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All About Your...Character

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

John Wooden, former basketball player/coach

Character is built into our lives from the time we are little. We emulate the adults we are exposed to and often imitate what we see. The character we develop as children and fine-tune into adulthood influences our decisions and the choices we make in life. Often times parents don't think their children are watching that closely. They are. They will not only imitate our good qualities, but also the qualities we struggle with.

Teach your children to:

RESPECT themselves and others

Be **POLITE** to everyone

Make **WISE** decisions

Be **PATIENT**

Be **RELIABLE**

Have **COURAGE**

Be **DETERMINED** to get their work done

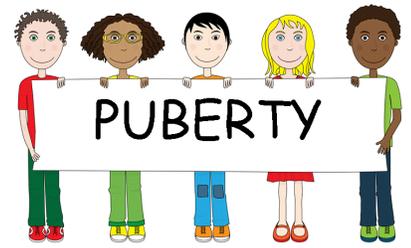


Everyday we are put in situations that are opportunities to develop our character:

- ◆ Commit to Taking the Time - time is something so many of us feel we don't have. We live in an over-scheduled society and sometimes it seems easier to overlook a troublesome action our child/children demonstrate than to address it. In the long run, it's always easier to address an action initially, than to correct an undesirable behavior later on. Investing time into our children is the most worthwhile thing we can do.
- ◆ Developing good character has a lot to do with repetition - we spent lots of time on the milestones; getting them to say a word or phrase, teaching them how to walk, etc. Good character is achieved by diligent repetition. It may seem tedious to keep saying the same things again and again, but that is how they will learn.
- ◆ Consistently enforce rules and boundaries. That seems like something that should be a given but surprisingly, many parents have a problem doing so.
- ◆ Be a good example. Remember, your children are watching, and as the old adage goes, *“Actions speak louder than words.”*

“Character is, for the most part, simply habit become fixed.”

C.H. Parkhurst, social reformer, 1842-1933



Ready or Not, Here It Comes...

Sooner or later puberty will affect your child. You know that, but does your child? They might have heard about that troublesome word, but experiencing it is much different. Usually, puberty starts between the ages of 8 and 15 for girls and 11 and 17 for boys.

Signs that puberty has begun in girls:

- ⇒ breast development
- ⇒ pubic or underarm hair begins
- ⇒ rapid height growth — a growth "spurt"
- ⇒ onset of menstruation
- ⇒ pimples or acne may begin
- ⇒ "mature" body odor

Signs that puberty has begun in boys:

- ⇒ enlargement of the testicles or penis
- ⇒ pubic, underarm, or facial hair development
- ⇒ rapid height growth — a growth "spurt"
- ⇒ voice deepening
- ⇒ pimples or acne may begin
- ⇒ "mature" body odor

What can YOU do?

Give your child a simple, truthful explanation about what's happening; their bodies are maturing and preparing for adulthood. Let them know that the changes they are experiencing are absolutely normal even though it might not seem so to them.

Also be sure to watch for signs that teasing or other difficulties associated with puberty may be affecting your child's emotional development. **Common signs/changes to watch out for include:**

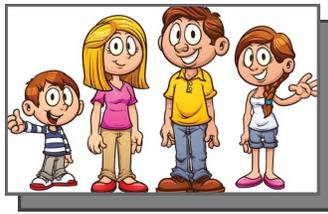
- ⇒ grades dropping
- ⇒ problems at school
- ⇒ loss of interest in daily activities
- ⇒ emotional ups and downs; depression

NOTE: Emotional ups and downs are part of going through puberty. The flood of hormones can cause emotional upheaval. If your child seems to be experiencing something more than the normal ebbs and flows, seek guidance from a professional.

Remember: How YOU cope with the changes they are experiencing can determine how successfully your child will cope.



The Talk



It's hard to comprehend how quickly the conversation with your kids went from explaining the benefits of eating all their vegetables to having to talk to them about the birds and the bees. Talking to your kids about sex can be frightening, no matter how close you and your children are. There are a few things as a parent, you should remember:

- ⇒ The first person a child trusts is you, their parent/guardian;
- ⇒ As the primary role model, information should come from you;
- ⇒ It is better your children receive correct information from you, than the questionable internet, television, or your child's peers could provide.



