Easing Transitions into Adolescence

"Youth today have detestable manners, flaunt authority, and have no respect for their elders. What kind of awful creature will they be when they grow up?"

-Socrates, 399 B.C.

Note to Parent Educators: This is a lengthy lesson and ideally should be divided into two sessions. The amount of important developmental material to be presented could lead to a presentation which is too didactic, therefore, educators will need to take every opportunity to elicit parental participation.

Lesson Objectives
♦ Understand the normal developmental changes of adolescence
♦ Adapt parenting approaches to meet the changing needs of adolescents
♦ Promote the adolescent's ability to develop his/her own identity and age appropriate independence
♦ Distinguish normal, healthy adolescent "separation" from dangerous, unhealthy behaviors

Vocabulary Terms
♦ Developmental domains: Distinct (yet interrelated) areas of growth and development (including physical, social, psychological, emotional and cognitive)
♦ Menarche: A girl's first menstrual period
♦ Identity formation: The adolescent's process of developing an integrated sense of self

Materials & Resources

Materials
♦ Name tags
♦ Large table, dry erase board or chalk board
♦ Picture of adolescent boy and adolescent girl, small post-it note pads, colored markers
♦ Selected handouts, tri-fold, magazine advertisements depicting teenagers (optional)

Curriculum Development Material
♦ Positive Discipline for Teenagers: Resolving Conflict with Your Teenage Son or Daughter by Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott, Publisher: Prima Publishing Company, 1994
♦ Get Out of My Life, But First, Could You Drive Me and Cheryl To The Mall? Revised Edition by Anthony Wolf, Ph.D., Publisher: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2002
♦ All Grown Up and No Place To Go: Teenagers in Crisis Revised Edition by David Elkind, Publisher: Da Capo, 1998

Additional Readings for Parent Educators
♦ Why Do They Act That Way? by David Walsh, Publisher: Atria, 2008
♦ Teenage As A Second Language by Barbara Greenberg, Publisher: Adams Media, 2010
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Module 6.5

Suggested Reading for Parents

♦ Parenting A Teen Girl by Lucie Hemmen, Publisher: New Harbinger, 2012
♦ Getting to Calm by Laura Kastner, Publisher: Parent Map, 2009
♦ I’d Listen to My Parents IF They’d Just Shut Up by Anthony Wolf, Publisher: William Morrow, 2011

The Lesson

1. Introduction

Begin the lesson by reading "The Cat Years" by Adair Lara. "The Cat Years" Published in the San Francisco Chronicle By columnist Adair Lara (permission granted to reprint)

I just realized that while children are a lot like puppies...loyal and affectionate, eager to please, obedient; teenagers are more like mature, independent cats. It's so much easier to be a puppy owner. You feed it, train it, boss it around. It puts its head on your knee and lovingly gazes up at you as if you were a Rembrandt painting. It bounds indoors with enthusiasm when you call it and does all its little tricks on command.

Then around age 13, your adoring little puppy suddenly turns into a quickly maturing, independent cat. When you tell it to come inside, it looks amazed, as if wondering who died and made you emperor. Instead of dogging your footsteps, it disappears. You won't see it again until it gets hungry-then it pauses on its sprint through the kitchen long enough to turn up its nose at whatever you're serving. When you reach out to ruffle its head, in that old affectionate gesture, it twists away from you and gives you a blank stare, as if trying to remember where it has seen you before.

You, not realizing that the puppy is now a cat, think something must be desperately wrong. It now seems so antisocial, so distant, so irritable and moody. It no longer wants to go on family outings. It would much rather be off by itself behind closed doors, having nothing to do with you.

Since you're the one who raised it, taught it to fetch and stay and sit on command, you assume that you did something wrong. Flooded with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your precious pet return to its good old comfortable ways.

Only now you are dealing with a cat, so everything that worked before now produces the opposite of the desired result. Call it and it runs away. Tell it to sit and it jumps on the counter. The more you try to move closer to it, the more it wants to distance itself.

Instead of continuing to act like a dog owner, you now need to learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a dish of food near the door and let it come to you. Remember that cats also need your help and affection. Sit still and it will come, seeking that warm, comforting lap that it has not entirely forgotten. Be there to open the door for it when it wants to come.
And one day, quite unexpectedly, your grown-up child will walk into the kitchen, give you a big hug and say, "You've been on your feet all day. Let me finish up those dishes for you!" And then, you suddenly realize, your cat is a dog once again.

