

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Normal Psychosocial Development in Adolescents

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10 FAQs on NORMAL PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENTS

1. I feel my 13-year-old son really needs my supervision regarding his company and friends. At the same time, I do not want to ingress into his personal space. Please guide me how to balance it.
2. How should I counsel my 18-year-old daughter about menstrual hygiene, safe sexual behavior, and relationships?
3. My 19-year-old son looks more relaxed and comfortable when he is alone, but he becomes silent and tense when he is with us. Please advise how to handle the situation.
4. My 18-year-old boy, Sunny, is very much changed recently. He drives very fast and comes late in night. I do not understand what to do?
5. Tarong, my son, has done tattoos, pierced his ears, having earrings too. Please help. I am worried.
6. My son, Manan, who is 15 years old is more comfortable with his peer group. He listens to his friends more than parents and family.
- 7A. My 14-year-old daughter, Radhika, now-a-days gets aggressive toward me. How to keep her in discipline without smacking?
- 7B. How to inculcate a habit of healthy lifestyle in my teenager?
8. What can I do to build positive body image for my 15-year-old son?
9. I have observed recently that my teenage son, Bhaumik, was observing porn clips. I am confused how to deal with?
10. My 13-year-old daughter comes from school and tells me that she feels like everyone is observing her. She is spending more time in front of mirror looking at her appearance. She attended menarche at 10 years. Is this normal, doctor?

Under the Auspices of the IAP Action Plan 2020–2021

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Normal Psychosocial Development in Adolescents

Q1

I feel my 13-year-old son really needs my supervision regarding his company and friends. At the same time, I do not want to ingress into his personal space. Please guide me how to balance it.

Monitoring a teenager is a delicate part of parenting. Too much monitoring will send the message of distrust, too less monitoring will deprive him of protection and guidance in making safe decisions about behavior and relationships.

Trust is the key to finding a balance. Wanting more privacy does not necessarily mean that he has something to hide. Teenagers need privacy for themselves and secrecy goes along with the development of independence which is normal.

Extreme secrecy, however, can be a red-flag sign which should be ruled out. Monitoring a teenager without engrossing to his personal space needs sensibility and discretion. Some of the tips are given here:

Dos

- Knock before you enter his room.
- Ask permission before looking at his personal belongings.
- Make ground rules. You need to know when he is coming back after his Saturday night party or if there is going to be alcohol. Do not ask him personal questions such as who he danced with, etc.

- Be consistent with the ground rules. Teenagers need to know that parents are not pushovers.
- Stay connected with trust. Invite his friends at your home, give space, and communicate with parents of his friends.
- Discuss about your concerns openly with him if required.

Avoid

- Listening his conversations on the phone secretly.
- Going through his diary or phone.
- Communicating with him on social media.
- Calling him relentlessly to ascertain his location when he is out of house.
- Open communication and building trust with teenagers will be helpful to balance the monitoring.

Q2

How should I counsel my 18-year-old daughter about menstrual hygiene, safe sexual behavior, and relationships?

You can become a friend of your daughter. She is in the transition stage between childhood and young adulthood (**Fig. 1**). You can talk to her about safe practices honestly and calmly. Please find some suggestions given ahead:

- Seize any opportunity such as advertises of sanitary napkins on television, newspapers, TV shows, online videos explaining normal menstruation while raising issues of sexuality and behaviors, etc. Use it as an opportunity to open discussions.
- Show her charts and videos available online on menstrual hygiene and health.
- Talk about cleanliness, use proper method of disposing used sanitary napkins.
- You can discuss about premenstrual tension/stress, a bit of pain in breasts and abdomen before and during menstruation which is normal. If it is not tolerable or bleeding is in excess (>5/6 pads per day)/prolonged (>5/6 days) can consult a doctor.

Few Tips about Safe Sexual Behavior and Relationships

It is very sensitive and important to address about safe sexual behavior and relationship. Many parents are not comfortable to talk about it.

- Present the risks objectively including emotional pain, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unplanned pregnancies.
- Avoid lectures and scare techniques to discourage sexual activity.
- No one should have sex out of obligation or force. “No” should always mean “No”. Instill in her the skill to say “No” which is one of the “Life skills”.
- With the facts and accurate information about sexual health, the important consideration of values, ethics, and responsibilities of family and community should be emphasized.
- Advice to stay away from situations that can lead to unsafe sex.
- If she is sexually active, this conversation with your daughter becomes more important and should be continued with understanding and acceptance on your part.
- Loving and meaningful relationships are healthy and safe.