Now the real question becomes...**HOW?**

- ⇒ Be honest. Use proper names for all body parts. Practice ahead of time to build confidence.
- ⇒ See if your child wants or needs to know more. Follow up your answers with, "Does that answer your question?"
- ⇒ If you don't know an answer, say so, research it and get back to them quickly.
- ⇒ Listen carefully to your child's responses.
- ⇒ Be prepared to repeat yourself.



By approaching these issues like any other health topic, not as something dirty or embarrassing, you increase the odds that your kids will be comfortable coming to you with questions and problems in the future. Your child may ask some things that surprise you. As awkward as you might feel, answer questions honestly.

Don't have them feel like there are topics that are out of bounds. Try not to get angry or think that a question being asked means your child is involved in what they are asking about. They likely are looking to understand things they've heard. **Remember: their peers, television, and the internet would gladly answer any question with a big smile and open arms.**

Positive communication can greatly help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions. Your values as a parent are important to express. This is the perfect time to tell them that you support their dreams and why you guide them with the standards you do. If personal questions about you or your past come up that make you uncomfortable, they can be deflected: "This is not about me, my concern is for the boundaries you need to set in your life."



NOTE: Providing the following pages to your child may help them understand what he/she is experiencing during puberty.



Puberty and Changes for Boys

What is puberty? Puberty is the time of life when hormones cause changes in a young person's body.

Where do the hormones come from? The pituitary gland located in a person's brain. It begins to release the special hormones that cause the changes.

When does puberty start? For some it happens sooner, for others it happens later.

Girls start noticing changes between the ages of 8 and 15.

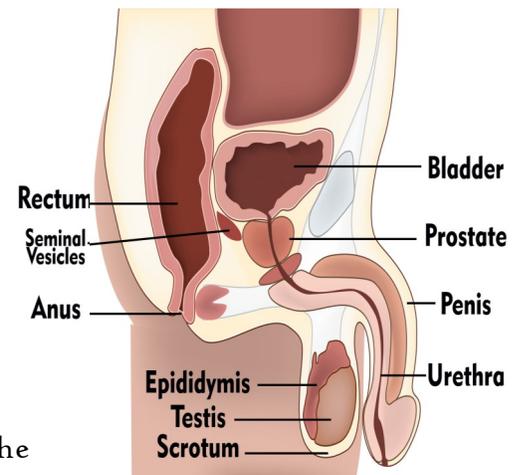
Boys start between the ages of 11 and 17.

Outwardly a boy's body will begin to change:

- Chest muscles (pectorals) will begin to develop.
- Shoulder muscles (deltoids) will broaden.
- As the larynx enlarges, voice will deepen.
- Facial, underarm and pubic hair develops and body hair may thicken.
- Reproductive organs will increase in size.

Inwardly things are changing as well:

- The pituitary gland releases hormones that cause the testicles, located inside the scrotum, to produce testosterone. This causes the external scrotum, testicles and penis to grow larger.
- When a boy has reached puberty, his testicles will produce millions of sperm. When the time comes for him to become a father, the sperm's job is to penetrate a woman's egg, causing fertilization.
- As a boy's body produces testosterone, involuntary erections and wet dreams may occur. Nocturnal emissions (wet dreams) are the release of sperm and fluid that boys have no control over. They are a normal part of puberty.
- Crushes and attractions may begin. Although younger children can have crushes, they are more intense during puberty.
- Self-consciousness may increase. Often, people beginning puberty feel self-conscious for a while.
- Sudden mood changes may begin. This is caused by the hormones flowing through your bloodstream.
- Friction with parents or guardians may grow. Puberty can be a trying time for you and your parents/guardians. While kids have their own emotional things happening inside, watching you move from childhood to young adulthood can also be emotional for the grown-ups in your life.





