Kinship Caregiving: Navigating Teen Years

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This Montguide discusses the variety of changes that occur during the teen years, how parenting styles affect development and ideas for kinship caregivers with teens.

KINSHIP CAREGIVERS RAISING RELATIVE CHILDREN find themselves in an interesting position as they are parenting “off-time,” meaning they may not be expecting to parent at this time. Parenting in this context can be more challenging as relative children navigate adolescence.

The journey through adolescence is unique. Youth are more receptive to outside influence and become more independent as they move through adolescence. Today’s technological advances allow for greater outside influence than when most kinship caregivers were teens. There is instant access to more information today.

Adolescence for this generation is a longer developmental stage than in the past. More young people attend college and delay marriage. Turning 18 is no longer the marker of independence for many youth. This extension of adolescence has led to three stages—early adolescence, middle adolescence and late adolescence. The changes that occur in youth vary with each stage.

Physical Changes

The teen years bring significant physical changes. During early adolescence, 10-14 years of age, the most noticeable changes begin, such as increases in height and weight, and acne may become a problem. For females, menstruation tends to begin, along with breast development. Males experience genital growth, the appearance of facial hair, and changes in voice. The rate of physical changes has not been so dramatic since infancy. During middle adolescence, 15-16 years of age, males tend to continue an increase in height and weight and female growth usually slows. By late adolescence, 17-21 years of age, females tend to be fully developed physically. Males may continue to increase height, muscle mass and body hair.

Although exciting, these changes can be a confusing time for a teen. There is an increase in moodiness, self-involvement, concerns with appearance, body image and a new sense of sexuality. There can be an increase in modesty, more showing off or a combination of both. Teens become concerned with being attractive and begin to experiment with hairstyles and clothing.

When discussing physical changes, relationships, and sexuality, encourage your adolescent to ask questions. Don’t be afraid to talk about your own discomfort. Relate sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one’s partner. Openly share values and concerns. Discuss the real responsibilities and consequences of love, relationships and sex. Everything from buying a first bra or shaver, to heartbreak in relationships, to pregnancy and sex are worthy topics.

More sleep is needed during this time of rapid physical change. Talk with your teen about the importance of good sleep. Set rules for using phones and screen time in the evening, including when they should be turned off for the night.

Cognitive Changes

Researchers today know more about the brain. The areas of the brain which allow adults to quickly assess a risky situation and make judgments are not fully developed until the early to mid-twenties. Teens demand more freedom and independence but may not be equipped to handle situations. Pushing boundaries is a natural part of adolescence and it comes with an increase in risky behaviors. Teens can make responsible decisions—sometimes they just need coaching. Even if they are aware of taking risks, adolescents mentally weigh risks against perceived benefits. For example, adults are aware of drinking and driving risks. They are more likely to prevent an intoxicated friend from driving even if the friend may become angry. A teen in the same situation may see getting into the car as risky, but view the situation as “just this once.” The odds may appear to be in their favor. Teens will often trade risk for immediate reward, such as peer approval. Risk will not seem as appealing if teens perceive greater benefits from a safer alternative. Try to provide fun and safe alternatives that are still intriguing for teens. Some ideas include meeting friends for shopping, going to the
movies, renting a movie and inviting friends for a sleepover, or going on a hike.

Adolescence is a time of increased decision making. Teens feel more empowered when they make their own decisions, and it helps develop responsibility. Start small. Allow teens input into family rules such as curfew or household chores. Taking a role in decision making allows teens to have more control over their lives and learn the reasoning behind rules, however, as the caregiver you have the final say. Brain development ends between the ages of 22-25 years and until that time, youth need guidance in decision making.

In high school it is important to track your teens’ progress in school. Grades are one indicator for other parts of their life and talking to teachers can give insight to how a teen presents outside of home. Many schools have online programs to monitor student’s assignments, grades and school notices. If you do not have internet access, talk to the school for another way to receive information.

Social Changes

During early and middle childhood, children depend on caregivers. Caregivers have control over who a child spends time with and participation in activities. During adolescence, peer relationships become more important, and teens may want to spend less time with parents or caregivers. This is a normal and critical aspect of development. Maintaining open communication is important. Encourage your teen to get involved in groups in and out of school. Teens are seeking a sense of achievement and want to be “good” at something. Coaches and mentors can be important resources.

