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# Normal Adolescent Development

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A Training For Parents  
Dr. Susan Landes



**Auburn-Davis DBT**  
Dialectical Behavior Therapy



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# Areas of Normal Adolescent Behavior

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- ❖ **Verbal Aggression-** Verbal aggression is normal adolescent behavior, especially in boys. Hormonal changes combined with the desire for more independence can cause teens to lash out with hurtful words, yelling, or arguments. While verbal aggression is normal, when it becomes abusive or turns into physical aggression it is time to get help. You do not want to allow aggression to get out of control. You cannot stand by when teens become harmful to themselves or others.
- ❖ **Lack of frustration Tolerance-** Hormonal changes and confusion about their place in the world can also cause a lack of frustration tolerance in adolescents, as can environmental issues such as bullying, low socioeconomic status, peer pressure, lack of support from home, and difficulty making friends. Teens are easily frustrated, and that frustration can lead to emotional or aggressive outbursts. Studies have shown testosterone levels to increase this type of behavior in teenage boys.





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- ❖ **Low Impulse Control**-Teens have a low level of control over their impulses. Children, in general, tend to act on what they want, often without thinking through the consequences. Teens are no different, except what they want could have far more dire consequences than when a child wants ice cream for breakfast. Low impulse control can lead to normal adolescent behavior such as blowing off schoolwork to go to a party or school event, experimenting with alcohol at home or at a party, or lying when they feel exposed. In extreme cases, it can also lead to petty theft, dangerous use of drugs, or promiscuous sex.
- ❖ **Withdrawal From the Family**-It is normal for your teen to withdraw from family and spend more time with friends and peers. In fact, increased social interaction with peers should be encouraged during adolescence. If your teen is withdrawing from all social interaction, it may be a cause for concern. Pay close attention to your adolescent and make sure that they are getting adequate social interaction. If they are withdrawing from family but also not spending time with peers, they may be isolating themselves.





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- ❖ **Sleeping Harder and Longer-** Teens grow very quickly from about ages 14 to 17. It is normal adolescent behavior to sleep harder and longer during intense growth spurts. Your teen may be reluctant to get out of bed in the morning for school, go to bed early, or sleep for as long as 12 hours per night on the weekends. If your teen sleeps harder and longer for a long period without respite, there could be a problem. If you start noticing low energy levels, a lack of interest in activities and subjects that they once enjoyed, and other signs of withdrawal from the world, it could be a sign that your teen is suffering from depression.
- ❖ **Increase in Appetite-**Because there is so much physical growth during the teenage years, your teen's appetite will also increase. You will notice that they eat much more during meals, and they will probably eat in between meals as well. It is perfectly normal adolescent behavior to want to eat everything in sight, and teens may not make the healthiest food choices. If your teen is constantly eating and starts gaining weight quickly, you may need to have them checked out by a doctor to make sure that there are not any health concerns that need to be addressed.





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- ❖ **Light Risk Taking**-Risk taking is related to low impulse control and peer pressure. It is normal for adolescents to want to fit in with the crowd, and teens are not likely to think through consequences before making decisions. This can lead to some light risk-taking behavior, such as experimenting with alcohol at a party or skipping the occasional class. When risk-taking behaviors become dangerous to your teen or others, you may need to address the problem and seek help.
- ❖ **Concerns About Physical Appearance**- As teens get older, they care more about physical appearance, concerned about fitting in with the crowd. Your teen may become pickier about clothing, worry about wearing off-brand shoes, or spend hours in the bathroom prepping for a night out. If your teen suddenly starts dropping weight, changes their eating habits drastically, or stops eating altogether, you need to get them into counseling for a possible eating disorder.