Puberty and Changes for Girls

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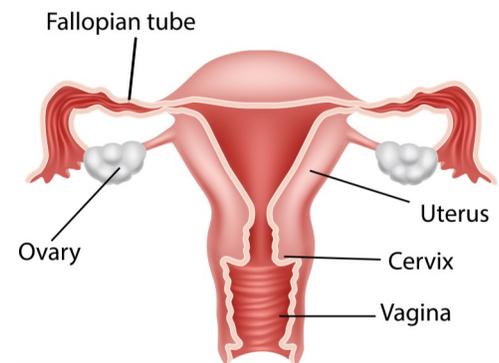
Boys start between the ages of 11 and 17.

Outwardly a girl's body will begin to change. All of these are totally normal.

- Underarm, pubic and leg hair will develop and hips will begin to broaden
- Breasts will begin to develop

Inside your body things are changing as well.

- A girl has two ovaries, and from the time she is born, they are filled with thousands of eggs that are about the size of the tip of a pin. Estrogen is the female hormone causing changes in a girl's body. During ovulation, an egg leaves one of the ovaries and travels down one of the fallopian tubes into the uterus. If that egg is not fertilized, it will pass through the cervix and leave her body along with the blood and fluid that are not needed since there is no pregnancy.
- This flow of blood and fluid is menstruation, more commonly called a period, which normally lasts from 2 to 7 days. Although it is called a monthly period, it may recur anywhere between 21 to 35 days.
- It is not uncommon for girls to experience cramps around the time of their period. This happens because the muscles of the uterus are contracting in order to eliminate the fluid.
- Six (6) months to a year before a girl first gets her menstrual period, her body might begin to produce a clear or white vaginal discharge, which is perfectly normal.
- Crushes and attractions may begin. Although younger children can have crushes, they are more intense during puberty.
- Self-consciousness may increase. Often, people beginning puberty feel self-conscious for a while.
- Sudden mood changes may begin. This is caused by the hormones flowing through your bloodstream.
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Peer Pressure



Most people hear the term “peer pressure” and automatically think about the negatives associated with it. Peer pressure can be both positive and negative. Children want to fit in and feel accepted as most of us do. Having friends with similar interests is great and friends can inspire each other to achieve great things. The problem comes when people have to compromise what they know to be right or wrong, good or bad, in order to fit in.



What Can You Do to Minimize Peer Pressure Issues?

- ❖ As a parent, the most important thing you can give your child is good self-esteem. Remind your child of their value. It’s not only about what you SAY, but what you DO. You are your child’s first example of how they should expect to be treated. Your child will grow up to expect that anyone who claims to love them will treat them the same way their parents/guardians treated them, with respect and dignity. In addition, children who feel good about themselves and have a good sense of what is right and wrong, are less likely to become involved with friends who teeter that line.
- ❖ Encourage honest, open communication. Your kids need to know that they can come to you with any problem or concern without being yelled at or criticized when they do. You want your children to be able to come to you if they’re feeling worried, scared or unsure of something or if they are tempted or pressured to do something that might seem wrong or risky.
- ❖ If your child has a good sense of right and wrong, help him/her develop their ability to be assertive especially in avoiding dangerous or inappropriate activities. If something they’re being urged to do seems wrong, they should feel confident enough to say so. Encourage them to be leader rather than a follower.
- ❖ Know your children’s friends. Sometimes it’s obvious that a certain boy or girl may not be the “right” friend for your child, but other times it’s not. Observing your child and their friend’s interactions can tell you a lot about that friendship.
- ❖ Talk through scenarios or circumstances that might arise and could make your child uncomfortable and establish a plan on what to do if they feel scared or unsafe. Ex.: Being at a party where there are drugs/alcohol, finding themselves in a situation where they know no one, etc.



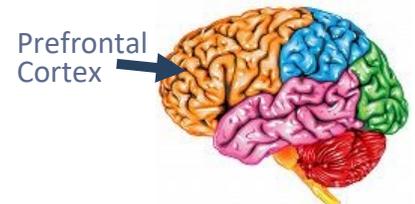
Middle School and Freedom

Freedom—a state in which somebody is able to act and live as he or she chooses, without being subject to any undue restraints or restrictions.