Use this essay to normalize the changes of adolescence. Ask parents: "Does this sound familiar?" Ask parents: "When you brought your infant home from the hospital, how many of you thought, 'I can't wait until this child is a teenager'？"

Instruct parents to recall their own adolescent years. Ask, "How many of you would like to go through adolescence again?  How many of you remember adolescence as a wonderful time? Who remembers adolescence as a 'mixed' time, some great times and some awful times?"

II. Instruction

Adolescence is a time of rapid, unpredictable, and dramatic change. Many parents approach their child's teen years with trepidation and anxiety. It can be a scary time for parents. This fear is not unreasonable. Adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases rates are alarmingly high, drug and alcohol use is prevalent, and teen smoking rates are escalating. When adolescents engage in high-risk behaviors, the consequences can be life altering or life threatening. In an effort to combat these negative outcomes, experts advise parents to "stay close to their teen." This comes at a time when adolescents are normally pulling away from and separating from their parents. This normal pulling away can escalate parents' anxiety.

Another hallmark of adolescence is the normal surge and ebb of hormones resulting in moodiness. This change in temperament can alarm parents who fear it represents a serious behavior problem. When adolescents engage in normal, healthy, safe rebellion, parents often react with fear and anxiety. This fear and anxiety frequently leads parents to "clamp down" and tighten parental control on their young teen. This is the opposite of what is developmentally healthy for teens and families. The goal of this lesson is to understand normal adolescent development and parental responses which can promote maturity and independence.

Parents interpret their teen's behaviors as normal but unacceptable behavior, they will react differently than if they interpret it as a sign of a serious problem. When a two-year-old has a tantrum, parents usually see it as developmentally normal and joke about the "terrible twos." When adolescents engage in normal adolescent "tantrums," the parents often interpret it as the beginning of a serious problem. The expectations of parents influence their perceptions and their reactions. By coming to understanding early adolescence, parents can discover this can be a wonderful time in a family's life.

III. Group Activity

Activity No. 1: This group discussion is most effective when the participants are in small groups. Split the parents into smaller groups and ask them to generate responses to the following questions:

♦ What do you most dislike or dread about your adolescent? About parenting an adolescent?
♦ What do you most like or anticipate liking about your adolescent? About parenting an adolescent?

Make a list of the parents' responses on the tablet or dry erase board, etc. Note the similarities and differences in the two lists. Introduce the concept many of these behaviors are characteristic of normal adolescents.
What Is An Adolescent? Bring a life size picture or model of two adolescents, a boy and a girl. Ask the parents to describe "teenagers" by writing adjectives on post-it note pads. As the parents share their responses, stick them onto the models. Encourage both positive and negative descriptors. Note the similarities between boys and girls.

IV. Instruction

You may provide the parents with **Handout No. 1: Growth and Development in Early Adolescence** and **Handout No. 2: Domains of Development** at this point or you may choose to distribute them at the end of the class.

Childhood is divided into "Ages and Stages." Adolescence is yet another stage of development. Growth and development occur in four domains; physical, social, emotional/psychological, and cognitive. (**Handout No. 1: Growth and Development in Early Adolescence** summarizes adolescent development. **Handout No. 2: Domains of Development** provides a visualization of the four domains of development.)

The rate of growth in adolescence is generally uneven. The term "growth spurt" is well deserved for adolescence as growth occurs irregularly. When parents visit a middle school/junior high school, they will observe teens in all phases of physical maturation. There will be very tall, fully developed girls and boys as well as girls and boys who have not even begun to develop physically. Social, emotional and cognitive maturity are equally uneven among young adolescents.

The rate of growth within each domain in each individual teen is also unequal. A teen could be maturing in one domain and not in any others. For example, a teen could be developing physically and not socially or cognitively. This explains why a teen's behavior does not always match his/her appearance.

**Note to Parent Educator:** It is difficult to present the four domains separately because they are significantly interrelated. It is important for parents to understand how the four domains interact and see the whole picture of their developing teen.

**Physical Growth**

In discussions of growth, developmental experts often use average ages to describe when an event occurs. This average is comprised of the youngest child to demonstrate a characteristic and the oldest child to demonstrate the same characteristic. Often there is a wide range in age when developmental milestones occur. This is normal. It is also frustrating to teens who want to be just like their peers (another normal experience in adolescence).

The physical growth of adolescence starts in "preadolescence." Everything is a range. There is no single age or observable milestone to mark when preadolescence begins. Parents often identify the start including growth hormones and reproductive hormones. Statistically, physical maturation is occurring earlier, at younger ages. Menarche (a girl's first menstrual period) is occurring in girls as young as nine years old.

