

When to Worry About Your Preteen

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Before you know it your 9- to 12-year-old will begin to transform into an adolescent. Just as you watched your baby learn to walk and talk, you'll watch your preteen walk a little further from you and begin to talk about video games, clothes, music, and "being cool."

During the preteen years it's difficult to know when emotional intensity and mood swings are part of the normal changes of puberty, or signs of more serious issues such as depression or anxiety disorders. As preteens travel on the road to becoming teenagers it's common for parents to lose sleep thinking about all of the things that could go wrong.

Your child's temperament and communication style will influence how quickly you see trouble brewing. If you have an intense and talkative child, you may become aware of problems quickly as your child shows strong reactions to school stress or bullying. Children who are cautious or withdrawing may internalize their feelings rather than complain, yell, or cry.

Pay attention to changes you observe over time, especially if there's change of functioning. For instance, if your son loved to play outside with friends on the weekend, but now stays at home reading or watching TV, there may be a problem. If your daughter was getting good grades, but suddenly brings home D's and F's, you should be concerned. Other signs to look out for are sudden weight loss or gain, new friends who make you feel uncomfortable, sleep problems, on-going headaches or stomach aches, and withdrawn and moody behavior that lasts more than a few days.

Things you can do when your worry meter is rising:

- Connect with the parents of your kid's friends to compare notes.
- Read books, go on-line, or talk to others about normal preteen development.
- Go for a walk or out to breakfast with your child, and have a "heart to heart" talk.
- Ask preteens to talk to you about their experiences.
- Reflect on your child's schedule. Is she expected to be busy all of the time? Is there too much alone time after school when you're at work?
- Have family dinners together as often as possible.
- Talk with teachers and find out how things are going in class.
- If you're worried, consult with the school counselor, your child's pediatrician, or a therapist.

Preteens ask for more freedom and for adults to back off. Yet parents need that balance between giving children room to grow physically and emotionally, and staying close and connected as they stumble, make mistakes, and change.

This article was originally written for the Preteen Alliance Forum. For more information on preteens, go to www.preteenalliance.org/.