Is freedom appropriate for middle school students? Absolutely not! At least not the freedom that they are interested in. 12- and 13-year olds desire independence and often times want to experience freedom, but adults know that at their young age, they are ill-equipped to live life without guidelines. At the same time, in today's over sexualized world, middle school students are often exposed to, and some even participate in, activities that could potentially cause real consequences, to the five-dimensions of who they are: physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual/moral.

The Prefrontal Cortex, often called the Executive Center of a person's brain, is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. It's no wonder that young people do things that make us look at them as if they've lost their minds. They're not fully developed! The prefrontal cortex controls a person's ability to:

- plan
- set priorities
- organize thoughts
- suppress impulses
- weigh consequences



This part of the brain is vitally important but is not matured at an age when young people become more independent, discover new relationships and are being tempted to participate in activities that could harm them in ways they often don't imagine. As adults, it's important to encourage and inform young people that real freedom lies in protecting the five-dimensions of who they are so that they don't have to deal with the consequences of activities that could cause great regret.

What can you do?

- Be a parent your child can talk to, someone who is available and a good listener.
- Try not to overreact when they bring something to your attention that floors you. Develop your poker face.
- Enforce family rules and regulations. Be a person of your word so that your child knows what to expect if he/she breaks the rules. Rules are good!
- If you have the opportunity to discuss risky behaviors while watching TV, movies or listening to music, have a conversation about what you're seeing/hearing. Don't make it a monolog. If you ask them what they think, they will receive your words more readily.
- Hang in there. Don't give up. Parents don't often see the results of their hard work immediately but with persistence and repetition, your hard work will pay off.

Not in Kansas Anymore

Parents often experience anxiety and worry as their children enter high school. Worries about their children often include: encountering new and unfamiliar influences, choosing undesirable friends, the possibility they may succumb to peer-pressures, and fear of their grades falling and messing up their chances of getting into a good college/university.

All of these concerns are valid, but don't let them harm your relationship with your teenager. Your teenager is going through tremendous change. He/she went from being upper-classman as an eight-grader to being the youngest and maybe even the smallest in a new school. They went from just receiving a diploma to getting hit with the realization that they have another four years until they achieve another one. They have to establish their place in the school and sometimes, even have to make new friends. This is the time to make sure you continue to be involved in your freshman's life, but try to do so without adding more stress to either of you. Ask them:

- about the specifics of their school day,
- who they sit with at lunch?
- which classmates they like best?
- what subject they find easiest? Hardest? And why?

Make it your business to know their friends. Very few teens will turn down an invitation to get ice cream or McDonalds. By doing this, you not only show your teenager that you are interested in their life, but you also get an understanding of what kind of young adult your teenager is turning into.

As you talk to your teenager:

- give them your full attention; don't multi-task when asking how their school day went;
- make clear eye contact, letting them know you are connected;
- when the distractions come (other siblings, a phone call), put them on hold until later.

Your encouragement is important. Do not be put off when they don't want to open up. Sometimes it takes time to get a response. Continue to be available and let them know you're interested in what's happening in their lives. This is the time they need to take on more responsibility, for themselves, their school work, and their actions. This time of life might be scary for you, but remember that your teen may feel overwhelmed as well.

Be encouraged! Knowing you care and feeling your support can improve your child's self-esteem and help establish a close parent-teen relationship.



Are All Teens *Doing It* ?

You overhear Mrs. Washer talk about how she and her husband make sure that their son carries condoms. Then Ms. Turner adds that she makes sure her daughter is on birth control. You start to think of your teenager, who you have been encouraging not to have sex. Now you begin wondering if you should consider purchasing something for them, you know, “just in case”. Why? Because there is an epidemic of sexual activity in high schools - everyone is doing it! Right? *Or are they?*

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has released their latest survey which states that less than 50% of high school students have ever had sexual intercourse. <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/sexualbehaviors>

