

It's not about you!

13 tips for parents of adolescents



By Shelley White, MA, LMHC

It's not about you!

13 tips for parents of adolescents

By Shelley White, MA, LMHC

www.swhitema.com

Written by Shelley White, LMHC
Edited by Lisa Marie Ford.
Illustrated by Natalia Chupil

© Copyright 2015 by Shelley White,
Lynnwood, Washington.
All rights reserved.

Introduction

Imagine navigating your school day on little sleep, trying to learn, experiencing intense peer pressure, and striving to meet teachers' expectations. Then you come home to more pressures from parents to do homework and chores, plus get along with your siblings. All this, and you are expected to act happy and be cordial.

This is adolescence. I bet it feels a little like trying to run a marathon in cement shoes!

Throughout the teen years, hormones wreak havoc on our children's bodies and emotions, and their brains aren't developed enough to make sense of it all. They may often feel moody and irritable, and it's hard to not take what they say personally.

It's not about you, though. It's about them. Understanding the biological, social, and developmental tsunami your child is experiencing during adolescence might make this clearer for you. And in understanding it's not about you, it will be far less painful and easier to maintain perspective while parenting your adolescent.



Typical behavior changes in adolescence

Today your nine-, ten- or eleven-year old is probably a total delight. More than likely, he is usually in a fairly good mood, is cooperative, loves to go to school, and brings home pretty good grades. She loves to hang out with you and ask your opinion on clothes. You happily reflect on what great changes have transpired over the past few years. Your child has become independent enough to make her own breakfast, be left alone at home for a period of time, and he may even do his own laundry!

At this juncture, as a parent, you're spending less time caretaking and like your newfound freedom. You may even be thinking of going back to your career (if you left it to raise the kids). You trust your child and are proud of your parenting.

Then, adolescence kicks in and suddenly you may be crying, "HELP! An alien took my child!!" Because overnight it seems like everything's changed:

- Now your child is moody, breaking out in sobs when you ask her to take out the garbage.
- He stays up late, sleeps late, and wakes up groggy.



- She'd rather shop for clothes with friends and cringes when you wear your favorite jeans (they never bothered her before).
- He spends less time with you and more time alone in his room.
- She begins to dress differently, wants to wear make-up, and spends hours primping.
- She doesn't want to go fishing with you anymore and would rather take drumming classes (because, you discover, "Billy" is in the class).
- He is embarrassed by family traditions and heritage-related activities.
- After telling you he has no homework, he will spend a tremendous amount of time on the phone or Internet. Then, when his not-so-good grades come home, he is quick to tell you it's because his teacher doesn't like him.

No, this is not an alien. It's your adolescent! And there are very reasonable explanations for why your child is acting this way.

The psychology and biochemistry of adolescence

Adolescence is well-recognized as a time for figuring out who we are in the world and a time for raging hormones. Though we might know this, it's easy to forget how these changes affect our own teen's behavior.

The process of exploring who we are prompts most adolescents to withdraw from family and identify more with peers. Your child might want your love and approval one minute and then act irritably towards you the next. This behavior can be very confusing and sometimes hurtful to parents. It is often misinterpreted as disrespectful or rebellious when really it is an expected developmental stage.

During adolescence, the sex hormones estrogen and testosterone flood the bloodstream. Surges of testosterone in both males and females in effect swell a part of their limbic systems (the brain's emotional center), which generates feelings of fear and anger, accounting for greater irritability and angry outbursts. High excitability and other intense feelings are also a result of

sex hormones on the limbic system. In addition, these hormones affect the neurotransmitter serotonin, temporarily causing levels to decline which increases the chances of mood swings and depression. Finally, the level of melatonin, the hormone that lets the brain know it is time to shut down for sleep, is lower in adolescents, making it difficult for them to fall asleep at night.

Your adolescent's prefrontal cortex, the CEO of the brain, doesn't reach full maturity until around the age of 25. The cortex is the center for decision-making, planning, judgment, organization, setting priorities, suppressing impulses, weighing the consequences of one's actions, and regulating the limbic system. Because your child may sometimes act responsibly, remember what he is supposed to do, and make reasonable decisions, you may think he is capable of doing this on a regular basis. However, his brain isn't fully ready to consistently achieve these tasks. Remembering that his brain is still forming might ease some of your confusion when one moment your child is remarkably mature and insightful, and the next she has made a mind-bogglingly poor decision.



13 Ways to support and nurture your adolescent

1. Don't take it personally.

The first rule of parenting an adolescent is not to take his or her behavior personally. Adopt the mantra, "It's not about me!" As noted above, your adolescent's behavior has to do with his or her brain development, hormones, and expected developmental changes. Remembering this can help you feel compassion for the immense amount of stress your child experiences.

2. Widen the boundaries, but stay close.

Imagine that going through life is like walking on a balance beam. When your child was an infant, you held her in your arms as you yourself walked the beam. When she became a toddler, you kept both arms around her, protecting her from falling as she walked along. As she grew older, you slowly let down one arm, then the other, and moved to simply holding her hand. Now that your child has reached adolescence, consider yourself a spotter. Your hands are entirely off her but you walk alongside, close to the beam, hands ready to catch



her if she loses her balance. Once she regains her footing, your hands are off again.