Recognize Signs of Unhealthy Relations

- Use of alcohol and drugs
- Avoidance of friends and social events
- Loss of interest in school and extracurricular activities
- Compulsive and aggressive behavior of the person
- Suspicious physical signs of abuse-like bruises and abrasions— if you are not confident, it helps if you practice the same talk with an adult before talking to your daughter.
- Be honest. If you cannot answer a question, try to find the answer together, take help of healthcare workers or consult a doctor, if required.



Fig. 1: Counseling of an 18-year-old daughter about menstrual hygiene, safe sexual behavior, and relationships.

Q3

My 19-year-old son looks more relaxed and comfortable when he is alone, but he becomes silent and tense when he is with us. Please advise how to handle the situation.

This is probably the normative and adaptive behavior at this age. Separation is prerequisite of healthy and autonomous functioning during adulthood. Parents need to allow smooth transition to independence and autonomy of adolescence knowing that he needs to create his own social family.

Some Tips

Try to understand that you must accept even if you want to know everything about your son, he will reveal only as much as he feels comfortable with. So, you have to go ahead with whatever information you get.

- As children grow up and enter their teenage, you do not have as much in common as you had with him during his elementary school days. Find activities/interests you can share now. The differences will be bridged honestly and frankly.
- Teenagers love to be with their peer groups which is normal. His priorities widen to include more of his peers and society. It may not mean that you are no longer your son's favorite company.
- There may be disagreements even leading to conflicts as rebellious nature is common and normal during this age up to certain extent. You may think he is overconfident, and he may think you are overcautious.
- This separation is natural for late adolescence but calls for courage to sail through smoothly. Because this does not mean that he does not love you, respect you anymore. He is trying to create his identity as an adult which is normal and what is expected as well.

Q4

My 18-year-old boy, Sunny, is very much changed recently. He drives very fast and comes late in night. I do not understand what to do?

Sunny shows risk taking behavior which is common in teens up to certain extent.

Adolescents take risks to test and define themselves. It releases happy hormone, *adrenaline surge*. So they get feel good effect, and it continues again and again. It makes good evolutionary sense leading to situations where new skills are learnt, new experiences will prepare them for future challenges.

Natural normative tendency to take risks plays central role in adolescent development making it a time of great potential and vulnerability. Complex feelings such as fear of rejection, wanting to look smart, makes it difficult for adolescents to think through potential outcomes, understand consequences of their decision or even use common sense.

Mass media, community norms, and adult role models are factors that influence adolescent risk-taking behavior.

Few Points to Emphasize

- Emphasize and confirm that he has valid driving license. Discuss about importance of wearing helmet, following traffic rules, etc. Be a role model for him.
- Help your son learn to assess risks. Calculated risks will be something from which he can learn. Pathologic risk taking will be something that may result in injury or death, such as drunk and driving (**Fig. 2**).
- Work out ground rules and boundaries, e.g., forbid use of cell phone while driving.
- Talk about values and norms.
- Monitor your son. Try to know his friends. Teach him assertiveness and how to say "NO", a life skill to handle peer pressure if any.
- Communicate openly with him about your concerns.
- Allow him recreational activities to cut down free time such as playing cricket, football, cycling, etc.
- Finally, illustrating potential consequences of risk taking may be helpful, like introducing him to someone handicapped after an accident.



Fig. 2: Shows a risk while driving.

Q5

Tarong, my son, has done tattoos, pierced his ears, having earrings too. Please help. I am worried.

Tarong, with his tattoos and piercings, is one of the many adolescents who do body art.

This is a fun form of self-expression for many adolescents. At this age, they are more concerned about body image. World cup footballers, cricketers, and many other celebrities who may be their role models are seen with tattoos. So, relax, it can be normal.

But, on the other hand, there is evidence that individuals with tattoos and piercings are more often associated with risk-taking behavior such as drugs, illegal activities and gang affiliation, etc. Hence, he needs to be monitored. Invite his friends to familiarize yourself with his peer group.