Do you want your teenager to be in this healthy majority? **Talk to them and encourage risk elimination, over risk reduction.** As a parent, you would hate to hear that your teen has started smoking or using drugs. You would most likely tell them how harmful those things are and that using illegal drugs or drugs not prescribed specifically for them can hurt them and potentially ruin their lives. You warn them of the danger that comes with picking up a cigarette or being with kids that use drugs because you want to eliminate risky activities. You don't teach them to **reduce** their risk by encouraging a “safer” way to smoke using low-tar cigarettes or supply them with clean needles and syringes “just in case”. In the same way, early sexual activity for your teen isn't healthy. Every day teens are traumatized emotionally, physically, socially and mentally by early sex. High school has enough drama and stress as it is, why add more? The best way to avoid the problems that come with being sexually active at a young age, is to eliminate the chances altogether. As a parent, you obviously cannot control your teenager's body, but you can influence the decisions they make.



- Encourage your kids to delay sexual activity until they're in an adult committed relationship or marriage.
- Encourage them to protect their heart and avoid getting themselves in a relationship they may not be ready for physically or emotionally.
- Remind them how priceless they are. **Let them know that anyone who is worthy of their love and affection should put their best interest first, respect their boundaries and care about what concerns them. Pressure to have sex is NOT love.**
- Encourage them to avoid drugs and alcohol, especially at parties. Drinking and using drugs can hinder one's ability to make healthy decisions.

If you're uncomfortable when you talk to your teen about sex, be honest and admit that. Share that you felt talking with them about sex was more important than your own comfort.

Talk to them in a clear way cut way. Do not substitute the name of things. They aren't babies. On the contrary, they are at an age where they can bring a baby home. So having a mature conversation with them is important. Be prepared to answer questions. The world is much more sexualized than it was when you were a teen. Today there are new words for a lot of things, so if you're unsure about what your teen is talking about, ask them. Finally, remember that just because your teen asks a question about something DOES NOT mean they are doing it.

You may think that all of this is the job of the school's counselors and teachers, but the truth is it's your job. Your child isn't old enough or mature enough to have their own apartment. They come home to you, their parent/guardian. Don't let your child's high school experience pass by without talking to them about sex. If you do, the “real world” will be happy to fill them in.

Secret C. I. A. Confidential. Isolated. Annoying.

“Personally, I believe there should be a direct link between the amount of responsibility, consistency, and honesty that kids show and the amount of privacy they’re allowed to have in their rooms.” James Lehman, MSW

Your teenager has probably told you that they deserve privacy at least once before. If not, wait for it. You may also see your teenager exchanging secrets with their friends or suddenly have to step away to discuss a *very serious matter*. These things are normal. So the question is, should you be concerned? Should you investigate to see what kind of activities your teenager is involved in? I mean after all, *somebody has to*.

As their parent/guardian, you have the right to know who they are talking to as well as where they are going and with whom. Even if your teenager is responsible, wanting to know where your child is going/what they are doing, and what time they’ll be home is not being nosey, its parenting. Unfortunately, many young people have a broken sense of entitlement, feeling they “deserve” privileges as well as material things. Many will feel they deserve privacy. If they are living in your house, and you are paying the bills, it is not too much to ask that they show basic consideration by letting you know of their coming and going.

Generally, there are a couple of ways to get this information. You can either choose to do so through regular conversation or by demanding them to tell you, though the latter is more detrimental to your relationship. You don’t have to be your child’s best friend, but fostering good communication and laying the groundwork for developing a mature relationship, is beneficial as they grow into adulthood.

“The years when kids are between 13 and 18 years old are an essential time for parents to stay involved,”
Amelia M. Arria, Ph.D.

This aspect of the teen age years, the secrecy and times of withdrawing, can be frustrating and downright annoying. Some parents, sensing a loss of control over their teens’ behavior, crack down every time their child steps out of line. Others avoid all conflict for fear their teen will push them away. You don’t have to do either of those things. It’s about finding a balance between your teen adhering to house rules and the supervised freedom they can enjoy when they comply. You can be an affective, involved parent who understands that your teenager desires a social life. Don’t let the media tell you otherwise. The media doesn’t know your child, that’s your job.

Hang in there. Your teens are worth pushing through this tough time.