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- ❖ **Defiance and Testing Limits-** As teens fight for their independence, they are likely to become defiant and test the limits of rules and expectations. It is normal adolescent behavior for your teen to ignore or argue about rules, or outright refuse to do things that are asked of them. While this is frustrating, it is a normal part of growing up that every teenager goes through.
- ❖ **Low Self Esteem-** Many teens have low self-esteem, particularly during awkward stages when they feel as though they don't belong. When they don't feel like a child anymore but also don't feel like an adult, they may wonder about their place in the world. This can lead to low self-esteem or poor self-image. If your teen becomes despondent, depressed, or withdrawn, it could be a sign that their poor self-esteem is developing into anxiety or depression.





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- ❖ **Abandoning Commitments-** Many teens will abandon previous commitments as they struggle to discover what is important to them. If your teen played an instrument or a team sport and suddenly loses interest or drops out, don't be surprised. This is normal adolescent behavior that should not be a cause for concern. If, however, your teen has little interest in anything at all, it could be a sign of depression.
- ❖ **Selfishness-** You may notice that your adolescent is selfish. Many teens think only of themselves, and they rarely consider the thoughts, feelings, or actions of others. This is because teens are figuring out who they are as people and trying to find their places in the world. This leaves little attention for people or events outside their immediate spheres of interest and understanding.





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- ❖ **Curfew Violations-** While frustrating and seemingly dangerous at times, it is normal adolescent behavior for your teen to miss curfew. Teens often do not have a great sense of time. They may lose track of time easily, especially when spending time with their peers at social engagements.
- ❖ **Struggles with Sense of Identity-** Many teens struggle with their sense of identity. They may go through phases where they are "goth" or "emo." They may go through phases when they are bookworms and then abhor books. They may dress differently or gain interest in completely different things than they have enjoyed in the past. It is also common for teens to grapple with gender or sexual identity.





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- ❖ **Mood Swings-** Mood swings are quite common as your child grows to adolescence. The massive hormonal changes that teens are going through affects the production of dopamine and serotonin in the brain, causing frequent changes in mood. A teenager may be completely peaceful one moment and crying the next. Mood swings are a cause for concern when they are drastic, frequent, and extreme. Many mood disorders and personality disorders are first discovered during adolescence.
- ❖ **Greater Interest in Privacy-**Teens have a greater interest in privacy as they grow up, and it is important that you allow them this privacy. Part of their interest in privacy will be due to changes in how they think about sexuality. Your teen will also have a greater interest in keeping thoughts and feelings private. Teens may keep a journal or diary, or they may have trusted friends that they talk to.





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- ❖ **Sexual Experimentation-** It is extremely normal for your teen to want to experiment with sex. Their experimentation may have to do with exploration of their own body. On the other hand, as they get older, they may become curious about sex with others. If your teen is not only sexually active but sexually promiscuous, you may need to seek the help of a professional.
- ❖ **Frequent Changes in Relationships-** Your teen may change relationships frequently. You may have a difficult time keeping up with whom they are dating and when those relationships start or stop. If your teen is showing any of the more concerning signs of adolescence when it comes to relationships (e.g., promiscuity), it is a good idea to contact a therapist and get them evaluated.





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# Resources

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- ❖ Hollander, M. (2008) *Helping Teens Who Cut: Understanding and Ending Self-Injury*. Guilford Press, New York.
- ❖ Porr, V. (2010) *Overcoming Borderline Personality Disorder: A Family Guide for Healing and Change*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- ❖ National Education Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder (NEABPD) [borderlinepersonalitydisorder.com](http://borderlinepersonalitydisorder.com)





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- Miller, A. (2006). *Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Suicidal Adolescents*. Guilford Press, New York.
- Miller, A. and Rathus, J. (2015). *DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents*. Guilford Press, New York.
- Linehan, M. (2015) *DBT Skills Training Manual: Second Edition*. Guilford Press, New York.
- [www.betterhelp.com/advice/adolescence/18-areas-of-normal-adolescent-behavior/](http://www.betterhelp.com/advice/adolescence/18-areas-of-normal-adolescent-behavior/)
- [www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Normal-Adolescent-Development](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Normal-Adolescent-Development)
- (There is a Part I and Part 2 to the above link.)



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