Without appearing to scare him off, you need to share the facts and discuss your concerns with him:

- People with tattoos are looked at with suspicion of being drug abusers, sexually permissible and hooligans which may not be true.
- Tattoos are permanent and cannot be removed fully, if one wants to remove them later on. Removal is very costly and painful.
- Some people get an unsightly skin condition called "keloids" following tattoo.
- Piercings and tattoos are medical procedures. There are risks of serious infections such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), if equipment used is not sterilized properly.

It is imperative for you to understand his motive, recognize, and share his enthusiasm to express social views by opening frank communication. Most of the time, it is temporary behavior during the phase of adolescence.

Q6

My son, Manan, who is 15 years old is more comfortable with his peer group. He listens to his friends more than parents and family.

Peers have more influence on thinking, attitudes, values, and behaviors as they become adolescents. If a young person tries to resist peer influences, he might feel left out or isolated. So, relax this is normal up to certain extent.

- Make Manan aware of the peer pressure. Help him to say “NO” to peers whenever required to maintain the dignity.
- Encourage him to give good amount of thought before giving support to some request by the peers. Encourage to think by using critical thinking skills (one of the life skills) through the results of their decisions.
- Encourage him to hold his own opinions and not always have to please others.
- Parents are judgmental while peers are not, so teenagers are more friendly with peers than parents.
So, listen, love, give latitude, and set limits with Manan and be more friendly with him.

Q7A

My 14-year-old daughter, Radhika, now-a-days gets aggressive toward me. How to keep her in discipline without smacking?

Mild and occasional aggression may be taken as normal at this age. But, if it is constant and progressive, deep issues of power lie beneath most of conflicts between teenagers and parents.

- *Power* (I am your boss!)
- *Position* (I am ought to act your parents!), and
- *Prestige* (Because I am the parent. I have to act like this otherwise what others will think of me.)

A conversation with last—wordiness and comeback lines is a threat to our position, our prestige, and they are about power. The impulsive and angry response by parents to backchat adds fuel to the fire in defiance.

Sometimes, parents fail to realize that it is the key to remove oneself from the power play.

Here are some ideas:

- Avoid responding to backchat with words, instead walk away or keep busy in some other work. It defeats a power play.
- Avoid telling your teenager what she should do. Instead talk what you can do, and lead by example.
- Make more use of “I-messages” if you wish to convey how you feel, e.g., “When someone gets hurts rude to me, I feel hurt.....” Make less use of “U”

Q7B

How to inculcate a habit of healthy lifestyle in my teenager?

- The teen years are fun and exciting time for your adolescent but often a very nerve-wracking time for you as a parent.
- It is the time when you are giving your teen more independence and responsibilities which is a good thing, but it is also important that you instill in them healthy habits that are essential to living a long and happy life. If you help them to form these habits now, you will be giving them the tool to navigate any obstacles, they may face as they grow into adulthood.
- Remember you have to lead by an example so be the role model for teenagers.

Healthy Habits for Teens

- **Healthy diet:** Proper nutrition is important for all of us, but for teens, it is more important as this is the last chance to correct. They are still growing rapidly and have increased appetites, but they are at school and out with friends more than they are with you. So it is more difficult to ensure that they are eating the right amount of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein, and dairy products. Avoid junk food, soft drinks as far as possible as it is harmful and addictive (**Fig. 3**).



Fig. 3: Avoiding junk food and ensuring to take healthy diet.

- Make sure that you always have healthy snacks in house. Give homemade tiffin for your teen. Try to have a nutritious family meal together at least a couple of times a week. Getting your teen involved in food shopping and cooking will also help him or her know to prepare nutritious meals when they are on their own.
- *Good hygiene*: Cleanliness of body, teeth, hair, nails, etc.
- *Daily exercise*: Daily some physical activities, such as cycling, football, cricket, etc. Discourage/limit screen time. Have a walk with him, play outdoor sports as and when you get time in weekends. Explain benefits of exercise and physical activities. Be a role model in doing exercise.
- *Sleep hygiene*: Teens need 8–10 hours at night-time for sound sleep. Encourage them not to take much nap in afternoon. Avoid use of screen, mobile, watching TV programs and serials at night hours. Explains benefits of proper 9–10 hours sleep and usefulness of it (**Fig. 4**).
- *Find passion*: While physical health is important so is mental health. Encourage your teen to find hobbies and interests that ignite their passions whether it is drawing, writing or music/singing. Doing something they love will help them to handle stress better as well as to have a more positive outlook on life.

