

The Adolescent Transition

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Adolescence is a difficult time for both teens and parents. Difficulties which occur during the normal development of a teen's identity and independence are compounded when the teen also has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). As ADD is expressed through different signs and symptoms as a child grows into adolescence, this can be a confusing, bewildering time for parent and teen alike.

As in childhood, difficulties with impulsiveness continue for the teen with ADD. Problems may arise from a teen's failure to consider how one's behavior will impact others or failure to anticipate consequences to one's actions. Given the natural experimentation that often occurs during adolescence with drugs, sex, and driving, a teen's impulsiveness is a significant concern for many parents.

Difficulties with inattentiveness also continue. Inattentiveness may be apparent when the teen is required to pay attention for greater periods of time to more demanding (i.e. difficult or boring) activities. As classes often change developmentally from allowing movement and frequent interaction at young ages to requiring sitting still and being quiet for extended lectures, and to more board work for older students, demands increase on one's ability to focus and attend to the class activity.

New difficulties develop in organizational skills for the teen coping with ADD. As teens progress through school, their workload becomes more complex as they try to manage varied classes, teachers and homework responsibilities. This new level of complexity requires greater organization for teens to continue to achieve. Unfortunately, organization does not come easily for many teens with ADD. These teens have difficulty independently developing the necessary organizational systems and habits that other students of the same age often are able to do. The result may be poor school performance, as well as frustration for the entire family.

Time management also is difficult for the teen with ADD. Inattentiveness to the passage of time as well as difficulty in organization are part of a teen's difficulty in learning how to plan. An essential part of a teen's time management is the ability to anticipate and plan for one's use of time to complete homework, chores and participate in other activities. The teen with ADD often has great difficulty in having an accurate awareness of the time necessary to complete common tasks and may frequently be presenting themselves (or their homework!) late for a deadline.

Poor social skills is also a frequent problem in adolescence that studies have shown persists into adulthood. At a time in development when social relationships become extremely important, inattentiveness to social cues can lead to difficulties with relationships. Teens with ADD often demonstrate a lack of awareness and understanding of the non-verbal signals of others, leading to miscommunication and misunderstandings. Additionally, a teen's difficulty in understanding the impact of their behavior on others may strain friendships and stress family members.

Difficulties in school, peer relationships and family relationships can lead to low self-esteem for teens with ADD. Often they experience the frustration of trying their best but finding that their efforts alone are not enough to succeed in the areas in which they wish to achieve.

What can parents do to help their child through this difficult time?

* Communication can be very important in understanding a teen's behavior. Establishing open-communication with a teen is vital and can best be done through a non-judgmental, supportive approach. Once trust is established and your teen believes that you really are trying to offer understanding and support, your teen may be more willing to confide in you regarding their difficulties. This may help them be more open to discussion of problems you have noticed and how these can be solved together.

* Offer structure and support. All teens continue to need guidance, support and limits during their adolescence. Make sure that your teen knows your expectations and rules, as well as the consequences if these are not met/followed. Be consistent in handling and responding to your teen's behavior. Praise your teen when they demonstrate responsibility-taking or show they can handle increased responsibilities.

* Assist with organizational strategies. Aid your teen in developing habits to organize themselves. Teach your teen to use a daily planner and then monitor to see that they use it. Buy your teen a timer to use when completing homework and then assist them in using it to see how long assignments really take. Set places in the house for things to stay (i.e. house keys on a table by the front door) and check to see that your teen uses them.

* Finally, don't be afraid to consult a professional if the stress becomes intense or the responsibilities of handling a teen with ADD become overwhelming. It's a difficult job to parent any teen and your responsibilities are even greater.

* *A good reference that further may be helpful is ADHD & Teens: A parent's guide to making it through the tough years by Colleen Alexander -Roberts, 1985, Taylor Publishing Company.

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