also related to these changes are shifts for teens toward an ability to identify and communicate more complex emotions, to understand the emotions of others in more sophisticated ways, and to think about emotions in abstract ways.

7. Form friendships that are mutually close and supportive

Although youngsters typically have friends throughout childhood, teens generally develop peer relationships that play much more powerful roles in providing support and connection in their lives. They tend to shift from friendships based largely on the sharing of interests and activities to those based on the sharing of ideas and feelings, with the development of mutual trust and understanding.

8. Establish key aspects of identity

Identity formation is in a sense a lifelong process, but crucial aspects of identity are typically forged at adolescence, including developing an identity that reflects a sense of individuality as well as connection to valued people and groups. Another part of this task is developing a positive identity around gender, physical attributes, sexuality, and ethnicity and, if appropriate, having been adopted, as well as sensitivity to the diversity of groups that make up American society.

9. Meet the demands of increasingly mature roles and responsibilities

Teens gradually take on the roles that will be expected of them in adulthood, learning to acquire the skills and manage the multiple demands that will allow them to move into the labor market, as well as to meet expectations regarding commitment to family, community, and citizenship.

10. Renegotiate relationships with adults in parenting roles

Although the task of adolescence has sometimes been described as “separating” from parents and other caregivers, it is more widely seen now as adults and teens working together to negotiate a change in the relationship that accommodates a balance of autonomy and ongoing connection, with the emphasis on each depending in part on the family’s ethnic background.

* See **Principles and Context**, pages 29–46, for details and references.

The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents*

I. Love and Connect

Teens need parents to develop and maintain a relationship with them that offers support and acceptance, while accommodating and affirming the teen's increasing maturity.

Strategies for Parents	
Watch for moments	when you feel and can express genuine affection, respect, and appreciation for your teen.
Acknowledge the good times	made possible by your teen's personality and growth.
Expect increased criticism	and debate, and strengthen your skills for discussing ideas and disagreements in ways that respect both your teen's opinions and your own.
Spend time just listening	to your teen's thoughts and feelings about her or his fears, concerns, interests, ideas, perspectives, activities, jobs, schoolwork, and relationships.
Treat each teen as a unique individual	distinct from siblings, stereotypes, his or her past, or your own past.
Appreciate and acknowledge	each teen's new areas of interest, skills, strengths, and accomplishments, as well as the positive aspects of adolescence generally, such as its passion, vitality, humor, and deepening intellectual thought.
Provide meaningful roles	for your teen in the family, ones that are genuinely useful and important to the family's well-being.
Spend time together	one on one and as a family, continuing some familiar family routines, while also taking advantage of ways in which new activities, such as community volunteering, can offer new ways to connect.

Key Message for Parents:
Most things about their world are changing. Don't let your love be one of them.

* See *The Five Basics of Parenting Adolescents*, pages 47–64, for details and references.

2. Monitor and Observe

Teens need parents to be aware of—and let teens know they are aware of—their activities, including school performance, work experiences, after-school activities, peer relationships, adult relationships, and recreation, through a process that increasingly involves less direct supervision and more communication, observation, and networking with other adults.

Strategies for Parents	
Keep track of your teen's whereabouts	and activities, directly or indirectly, by listening, observing, and networking with others who come into contact with your teen.
Keep in touch with other adults	who are willing and able to let you know of positive or negative trends in your teen's behavior, such as neighbors, family, religious and community leaders, shopkeepers, teachers, and other parents.
Involve yourself in school events	such as parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, and special needs planning meetings.
Stay informed about your teen's progress	in school and employment, as well as the level and nature of outside activities; get to know your teen's friends and acquaintances.
Learn and watch for warning signs	of poor physical or mental health, as well as signs of abuse or neglect, including lack of motivation, weight loss, problems with eating or sleeping, a drop in school performance and/or skipping school, drug use, withdrawal from friends and activities, promiscuity, running away, unexplained injury, serious and persistent conflict between parent and teen, or high levels of anxiety or guilt.
Seek guidance if you have concerns	about these warning signs or any other aspect of your teen's health or behavior, consulting with teachers, counselors, religious leaders, physicians, parenting educators, family and tribal elders, and others.
Monitor your teen's experiences	in settings and relationships inside and outside the home that hold the potential for physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, including relationships involving parental figures, siblings, extended family, caregivers, peers, partners, employers, teachers, counselors, and activity leaders.
Evaluate the level of challenge	of proposed teen activities, such as social events, media exposure, and jobs, matching the challenges to your teen's ability to handle them.
Key Message for Parents: Monitor your teen's activities. You still can, and it still counts.	

3. Guide and Limit

Teens need parents to uphold a clear but evolving set of boundaries, maintaining important family rules and values, but also encouraging increased competence and maturity.

Strategies for Parents	
Maintain family rules	or “house rules,” upholding some non-negotiable rules around issues like safety and central family values, while negotiating other rules around issues like household tasks and schedules.
Communicate expectations	that are high, but realistic.
Choose battles	and ignore smaller issues in favor of more important ones, such as drugs, school performance, and sexually responsible behavior.
Use discipline as a tool	for teaching, not for venting or taking revenge.
Restrict punishment	to forms that do not cause physical or emotional injury.
Renegotiate responsibilities and privileges	in response to your teen’s changing abilities, turning over some areas to the teen with appropriate monitoring.

Key Message for Parents:
Loosen up, but don’t let go.

4. Model and Consult

Teens need parents to provide ongoing information and support around decision making, values, skills, goals, and interpreting and navigating the larger world, teaching by example and ongoing dialogue.

Strategies for Parents	
Set a good example	around risk taking, health habits, and emotional control.
Express personal positions	about social, political, moral, and spiritual issues, including issues of ethnicity and gender.
Model the kind of adult relationships	that you would like your teen to have.
Answer teens' questions	in ways that are truthful, while taking into account their level of maturity.
Maintain or establish traditions	including family, cultural, and/or religious rituals.
Support teens' education	and vocational training, including through participation in household tasks, outside activities, and employment that develop their skills, interests, and sense of value to the family and community.
Help teens get information	about future options and strategies for education, employment, and lifestyle choices.
Give teens opportunities	to practice reasoning and decision making by asking questions that encourage them to think logically and consider consequences, while providing safe opportunities to try out their own ideas and learn from their mistakes.
Key Message for Parents:	
The teen years: Parents still matter; teens still care.	

5. Provide and Advocate

Teens need parents to make available not only adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and health care, but also a supportive home environment and a network of caring adults.

Strategies for Parents	
Network within the community	as well as within schools, family, religious organizations, and social services to identify resources that can provide positive adult and peer relationships, guidance, training, and activities for your teen.
Make informed decisions	among available options for schools and educational programs, taking into account such issues as safety, social climate, approach to diversity, community cohesion, opportunities for peer relationships and mentoring, and the match between school practices and your teen’s learning style and needs.
Make similarly informed decisions	among available options for neighborhoods, community involvement, and youth programs.
Arrange or advocate for preventive health care	and treatment, including care for mental illness.
Identify people and programs to support and inform you	in handling parental responsibilities and in understanding the societal and personal challenges in raising teens.
Key Message for Parents: You can’t control their world, but you can add to and subtract from it.	