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Understanding Teen Challenges: What Parents Can Do

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Adolescence is a time of tremendous physiological & social change

In her presentation, Dr. Jennifer Kellogg explained that adolescents are undergoing important physiological changes. Their brains continue to develop in critical ways until their early 20s. Hormonal changes also affect teens' behaviors and responses. Teens naturally respond to stress differently than adults.

Socially, peers are of central importance to youth, as they work to acquire key socialization skills, separate from their families, and become their own individuals.

To understand what is going on for teens today, Dr. Kellogg noted, it's important to realize that today's teens have rapid and unparalleled access to social media and such contemporary issues as the pandemic, climate change, and other world events. Some of these influences can lead to feelings of isolation and other difficult emotions.

Of particular importance is for parents to help teens maintain their physical health to support their emotional health. Dr. Kellogg identified "things that matter": Sleep (7-10 hours a night); exercise; diet; and participation in such activities as sports, academics, or volunteering. Too often these critical factors are overlooked.



What Parents Can Do

Even while apparently dismissing them, teens nevertheless still look to their parents for key support. Dr. Kellogg outlined several ways in which parents can provide that important support.

Keep communication open. Allow your children to approach you on their own timeline, when they feel ready. For example, many teens open up later in the evening, or during a drive in the car to and from events. Look for ways to create opportunities to talk by making yourself available.

When talking with teens, be open and curious, rather than judgmental. Avoid negative or absolute language, such as “We need to talk!” “That’s a problem!” Overreacting is liable to shut teens down.

Instead, listen as much as possible, and ask open-ended questions, letting them respond in their own way. Often, Dr. Kellogg noted, parents may need to find ways to manage their own feelings and reactions when talking with children, for example, taking a few moments before responding.

It’s important to validate teens’ feelings. However, Dr. Kellogg explained, validating does not mean that you agree with them, only (importantly) that you are acknowledging their emotions. This can include your reassurance that this time of life is time-limited, and things will change.

Model appropriate coping strategies yourself. Demonstrate your own daily self-care practices, such as mindfulness, talking about and



sharing feelings (rather than holding onto them), exercising, and keeping to a healthy diet.

When There's a Concern

Parents should be aware of their teens' environments, "What's going on." Keep an eye out and note any unusual behaviors, changes in affect and mood.

Do not be afraid to let your child know of your concern. Be open and affirming, "You need support." Also, do not be afraid to bring up the subject of suicide or self-harm. "You will not be giving them ideas." They are already acutely aware of these. Dr. Kellogg and other experts in the field stress that talking about suicide and self-harm openly can be a relief for children, enabling them to talk about their feelings and fears. It can serve as a protective factor and provide them with reassurance of your support.

If you suspect that your child is dealing with particularly difficult emotions, don't be afraid to seek help. Dr. Kellogg stressed that the type of psychotherapy, such as CBT or DBT or trauma-informed, is not important. What matters is that you contact a reliable source of care.

Jennifer Kellogg has her doctorate in clinical psychology. Early on in her career, she was drawn to working with teens and their families. She has been working with adolescents for over 10 years in a variety of settings. Her approach is one that encourages identifying a person's strengths to foster confidence and increase resiliency.