



Parenting Adolescence

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Background

Adolescence is derived from Latin word “*adolescere*”, which means to grow into maturity.¹ World Health Organization (WHO) defines “adolescence” as the period between 10 to 19 years of age.² It is the period in which a person is no longer a child and not yet an adult. It is a phase of growth and development from childhood to adulthood and from onset of puberty to reproductive maturity. There are estimated 1.2 billion (1.20 billion) adolescents in the world³ and in India, these constitute nearly 21.4% of the population i.e. 243 millions.⁴

Adolescence is life’s most fascinating and perhaps one of the most complex stages of life. It is the time when young people take on responsibilities and experience experiments with independence. During adolescence, there is a rapid physical growth and development of physical, mental, social, psychological and sexual aspects. In addition to these changes, some behavioral changes also occur like independency, intimacy, identity, intellect, and peer group dependence. The process of rapid and multifaceted changes makes them vulnerable to many problems. About 40% of global burden of diseases falls on them.³ For majority of the problems of adolescents, the root cause is lack of proper guidance and support by parents; providing which, is a challenge.

The major health problems of Adolescents are as follows –

Sexual & Reproductive Health Problems:

Several problems related to sexual & reproductive health emerge during adolescence phase like unintended & unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions, RTI/ STIs, HIV/ AIDS, sexual violence and coercion etc. Approximately 11% births

worldwide were reported to an adolescent mother i.e. 13 million births.³ Globally, 1 out of 20 adolescents contract curable STIs every year. Every year in developing countries around 3.1million girls (15 to 19 years) undergo unsafe abortions i.e. approximately 1/7th of total unsafe abortions.⁵ Cultural pressure often forces parents to marry off their daughter at a younger age. It was also reported that around 30% of girls in low and middle income countries were forced to get married during adolescence; more in rural areas (46%) as compared to urban areas (22%).⁶

Substance/ Drug Abuse (Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Abuse):

In this age, adolescents are not mature and are unable to realize the harms of alcohol, tobacco or drug abuse and might indulge in usage of these substances, which may take them to crimes and other antisocial activities. As per WHO reports, globally 1/10th of the adolescent boys start tobacco use during adolescence.²

Mental health Problems:

Depression and suicide, strong sexual drive, frustration in seeking independence, unable to control impulses adequately, serious antisocial behavior problems, thinking and worrying about future, attempts to commit suicide due to severe depression & alcohol abuse are some of the common mental health problems among adolescents. Globally, depression was the top most cause of illness and disability among adolescents and suicide was the 3rd cause of death among adolescents, as per WHO reports.³ Suicide might usually be precipitated by a break up with a girl or boyfriends, conflicts with parents or peers or because of unexpected pregnancy.

Violence, Injuries & Accidents: Violence due to physical or sexual assaults is a major public health

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and social problem among adolescents. Poverty, inadequate parental disciplining and monitoring in early childhood might result in behavioral problems in early adolescence. Psychological problems then can lead to stealing, running away from school, home etc. At times due to the pressure of the deviant peer- group, they may become delinquent. Exposures to violence, corporal punishment, verbal aggression, especially in early adolescence, increase the risk of violence. When an adolescent indulges in premeditated, purposeful unlawful activities habitually and repeatedly, he/ she is considered to be a juvenile delinquent. It was reported that globally 180 adolescents die per day because of interpersonal violence.³ Approximately 30% of the adolescent girls (15-19 years) face violence by their counterparts worldwide.³ Globally, approximately 60,000 and 0.12 million adolescents die annually because of drowning and road traffic accidents, respectively.³

Medical/ Nutritional Problems - Nutritional needs during adolescence are increased due to speedy growth. The diet of adolescents should provide extra energy, protein and vitamins to meet the additional requirement for rapid weight gain. Deficiency or excess in diet might lead to development of malnutrition. Excess of diet and/ or with poor physical activity will lead to development of truncal obesity. Globally, less than 1/4th of the adolescents indulge in recommended level of physical activities.³ Individuals with truncal obesity are more prone to cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Strong family history of obesity also leads to obesity. On the other hand, poor diet will lead to development of under-nutrition and also some of the nutrition deficiency diseases. Anemia is one of the commonest problems especially in adolescent girls as they like more junk foods instead of nutritious foods and are less aware about nutritious value of foods and the daily nutritional requirement for their growth. Under- nutrition can also lead to higher incidence of tuberculosis and chest infection. Moreover girls are more prone to develop UTI at this stage. Chronic illnesses become worse during adolescence. The skin disorders such as acne, hirsutism, and fungal infections e.g. athlete's foot commonly affect adolescents. Some genitourinary and gynecological disorders (e.g. DUB, Pelvic mass etc.) may also occur during adolescence.

