



## Adolescence: What is It?<sup>1</sup>

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Adolescents are young people who straddle the fence between childhood and adulthood. They have one foot secured in childhood and one foot moving into the world of adulthood.

It is a unique period of the life span. In fact, no developmental period, other than infancy, is characterized by so many changes. Complex changes are marked by very fast growth. Those changes include:

- physical growth;
- the rise of reproductive sexuality;
- new social roles;
- growth in thinking, feeling, and morals;
- and school transitions.

This is the first of a three-part series of bulletins which explores adolescence. They are divided into major questions:

1. What is adolescence? and What are the biological changes that occur during adolescence?
2. What are the major questions facing adolescents?

3. What are the developmental tasks facing adolescents?

The information in this series provides a "road map" of what to expect from adolescents. Using this road map, parents and other adults can determine whether adolescents are reaching their destinations; or whether they have detoured and need extra support and intervention to get them back on track.

This series also provides information about communication. Positive interactions with your adolescent can enhance his or her development.

Parents and adults who work with adolescents must remain sensitive to adolescents' individual needs, because they develop at varying rates.

### WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence begins with biological maturation (puberty), when young people must accomplish developmental tasks and develop self-identity. It ends when they achieve self-sufficient adulthood as defined by society.

Adolescence has three substages, early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence.

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## Adolescence: What is It?

In early adolescence, between 10 and 14 years of age, adolescents are moving from elementary school to middle or junior high school. Middle adolescence is between the ages 15 and 17 and late adolescence from age 18 to the early twenties.

Late adolescence seems to be extending further into the early twenties. This is especially true for those adolescents who cannot support themselves financially after high school.

Here, we group middle and late adolescents together and refer to them as late adolescents. The difference between early and late adolescence can be illustrated by comparing 11- and 12-year-olds with 17- and 18-year-olds.

Early adolescents are barely out of childhood. Much like younger children, they still need special nurturing and protection. Late adolescents, on the other hand, share many attributes of adults.

These two groups have very little in common with each other, and their needs and abilities differ. Parents and other adults who work with them need to be aware of these differences in order to provide the support necessary for healthy adolescent development.

### **WHAT ARE THE BIOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL CHANGES IN ADOLESCENCE?**

The completion of biological and physical development associated with adolescence seems to occur earlier now than in the past — two years earlier than in the year of 1900.

Puberty, which signals of the beginning of adolescence, is a developmental process which takes about two to four years to complete.

Puberty usually begins two years earlier for girls than for boys; and, girls are generally taller than boys their age until around age fourteen when boys are generally taller.

The events most closely associated with puberty, menstruation in girls and ejaculation in boys, actually occur approximately midway in the developmental process. Girls are generally 12½ years old at the onset of menstruation (menarche). Boys are on average 13 years of age at first ejaculation. It is important to remember that ages can vary.

Sexual dimorphism — the physical differences between men and women such as height, weight, body proportions and reproductive systems — occurs during puberty.

Sex hormones increase, specifically estrogens increase in girls and androgens increase in boys. Due to higher levels of androgens in their system, boys generally suffer more acne and odor problems than girls. At approximately age 15 for girls and ages 16 to 17 for boys, hormone production levels off.

- Early adolescent girls (10- to 14-years-old) experience:
  - onset of menstruation on average at age 12½
  - a growth spurt of approximately 8 to 10 inches
  - weight gain and an increase in muscular development
  - change of body portions change — hips widen
  - development of breast buds and pubic hair
- Middle adolescent girls (14- to 17-years-old) experience:
  - full expression of secondary physical characteristics
  - full development of breasts
  - development of sweat glands and oil glands (acne or odors)
- Early and middle adolescent boys (12- to 16-years-old) experience:
  - a growth spurt of approximately 12 to 13 inches
  - weight gain and an increase in muscular development
  - changes in body proportions — shoulders broaden
  - development of pubic hair

- Middle adolescent and late adolescent boys (16-to 20-years-old) experience:
  - full expression of secondary characteristics
  - development of facial hair
  - development of sweat glands and oil glands (acne or odors)

## CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a complex period in the life span marked by a multitude of changes. These changes make adolescence an exciting, as well as awkward, time in one's life. Adolescents often are easily embarrassed and may be uncomfortable with childish routines, such as kissing parents good night. As parents and adults who interact with adolescents, it is important to know about the normal changes and behaviors of adolescents. Awareness of these facts, enables parents and adults to support them better.

While adolescents may look like adults, we know that they are not. They need time and opportunities to understand themselves, their new bodies, new roles, and new relationships.

Parents and adults need to expect ambiguity, searching and uncertainty when interacting with adolescents. They need to spend time with adolescents and, at the same time, respect their privacy. Through example and guidance, parents and adults can have a positive impact on the lives of adolescents.

The first bulletin of this three part series has only begun to show the complexity of the changes that confront individuals beginning their second decade of life. The next two bulletins will provide more information about the intellectual and emotional changes that occur in adolescence.

## RESOURCES

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