

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Mental Health Issues in Adolescents

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10 FAQs on MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ADOLESCENTS

1. My son is 10 years old. I want to know more about his upcoming phase of adolescence, what is it?
2. My daughter is 13 years old. I want to know why is it important to understand this phase of adolescence that she is going through.
3. My son is 15 years old. What are the various mental health challenges he could face?
4. I have a teenager daughter and I am keen to know about the various “risk-taking behaviors” associated with this phase.
5. My son is 14 years old. Why is this phase so critical? what can we do as parents to help our teenagers?
6. When it comes to teenage behavior, how do we know what is normal and what is not?
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9. My daughter is 13 years old and often complains that “no one understands her”. what should I do?
10. My 13-year-old son has lost interest in academic activities. I am worried and not sure what to do?

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Mental Health Issues in Adolescents

Q1

My son is 10 years old. I want to know more about his upcoming phase of adolescence, what is it?

Adolescence is an evolving phase of transition from childhood to adulthood involving a range of physical, mental, and psychosocial changes. It is a period of enormous energy, vibrant physical changes, skill development, and new experiences.

The World Health Organization defines “*adolescence*” as the period of life between the ages of 10–19 years and “*youth*” as the period between 15 and 24 years. Overall, it combines these age groups and assigns the term “young people” to those between 10 and 24 years. Because adolescence spans such a wide age range and encompasses diverse and complex developmental changes, it is often divided into three substages: early adolescence (10–14 years), mid-adolescence (15–17 years), and late adolescence (>17 years). Early phase 10–14 years is described most difficult to handle by many parents. Adolescent is treated simultaneously as child and adult which adds to further confusion.

Q2

My daughter is 13 years old. I want to know why is it important to understand this phase of adolescence that she is going through.

Adolescents can be addressed as the building blocks of the society and upcoming drivers of prospective economic growth and innovation. This phase reflects an age of opportunity. Current global demographics reflect young people as the largest statistics over the years forming a quarter of the universal population.

It is thus a very complex and critical period of life so it is important not to overlook their physical and mental health needs when they arise. It can be a time fraught with uncertainty as they struggle with the multifaceted changes moving toward attaining independence. It is sometimes best not to pass things off as “just a teenage thing”. Changes may be a red flag for a number of more serious issues.

Q3

My son is 15 years old. What are the various mental health challenges he could face?

As per the World Health Organization, globally up to 20% children and adolescent suffer from disabling mental health issues. Psychosocial basis appears to be the most common attributing factor for several health problems in young people as compared to biological basis. Typically, emotional vulnerability and associated risk-taking behaviors while difficulties negotiating the developmental challenges of adolescence could result in such difficulties. About 75% of adult mental health issues can initiate prior to 25 years of age. Mental health issues could range from depression, anxiety, deliberate self-harm, or suicidal ideation. These could further be associated with risk-taking behaviors such as accidents and injuries (either self-inflicted or unintentional) and behavioral problems, such as substance abuse and unsafe sexual experimentation, aggression, bullying, violence, and criminal acts.

During this phase of increasing social exposure, young people could experience intense anxiety when having to perform in front of other people, called as social anxiety. During this phase, the young people are developing clear identity and are more vulnerable to develop body image issues and related eating disorders. Mood swings and depression in the context of poor emotional control are common. Deliberate self-harm could be in the form of cutting or taking repeat overdoses.

Q4

I have a teenager daughter and I am keen to know about the various “risk-taking behaviors” associated with this phase.

Beyond being an important period of human development, adolescence is also a time of changing health needs. This is especially in relation to the onset of new health risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, alcohol, and other drug use), the emergence of mental health disorders, new sexual and reproductive health needs [e.g., contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), gender orientation), and greater risks from injury (e.g., road traffic injuries).

Risk of various substance abuse (tobacco, alcohol, and other illicit drug use) can also accompany this phase. It is very vital to educate the young person about the short-term as well as long-term hazards of substance abuse which are not only limited to mental health or behavioral issues but can also lead to developmental and learning issues. In addition, addictions can predispose to various cancers. Further awareness needs to be created about the risk of alcohol consumption and unplanned teenage pregnancy that can lead to a broad-spectrum of developmental, behavioral, learning issues in children along with risk of cardiac problems.