10 TIPS FOR RAISING TEENAGERS

- ◆ When making a rule, clearly review the consequences of breaking that rule ahead of time. This prevents any debate when/if the rule is broken. Remember, they cannot argue with you and the consequences if they know what to expect ahead of time.
- ◆ No visitors to the house unless an adult is home. That rule protects them and you.
- ◆ Look for opportunities to praise them as much as you find opportunities to object to their behaviors.
- ◆ Speaking of which, DO NOT debate with your teenager.
- ◆ When your teen is talking to you about something, stop what you are doing and give eye contact. This makes them feel they are being heard.
- ◆ Make time for you and your teen to communicate. It's an important enough item to put on your calendar - and to be protected from being "bumped".
- ◆ Know your teenager's friends. This will give you an idea of the influences on them.
- ◆ Let them know that you're interested in what's happening in their lives. They don't always understand that unless it's said out loud.
- ◆ When you can, be involved in school things, extracurricular, fun events, etc.
- ◆ Your relationship with your teen is everything. The media will tell them through music, TV and movies that they don't need you or a relationship with you. You need to make sure they know that's not the case. They are important to you, make sure they know it!

11 Tips for Communicating with Teenagers

All families communicate differently. If you've tried to communicate with your teens before and it hasn't gone exactly the way you want, don't give up. Keep trying for your sake and theirs.

1. First and foremost, your relationship is the most important thing. Find time to have connected, relaxed conversations with your teen. It sounds easy, but making time in our busy lives is sometimes a struggle. You may have to put a date on the calendar.
2. If communication hasn't come naturally, be diligent as you take on this aspect of your relationship. Be patient as you try to engage him/her.
3. Be a good listener. If there is a conflict, try letting them begin. Don't interrupt. Insist that they speak respectfully. Be consistent. Your rules, reactions and the like should be something they can depend on.
4. Pick a non-threatening place if possible. Maybe grab a bite to eat. Find something you both enjoy doing.
5. Practice having conversations by talking about non-threatening/neutral things so that every conversation isn't a battle.
6. Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer.
7. Try not to be an interrogator or interviewer.
8. Give value to your teen's feelings/concerns.
9. Keep issues in perspective. There are big things and small things. Try to distinguish between the two.
10. If your teen is a reluctant communicator, ask them to write you a letter about their issue or problem.
11. Allow choices whenever possible but as the adult, you have the final say.



What Were You Thinking?

You may wonder why your teenager does things that cause you to look at them in wonderment...and not the good kind. There's something important you need to know. Although they may look grown up and fully mature physically, their brains are still being developed.

In the last several years, scientists have discovered that the pre-frontal cortex is not fully mature until the mid-twenties.

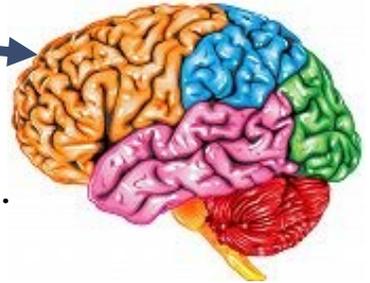
The Prefrontal Cortex, often called the Executive Center, controls a teen's ability to:

- Reason
- Set priorities
- Organize and plan for the future
- Suppress impulses
- Weigh consequences

What can you do to help counter-balance this?

- Teach the importance of setting personal boundaries.
- Use real-life examples to teach the reality of consequences.
- Be patient with them, try not to overreact.
- Be consistent when setting expectations.
- Discuss the risks involved when using drugs, alcohol or being sexually active. (Teens sometimes have trouble connecting the dots regarding how drugs/ alcohol can lead to behavior they might otherwise avoid).
- Hang in there. Don't become so discouraged that you give up teaching them what's right.

Prefrontal Cortex



If your child has gotten into trouble because of unwise decisions, they need correction. It's okay to show your teens why their poor decision led them into trouble. That's how they learn. In fact, without correction, there is a real possibility that they can get into more serious trouble next time. Even if they don't realize it, they continue to need your guidance.

"To all those mothers and fathers who are struggling with teen-agers, I say, just be patient: even though it looks like you can't do anything right for a number of years, parents become popular again when kids reach 20."

Marian Wright Edelman, American Activist for the Rights of Children