While teens may spend more time away from parents and with friends, it is important to monitor and supervise teen’s activities. Get to know their friends and their friends’ parents or caregivers. Knowing more about your teen’s friends enables discussion about their activities and interests. Ask questions while riding in the car or at the supper table. For example, ask, “What do your friends like to do?” “What music do you and your friends listen to?” Also, notice them switching peer groups in school as they try to find their place socially. Changes in groups will likely mirror changes in interests and are part of identity development. Changing interests is common during early and middle adolescence and part of healthy development. They can also be a cause for disappointment if the teen is not accepted by a peer group. Support your teen by encouraging, listening, and empathizing. It is healthy to talk about your own mistakes, however try to avoid overstating “When I was your age…” Let them know that you identify with being a teen even though it was during a different time.

Advances in technology have even tech-savvy caregivers trying to keep up. Note what is happening with your teens time spent texting, and the social media they use. Whether it is Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or another evolving network, helping your teen understand appropriate boundaries and recognize safe online behavior is a life-long skill. While technology is convenient, it can also contribute new challenges. Understanding current phrases will help if you and your teen text; you will be able to identify what they text to friends. Knowing the current streaming shows, movies and games can open discussion of the content and your values. Set limits on what younger teens view in movies and during gaming. Recognize that in addition to the gaming content, many games and players are now connected to the internet. When placing limits, explain that rules in your home may be different from rules in the homes of their friends. In the past, phone rules limited the amount of time spent calling friends. For today’s teens, phone limits may also limit their consumption of internet content and social media interactions with friends. They may have friends they do not know in person, but who help support them through online connection.

Adolescence is also a time of increased interest in romantic relationships. Talking about love and relationships can be uncomfortable for teens and adults, but it is an important aspect of life, and a part of responsible parenting. In a household headed by a kinship caregiver, a generation gap and new norms for teens can make the discussion more difficult. The discussion of sexuality was not as common as it is today. Teens are curious about body and emotional changes, therefore it is important to keep communication open. If teens don’t learn about responsibility in relationships and sex at home, they are likely to turn to friends or the internet, where information may not be reliable or accurate.

Communication can become strained, and it is common for teens to manage information, where teens limit what they share with adults about their lives. Although this can be aggravating, it is a healthy process, and aids in personality development, boundary establishment, privacy, and builds strong relationships with friends. It might sound simple, but straightforward conversations with your teen go a long way. Relating to a teen today may be daunting, but teens desperately want to be viewed as mature and grown up. Engaging conversation is one way to achieve good communication. Promote open and close caregiver-adolescent relationships by showing respect for your teen’s opinion, even if you disagree. Communicating with and engaging in efforts to connect will likely increase the information your teen shares. Avoid asking lots of questions. Sometimes the way to start a conversation is to be available but let the teen start. For example, if you
are making dinner and your teen comes in the room, greet them, but let them start the conversation.

**Parenting Styles**

So, what should kinship caregivers raising teens do to help guide relative children through adolescence? Parents and caregivers use various styles, shaped by one’s own upbringing, parenting books, religious views, and the popular media.

Parenting styles involve two important parts – levels of warmth and control. Depending on the combination of these, different parenting styles are identified. Research finds styles with low warmth and low control to be least effective in raising children. Research has shown authoritative style to be the most effective with teens.

Parenting styles can help kinship caregivers in how they respond to relative children in any situation. By knowing the different styles, caregivers can learn how to provide warmth and control in their parenting in ways that will better guide relative children and improve communication with the children.

**Behavioral Health for You and Your Adolescent**

As teens navigate changes, help them take care of themselves physically as well as emotionally. Montana has a high rate of suicide. Talk to your teen about their concerns, stress, and challenges. Let them know you are there for them and you will find them support should they experience depression, suicidal thoughts, or substance abuse problems. Letting the school counselor know if you suspect a problem can be a first step.

Parenting requires a great deal of energy – even in the teen years. Kinship caregivers raising relative children often comment how hard it is to keep up with children because in many situations, they are parenting a second time around or taking on relative children was unexpected. Take time for your needs: try to get enough sleep and maintain a healthy diet. Take walks or participate in a physical activity you enjoy. See a healthcare professional regularly and take needed medications as prescribed.

**Conclusion**

The adolescent years are exciting and full of changes. They can be more difficult when teens are being raised by relatives, however, this does not mean the family is headed for years of challenges. Generational and family differences provide a learning opportunity for relative caregivers and youth. Use this to build relationships and support for your teen. If problems arise that can’t be resolved within the family, seek assistance from a therapist, teacher, or school counselor. Enjoy this phase of life with your teen.
References


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