Q5

My son is 14 years old. Why is this phase so critical? what can we do as parents to help our teenagers?

It will be highly beneficial for parents and other family members to be involved in the health of their teenagers. Getting acquainted with your child could assist with identifying early changes and seek help before things get serious. Every individual's needs vary and even if any concerns appear, should not be casually dismissed. The situations faced by the young people can be novel with no prior exposure and so often their coping strategies could be very intense as compared to adults, who have relative experience and due to which they can provide a balanced reaction. Especially, in situations like breakup of a relationship or parental separation can demand additional family/social support.

It is also vital to revisit your parenting skills. Often parental adverse or strict childhood experiences can influence their parenting skills. Instead of imposing parental vision for their children, this is the time to understand the young person's concepts about their personal and professional life by providing appropriate support. Strict parenting and academic pressure is one of the popular reasons for suicidal tendencies in our subcontinent and a rapid cultural change in this context can prevent multiple prospective suicidal fatalities.

Q6

When it comes to teenage behavior, how do we know what is normal and what is not?

Things to look out for are as early flags: health worries such as headaches or aches and pains, social withdrawal, avoidance behavior, including nonattendance at school or retreating from activities that used to interest them. Sudden changes in behavior or behavior that is out of character including low mood, feeling unhappy or feeling irritable, angry outbursts and conflict with others at home, aggression, fear, avoidant tendency, sleeplessness, saying they think they are depressed, self-harm thoughts or attempts, tiredness, and getting bored. Getting moody and grumpy is a common thing for the depressed adolescent. Difficulties with eating too much and sleeping too much are common as are anxiety symptoms and excessive worries.

Q7

My daughter is 15 years old and I am worried that she might self-harm. How do I identify thoughts of self-harm?

Thoughts of self-harm and suicide can be prominent in young people with emotional disorders such as depression. It is important to be able to look for early warning signs in a teenager at risk for self-harm. Initial question to enquire would be to ask about things the teenager would be enjoying in life. A sense of reduced enjoyment in life could be referred to as feeling worthless. There is any suggestion of self-harm thoughts, an immediate counseling session should be organized. Meanwhile, exploring thoughts about the actual plan toward putting self-harm or suicidal thoughts in action should be considered.

Q8

My son is 15 years old and has very low threshold for getting angry and often irritable. What could be the reason? What can I do to help him?

Anger in teenagers is like a tip of an iceberg. There are underlying contributory factors that need to be explored, e.g., mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, body image issues, social bullying, breakups, or behavioral issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorder, etc. Initiating a process to understand the young person by optimizing family and social support is crucial. Further, organizing an assessment by a medical practitioner (preferably with expertise in adolescent medicine) and a counselor.

Q9

My daughter is 13 years old and often complains that “no one understands her”. What should I do?

She is going through this challenging phase that involves multiple changes at varied domains. This is the time they are moving toward attaining independence at several levels. Parental role is to give guarded freedom that permits the young person to explore their potentials and also experiment to a certain extent yet being supervised and supported to avoid risk taking behaviors. One of the keys is to start treating them as an adult, acknowledging their views, and giving more responsibilities to make independent decisions. Offer a listening ear by befriending them. Organizing a counselor to help them confide their thoughts is very useful.

Q10

My 13-year-old son has lost interest in academic activities. I am worried and not sure what to do?

First step will be to get acquainted with his teaching environment to understand the factors. Is it a sudden drop or was always low? Various reasons could be learning difficulties, bullying, mental health issues, behavioral problems, breakups, competitive peer or academic pressure, etc. Discussions with his teachers, school principal, and school counselor could provide. There could be underlying medical causes that will need to be assessed for as well. Optimizing their educational support is very crucial. Your role will be to understand the situation and also help the young person to understand themselves and reassure that together you will work toward an appropriate solution.

Salient Tips for Parents

- Provide continuous support and guidance to adolescents.
- Watch for red-flag signs in mood changes of your wards.
- Keep verbal and nonverbal lines open for communication.
- Encourage healthy lifestyle, physical activity, and guide how to cope with negative emotions and stress.