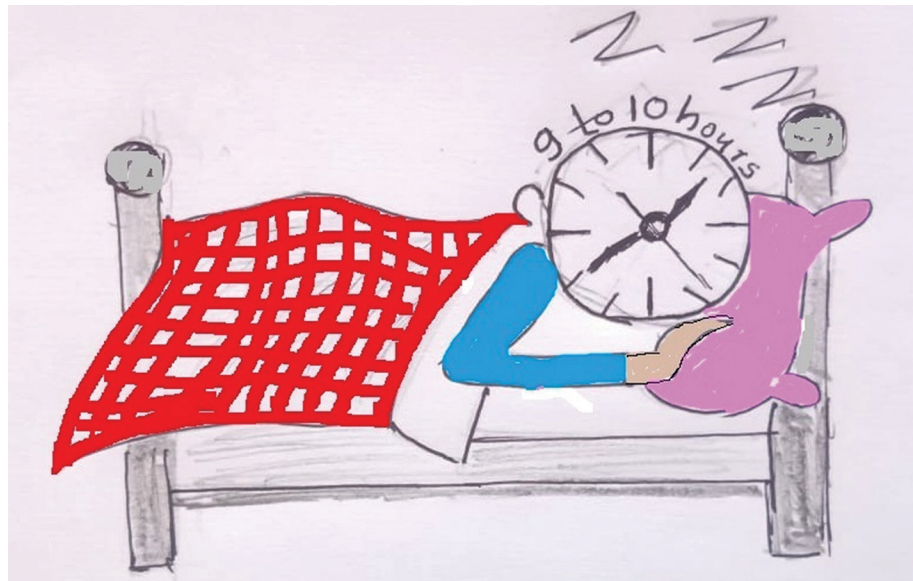


Fig. 4: Benefits of proper 9–10 hours sleep.

Q8

What can I do to build positive body image for my 15-year-old son?

Let us understand, what is body image.

- Body image is how and what you think and feel about your own body. It includes the picture of own body that one has in the mind, which might or might not match with actual shape and size of the body.
- A positive or *healthy body image* is feeling happy and satisfied with body, as well as being comfortable with and accepting the way one looks.
- A negative or *unhealthy body image* is feeling unhappy with the way one looks. People who feel like this often want to change their body size or shape.

Factors Affecting Body Image

- These factors include family environment, ability or disability, the attitudes of peers, social media, cultural background, and more.
- *Puberty* is also a big influence. During puberty, your teen's body is going through lots of changes. But at the same time, fitting in and looking the same as other people become more important.

Talking about Body Image with Teens

Your teenager needs your help to sort through and understand messages about the body.

Help your *teenager* to develop a positive body image by:

- Active listening and talking with the teenager.
- Focusing on him person as a "Whole"
- Being a "Role Model" for positive body image.
- Say nice things about how they look.
- Allow them to try new looks and styles.
- Avoid criticizing how a teen looks.
- Make sure teens get plenty of sleep and eat a healthy diet.
- Make sure teens are active everyday.
- Many times, teens feel confused, reassure him that changes are normal, and it means that he is growing up.
- Talk about *images on social and other media*. Some images set unrealistic ideals for teenagers. But explain how the images are often digitally manipulated so that people look more "beautiful" than they really are.

Q9

I have observed recently that my teenage son, Bhaumik, was observing porn clips. I am confused how to deal with?

I understand that it is a distressing situation for parents and teenager too. It can be just exploring curiosity as well, so calm down first. A significant number of children and young people are exposed to pornography. Exposure and access are most likely to occur online, and it might increase with age. Boys are more likely to be exposed to it, and actually seek it out. Pornography impacts on what teens believe about sex and intimacy and that affects their behavior; especially their risky behaviors around sex, which can have impact over future married life as well. The average age of exposure to pornography is around 10 years.

