

Keeping Adolescence Healthy

Exploring the Issues Facing Today's
Kids and Communities

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ISBN: 1-4196-8997-5

ISBN-13: 978-1-4196-8997-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008901561

Publisher: BookSurge Publishing
North Charleston, South Carolina

All books printed in the U.S.A.

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What is adolescence and why is it so important?

Adolescence is the transition from childhood dependence to adult independence; the stage of life during which we form complex social identities and learn to function outside of our families. If all goes well, kids should leave adolescence heading into a healthy and productive young adulthood. In the current book, we will take a tour of a variety of issues that can influence the paths that kids take through life and the nature of the adults they become, and explore what research suggests about how best to deal with them. In this chapter, we will set the stage for those discussions by examining adolescence, what it is, what it tends to look like and why it is so important.

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Looking good at any cost – The pressure kids are under to attain aesthetic perfection

Today’s teens are held to standards of physical perfection unattainable by most and unhealthy for most that attain them. In this chapter, we will explore the pressure adolescents, and the rest of us, are under to attain perfection, aesthetically, and examine the impact that factors like marketing and depictions of beauty in the media can have on self-image and body satisfaction. The recent trend toward plastic surgery at younger ages will be discussed, as well as ways in which adults can help deflect the pressure kids are under to meet lofty and unreasonable cultural expectations of beauty.

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Diet, exercise and relaxation – What does it mean to be a fit teen?

One key message from the last chapter is that looking good and actually being healthy are often two very different things. In this chapter, we will explore what it means to be physically healthy during adolescence, focusing on diet and exercise. We will discuss the issue of teaching kids to make healthy food choices, the impact of vending machines in public schools on adolescent health, eating disorders, the Body Mass Index, nutrition and other topics. We will also discuss research suggesting that focused and intentional relaxation, like breathing exercises, is beneficial to adolescent health, well-being and brain functioning.

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The toxic effects of videogame violence on kids and communities

In this chapter, we will continue our exploration of how cultural forces shape and mold our kids, this time focusing on digital violence. Store shelves are filled with fun and benign games, but also an array of ultra-violent titles. The case will be made that the supply and demand of games that make graphic, first-person murder fun for kids of all ages points to problems in the culture and ultimately contributes to them. We will examine the data to assess the impact that such violence has on our kids and communities, explore ways to help kids make healthy decisions around gaming, and discuss how to make healthy decisions on their behalf.

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School violence – Bullying, shootings and what can be done about it

Increasing violence in public schools serves as a prime example of how pro-violence messages in the culture influence the real lives of our kids. In this chapter, we will take a close look at two categories of hostility that occur in schools – bullying and murder. While both include aggression, the acts are often perpetrated by very different types of kids. Is it possible to predict which kids are likely to become bullies or killers? What happens to kids who are bullied, and communities struck by the tragedy of homicides in schools? What are the options beyond metal detectors and guards?

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Adolescents are built to explore and take some chances. For many kids, these tendencies are expressed through sports, the arts, or various healthy social outlets. For others, these tendencies lead to experimentation with, and sometimes chronic use of, substances that alter how the brain works. In this chapter, we will look at drug use from a developmental standpoint. We will examine how kids get started down pathways involving drug use, discuss how adults can help keep them from going too far, and lay out concrete steps for what to do once a kid begins sliding down the pathway toward dependence and addiction.

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Alcohol is the most widely used and abused drug among both adolescents and adults in the United States. Moderate consumption can be part of a healthy adult lifestyle, but could prove unhealthy for developing teens. Rates of heavy drinking by teens have slowly declined but the costs associated with such misuse remain high. Many adults believe that allowing kids to drink at home will somehow protect them from harm. Others believe that delaying use as long as possible is the best course of action. In this chapter, we will examine alcohol and explore strategies for helping adolescents avoid harm and make healthy choices around the issue of drinking.

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Protecting kids from disease – The immune system, how it works, and how to keep it healthy

Each year several media stories break about teens dying from viruses or drug-resistant strains of bacteria. Fortunately, we all carry around the means to protect ourselves from most infections. It’s called the immune system. Like other systems in the body, the immune system undergoes poorly understood developmental changes during adolescence. In this chapter, we will explore the immune system and its role in psychological well-being, discuss the safety of vaccines, and examine ways in which the immune system can be optimized to help make adolescence a healthy stage of life.

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Puberty and “raging hormones” – What do they have to do with adolescence?

During the second decade of life, our bodies undergo widespread changes in height, weight and hairiness. Males start generating sperm and females start releasing eggs and having periods. These changes are related to puberty, the physical metamorphosis that prepares us to have children and protect them. The physical changes of puberty and the social and psychological changes of adolescence combine to prepare kids for their adult roles. In this chapter, we will discuss puberty, what it is, how and why it happens, and how it relates to the social and psychological metamorphosis of adolescence.

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Birds, bees and adolescents – The facts about teens and sex

Changes during puberty and adolescence trigger a sexual awakening. This process can be unsettling for both parents and teens. Cultural forces influence the types of behaviors that emerge at this time. How are today’s kids coping and how can adults help? In this chapter, we will examine rates of sex, contraceptive use, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections, as well as the association between sex and violence in teen relationships. The aim is to help adults prepare themselves for goal-directed discussions with teens about the risks and responsibilities that go with sex and sexuality.

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In previous chapters, we explored some aspects of normal adolescent behavior that can be downright troubling. Many kids experiment with drugs, drink alcohol, break household rules and the law, and end up doing just fine. But what happens when the troubling behaviors don’t seem to be temporary and transient? When does moodiness cross the line into depression? When does difficulty focusing on schoolwork become ADHD? When does an argumentative attitude become conduct disorder? In this chapter, we will examine the issue of normal vs. abnormal behavior, discuss how to spot problems and explore what can be done to help kids deal with them and get back on track.

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Adolescents and the Internet – Keeping kids safe on the digital frontier

There is perhaps no better example of a generation gap than the ubiquity of the World Wide Web in the lives of current adolescents. Anything can be found, or lost, online. Issues like identity theft and sexual predation will be discussed, and tips will be provided for keeping kids safe in an increasingly virtual world.

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