

## Parenting Teens: 5 Key Developmental Principles to Keep in Mind

By

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC

While the child before us has transformed into a maturing teenager, remembering where they are on the developmental path is critical to parenting in this stage. Despite the evolving physical features and push for independence, teens are still straddling an ever-changing position. Typically, they have one foot back in childhood and one foot in adolescence and require a holding environment to help them cross that chasm toward young adulthood. In this holding environment, we provide a bridge of support and challenge, one that looks and feels different than earlier versions. As we parent teens and help them negotiate the identity crisis, it helps to keep the following developmental principles in mind:

**Autonomy.** The closed door and the widening space between us as we travel together are symbolic of a teens need to establish choice, independence, and identity. Privacy is paramount. And as they walk ahead as not to be seen side-by-side with us it is important to remember that this stage is very much like the toddler stage. Toddlers run ahead and proclaim independence, “Me do!” But they turn around to see if the secure home base we provide is still close. The same is true with teens, only the turn to home base to “feel” our presence is psychological. Being there for them and providing the structure they need may be different and, at times difficult, but it is just as needed as any developmental stage.

**Identity.** Teens are negotiating the crisis of identity development, asking the important question: “Who Am I?” They learn this through relationships and in the activities that bring out their sense of competence. This stage is centered on *differentiation* so that in the future teens can more fully integrate a developed sense of self into relationships. Teens learn who they are as they make the difficult transition of being centered on their own needs to being in the give and take of relationships. This takes time and having parents to count on and be there matters.

**Peers:** For teens the bedroom door may close, but the world is becoming bigger with their peer groups being more central to how they spend time and how they experience a sense of self. The transition to a diverse and widening world challenges the mindset. Teens tend to pick kids who think, look, and act like themselves. Typically, teens would rather be around peers than us—and that is developmentally driven.

**Pruning and Myelination.** While teens change on the outside, even greater changes are occurring on the inside. Not since the age of two have their brains gone through such a major overhaul. New neural connections are being made while some are being pruned for efficiency. The resulting change in brain architecture honors “use it or lose it” but it is also a time of vulnerability for teens. In this time of rewiring, pruning may be behind the onset of

psychiatric disorders during this stage. Stress and its management plays a major role in overall well-being.

**Constructing reality.** It is a challenge to adult optics to witness an adolescent with adult hardware acting with childlike software. Cognitively, teens are learning to think about their thinking, but they are still subjectively centered on meeting their own needs. The shift from constructing a reality of a self-centered universe, to one also inhabited by the needs and wants of others is a work in progress. Cooperation and perspective-taking requires lots of practice. Teens need consistent coaching and reminders that the world is a big and diverse space.

**What you can do:** With these developmental principles in mind, here are some suggestions for providing a holding environment for your maturing teenager.

- Hold them responsible for their relationships (including social media).
- Be a model in your relationships.
- Be a model for your use of technology and free time.
- Listen more, preach less.
- Enlist their thoughts and ideas to foster independence and perspective-taking.
- Don't judge their preferences. These preferences and interests are purposefully different from yours and part of identity development. Monitoring content is important, but you don't have to *identify* with their choice of music, You-Tube celebrity, etc.
- Help them notice and develop competencies.
- Keep structure, limits, and key family rituals.
- Sleep is critical for the changing adolescent brain—and for you as well!
- Offer *concrete models* and checkpoints for important future dates, goals, and projects.
- Be aware of and know of friend groups.
- For a fuller picture of your teen's values, listen to what other adults say, such as teachers and coaches. Parents typically will get the rations of moods and venting.
- Enlist the help of another adult. Having a mentor or interested adult other than yourself is a powerful protective factor.
- Hold them accountable for chores.
- Hold them accountable for attitudes. Of note, while arguing may increase, the teen rebellion is not as prevalent as pop culture would have you believe. Findings point to parent-child relationships that have long been stressed and strained before the teen years.
- Love them for who they are rather than what they are not able to be at the present time. Remember that, just like us, they are a work in process.

## Resources

Spear, L. P. (2013). Adolescent neurodevelopment. *Journal of adolescent health, 52*(2), S7-S13.

## About the Author

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC, has worked in educational, clinical, and, private settings for over two decades. Presently, he balances roles as a consultant in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He has also maintained a private practice for over 20 years. Dr. Panepinto has written on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on fatherhood. More at [DrJohnPanepinto.com](http://DrJohnPanepinto.com).