Role of parents & adolescent problems

Parenting an adolescent presents a challenge. It is important to look at your hopes and love for your child, but at the same time not ignoring or

neglecting the needs of adolescents. This at times may put tremendous stress on the parents. Many of the physical changes in adolescence stage are perceived as either, sudden or scary changes and are not appreciated by them. Moreover, bullying by peers and a new surge for independence leads to several behavioral changes e.g. passive-aggressive behavior, self-consciousness and self-doubt and/ or over- confidence etc. Many times, our adolescents blame themselves for the troubles. When that is too painful, they become angry and resort to substance abuse or result in mental problems. This is the time when they need proper handling by parents. The parents should bring the best out of them and make a lifetime relationship between them and the adolescents. It is the responsibility of parents to familiarize adolescent about normal changes occurring during adolescence and also get them prepared for risk and consequences likely to occur during adolescence. For majority of the problems of adolescence, the root cause is that they lack proper guidance and support in the time when they needed it the most but in a different way. Research shows that in a positive family environment i.e. where open parent- child communication occurs, adolescents are able to navigate these years with a relative ease.^{7, 8} We can build relationships with our children that strengthen them against the harshness of their environment. The parents should learn the ways of healthy and effective parenting of adolescents. Your child needs your support, and you must be in a position to give that support when you had a chance to talk and at the same time you should be able to release some of the tension you have gathered in your efforts to care.

Some of the tips of parenting adolescence are shown below.

Tips for parenting Adolescence⁷⁻¹⁰

- 1) **Educate yourself:** Read books about adolescence; be prepared for more conflicts. The more you know, the better you can prepare your child.
- 2) **Listen to your child:** Young people can use your help if you make yourselves unobtrusively available to listening. Listening builds trust and doesn't involve directing the conversation in any way. It's often just being around and willing to listen, if a young person wants to talk.
- 3) **Talk to your child early enough:** Regular communication between the parents of the

adolescent without making the kids feel that they are being watched is important. When your child begins to talk, stay interested. Remember this: your child has chosen a subject to discuss with you when they feel comfortable to do so. Talk about things like - menstruation or wet dreams, difference between boys and girls, where baby comes from, share memories of your own adolescence with your child. Just answer the early questions. The earlier you open the lines of communication in these subjects, the better chance you have of keeping them open. Throughout the teen years, give books on puberty to your child.

- 4) **Inform your child and stay informed yourself:** Don't avoid the subject of sex, and drugs, alcohol and tobacco use; discuss these things openly with your child before he/ she is exposed to them.
- 5) **Put yourself in your child's place:** Practice empathy with your growing child; tell your child that these are natural physiological changes.
- 6) **Maintain your expectations:** Stay hopeful about your child's capabilities, and about their ability to solve problems, but maintain your expectations. Show your affection, hopefulness about your children's future and confidence in their ability to achieve appropriate grades, about their behavior and adherence to the rules of the house.
- 7) **Know the warning signs:** Like sudden changes in the friend circle, skipping school continuously, falling grades, rapid and drastic changes in personality, delinquency, drug abuse etc. Consult a psychologist or psychiatrist for proper counseling.
- 8) **Respect your child's privacy:** You should not expect adolescents to share all thoughts or activities with you at all times.
- 9) **Monitor what your child sees and reads:** Be aware of what your child is watching, reading and surfing over internet.
- 10) **Reward your child:** Praise the good qualities you see in him/ her, e.g. being trustworthy. Find many things to praise and

enjoy. Remember the motto of many parents with teens- We are going through this together and we will come out of it together.

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Date of Submission: 24th Oct 2014

Date of Acceptance: 28th Dec 2014