Your child needs to be allowed to try to walk the beam independently but to have you there with a helping hand whenever needed.

3. Celebrate your child's independence.

When your child wants and needs you, be there. When not, respect his or her desire to do it alone. It can be very confusing when your child pushes you away one moment and wants a ride to a friend's house a few minutes later. It can be hard sometimes not to feel used. But remember when your toddler pushed your hand away and said "I do!!!" when you were trying to help her tie her shoe? Did you feel resentful towards your child for her desire to be independent? Probably not – in fact, you likely felt proud that your child was becoming more independent. Your adolescent is doing the same thing - only the emphatic "I do!!!" might not sound as cute as it did at the age of two. Model good communication and negotiation skills, just as you did with your toddler, and let your teen do it on his own as long as you feel it's safe.



4. Remain affectionate.

Continue to hug and kiss your child just like you always have (just not in front of his friends!!!). If your child resists those hugs, find other ways to show affection using the love language with which your child is comfortable.

5. Give your child room to make mistakes.

According to neuroscientist Dr. Jay Giedd, "Making mistakes is how the brain optimally grows." Allow your child to make mistakes. In fact, let him or her know you *expect* occasional mistakes. This will encourage your child to try new things. Can you imagine anyone getting on a bicycle for the first time and immediately riding away? We all fell a few times before we learned to keep our balance. But falling didn't deter most of us from getting back on and trying again. Maybe we didn't lose our confidence because we weren't expected to be perfect on the first try. There was no shame in falling. Let your adolescent know there is no shame in making mistakes.

6. Help with organization.

Because a teen's prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed, organization isn't your child's strong suit. So actively step in with ideas and tools to help him or her get better organized. And

recognize that what works best for you might not work best for your child. Keep trying until you find something that works. Help your child with sequencing, with determining what to do first, second, third, and so on. Be extremely specific with chores. For example, "Wash the sink, toilet, and bathtub, and sweep the floor" instead of simply "Clean the bathroom."

7. Guide your child through decisions with patience and love.

Try not to decide for him or her. As a parent, this is one of the most respectful things you can do. Allowing your child to make her own decisions, when appropriate, helps her develop essential decision making skills. If she decides on an action that wouldn't be the best choice, but it won't hurt her or anyone else, go ahead and let her try it. And if the choice turns out poorly, you can help her develop the ability to recover – another profoundly important life skill.

8. Assign household chores.

This provides your teen with ownership in the home and makes him feel a part of a system. Requiring a child to take out the trash is good; however, requiring that she be happy while doing



so is an entirely different thing. Getting caught in an “attitude adjustment” argument with your child is a no-win situation. She won't really understand what you mean by attitude. Remember the cement-shoe analogy? It's very difficult to be cheerful when you're running in cement shoes. Thank your child for doing her chores, no matter what her attitude is.

9. Provide structure.

Have a regular homework time and a quiet place to study. Be consistent about bedtime and regulate time on the computer. Routines provide safety for kids.

10. Explain your decisions.

If your adolescent is challenging your decisions, it's a good sign that his reasoning ability is maturing as it should. Saying “Because I said so” isn't helpful. Instead, explain your decisions. Be firm yet fair. Listen respectfully to your child's reasoning if he disagrees. Kids are entitled to have an opinion although not a vote. Giving your child a chance to voice his opinion, and sometimes allowing yourself to be swayed by his argument, is a good idea. But in the end, you should make the decisions.

11. Offer immediate benefits for positive behavior.

To motivate your child, emphasize immediate payoffs rather than long-range ones. It makes more sense to an adolescent to do homework now so she can go to the party on Friday night rather than because it will help her to one day get into college. And it's O.K. to offer a reward to your child in exchange for what you want (I'll give you this if you do that). If you want him to sweep the driveway because he takes pride in your home, you are likely going to be disappointed. Offering a monetary reward or a privilege is more effective. We all respond well to immediate rewards. Internal motivation, for the most part, comes later in life.

12. Respect how your child is different from you.

Remember, the best way to win your child's respect is to genuinely respect him or her, including the desire to be different. Your child may have a very different way of being in the world with different interests and style. If you teach your child to be a good person, he will likely be a good person. Treat your child with dignity, and she will learn she has value.



13. Keep your sense of humor!

The last and perhaps most important ingredient in parenting an adolescent is the need to maintain a sense of humor. So sit back and enjoy the ride!

If you're ever worried about your child's behavior, see below for help:

- For an extensive list of community resources, call 800-223-8145 (Snohomish county, Washington state) or 800-621-4636 (King county, Washington state).
- If in crisis, call the Washington State Care Crisis line at 800-584-3578.



About the author

Shelley White is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor with a therapy practice in Lynnwood, Washington, where she specializes in teens and their parents. She was a middle school counselor for thirteen years; taught college-level courses in child development, conflict resolution and mental health; served as instructor and coach at the Dispute Resolution Center of King County; and teaches Snohomish County mandatory classes for divorcing parents. Since 2001, one of her specialties has been conducting workshops on anti-bullying and anti-harassment for teens. She is the mother of two wonderful girls now in early adulthood.

Shelley offers parenting classes and workshops throughout the greater Seattle area. Please see www.swhitema.com for times and locations.

Shelley can be contacted at 360-509-2812 or by email at swhite1900@yahoo.com