Tips for Parents

- *Stay calm:* Stay calm and reassure your son.
- *Just listen:* Ask him to tell you about how he found it. Ask him how he located it on his device. Find out where it happened, who (if anyone) showed it to him, how he felt when he saw it, and what he viewed.
- *Reassure:* Avoid punishment. This will hurt your relationship. Do not take his device from them immediately or he will feel punished. One needs to be supportive and understanding.
- *Plan your talk:* While it is tempting to give a big lecture right, there on the spot, it is better to take some time out to plan your conversation about pornography and sex before you start the discussion.
- *Talk about how he felt:* Did watching this make your son feel good, bad, safe, scared, uncomfortable, curious, or something else? All of these feelings are normal. Tell him that it is fine to feel like that. Most children will feel a mix of curiosity and revulsion.

Use this as a chance to teach about real intimacy. Did what they viewed seem respectful? Were the people involved both wanting to do what they were doing, or were they just acting? You may wish to teach them that a respectful relationship includes sex where both partners agree to what is happening (use the word “consent” and discuss it) and feel good about it. Ask them if what they saw resembled kind and caring intimacy or dominance, power, and disrespect.

- *Talk about sex:* You may wish to talk to them about what sex is and why we have sex. Discussions about love and intimacy are important. So, too, are discussions about boundaries, appropriate age and timing for intimacy, and other personal values related to sex and love.

- *Problem-solve together:* Ask him whether he thinks it is a good idea to look for those kinds of things on Internet again.

Encourage him to think of ways to stay safe.

- Avoid using keywords that lead to these kinds of images.
- Update security levels on devices.
- Keep devices in public places.
- Avoid friends, relatives, and neighbors who are viewing pornography.
- Have regular conversations about what your teenager is viewing.
- Encourage your son to talk to you anytime about *any* questions he has, or anything else he sees (**Fig. 5**).

In a perfect world, one should have a positive age-appropriate conversation about sex and intimacy with children from an early age.

A discussion about pornography may not have been in your plans, but accidental exposure to this kind of content demands a response. These tips can provide a useful springboard to further ongoing healthy conversations about intimate topics with your teenager.

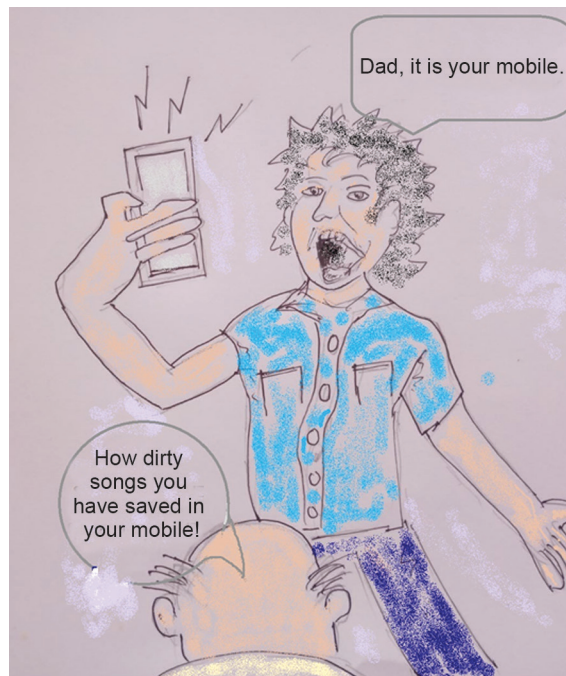


Fig. 5: A discussion between a father and a son regarding dirty song saved in the mobile.

Q10

My 13-year-old daughter comes from school and tells me that she feels like everyone is observing her. She is spending more time in front of mirror looking at her appearance. She attended menarche at 10 years. Is this normal, doctor?

Yes, such behavior is common and normal.

The spotlight effect is a term used by social psychologists to refer to the tendency which one has to overestimate how much other people notice about us. In other words, your daughter may tend to think there is a spotlight on her at all times, highlighting all of her mistakes or flaws, for the entire world to see.

The reason for the spotlight effect is the innate tendency to forget that although one is the center of one's own world, one is not the center of everyone else's world. This tendency is prominent when one does something atypical. You can help her to reduce it by using self-distancing techniques, which involve trying to view yourself from an external perspective.

Early adolescents undergo rapid physical changes, and may experience uncertainty about all of these anatomical and physiological changes are progressing normally or not. Subsequently, a strong emphasis on physical appearance is normal. Just reassurance from you/adult will be comforting to her.

Tell your daughter that one of the best ways to boost our body confidence is through acceptance. If you can face a *mirror* everyday and cultivate a positive body image, then acceptance and confidence will follow automatically.