In preadolescence, it is normal for children to increase fat accumulation and gain weight in anticipation of the growth spurt ahead. Not all children do this, but many do have this experience. For those who do gain weight, it can have psychological implications. Ask parents: "How does the cultural obsession with thinness impact preadolescents who find themselves gaining weight and 'bulking up'?'" (The parent educator might have a
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Today we see eight-year-old girls obsessing about their weight and dieting. Such dieting can have adverse effects on the teen's ultimate growth.

Puberty, the period of rapid growth and physical maturation, culminates in a teen's ability to reproduce. The developmental changes are physical but they have significant psychological implications, even when the growth pattern is normal and unremarkable.

Physical growth is usually rapid. Teens can grow three to four inches in a year. Boys generally start later than girls. Girls begin puberty in an age range of seven to fourteen. Their growth is usually complete by ages fourteen to fifteen or within about a year of their menarche. Boys begin puberty at ages ranging from nine to sixteen and their growth is usually complete by about age eighteen. Occasionally, girls and boys experience some continued growth beyond this time, although this is not the norm.

Physical growth is also uneven and irregular. For instance, a teen may have one foot which is larger than the other. This makes shopping for shoes an additional challenge. Not only do parents have to find shoes they are willing to buy, but then finding shoes which fit both feet can be a struggle. Parents must be aware their teen is not necessarily being difficult or picky about the way the shoes fit. Teens are also frustrated by this inability to find comfortable shoes which fit well (and meet with peer approval).

The physical growth pattern of adolescence is different than in previous development. In utero, babies grow from the inside outward. They develop the head, then the torso, then the arms and legs, and finally the fingers and toes. In adolescence, that pattern is altered and growth occurs from the outside inward. The hands and feet grow before the arms and legs. The torso is the last to grow. This often results in clumsiness or awkwardness as teens struggle to become accustomed to their new body configuration. They simply have not grown into their "big" feet yet. Additionally, their facial features develop before their head grows so they may look disproportionate, with big noses or ears. They often look and feel awkward. As their eyes grow, they elongate and teens frequently require glasses for the first time. This developmental pattern often results in the teen feeling dissatisfied with his/her own appearance.

Internal organ growth lags about one year behind visible growth. The heart and lung size and capacity have not caught up to the change in height and weight. This has implications for athletics in both boys and girls, as their endurance may not match their physical appearance. The lymphatic system becomes less active. Many children who have struggled with childhood asthma experience dramatic improvement. Their immune system has developed and they may be less likely to have respiratory illnesses. Both boys and girls generally experience a deepening in their voices. For boys it is more noticeable and more embarrassing with the accompanying cracks in their voices. As hormonal levels elevate, teens (and preteens) may begin to experience oily hair and acne. Parents may notice their preteens suddenly need to use deodorant and shower regularly. Some (pre)teens adjust their personal hygiene habits on their own while others may require parental intervention.

The physical changes resulting in lack of proportion in appearance and hormonal changes which may create acne and greasy hair make most teens acutely self-conscious and dissatisfied with their appearance. Papalia notes "most young teenagers are more concerned about their physical appearance than about any other aspect of themselves and many are dissatisfied with what they see in the mirror." (Papalia, 2010) It is a cruel joke of nature that at the time when teens care the most about their appearance, it is the least satisfying and beyond their control. Hormone changes also result in mood swings or moodiness. This is confusing for the
teens and often frightening for both the teen and parents when the teen appears to be so out of control of his/her emotional reactions.

Sexual maturation is occurring earlier today than in past generations. One hundred years ago, the average age of menarche was fifteen to seventeen. At that time in history, girls married around the age of eighteen. Today, the average age of menarche is twelve to fourteen. Ask parents: "How old do you want your daughter to be when she marries?" Most parents will respond "thirty." Point out this is a long period of time when teens are sexually mature and it is our expectation they will remain sexually inactive. The most commonly offered explanation for the declining age of menarche is the improvement in health and nutrition experienced by children today. Experts believe the average age of menarche will not continue to decline significantly. Girls who are slightly obese or sedentary may have an earlier menarche. Girls who are very athletic or anorexic may be delayed or may stop menstruating after starting. Generally, although not always, menarche occurs about one year after the appearance of axillary hair.

The timing of puberty is important to teens and uncontrollable. It is hard for young teens to be different in early adolescence. Ask parents to share their memories of maturing either very early or very late, how it felt and how they reacted to it.

For girls, it may be harder to mature early. Often parents observe early maturing daughters slouching or wearing loose fitting clothing with the intention of obscuring or disguising their physical changes. These girls are often teased and frequently they are called "boy crazy." They are attractive to older boys and the girls may delight in the older boys' attention. Girls who have been friends throughout elementary school may mature at different times and find themselves with little in common and the friendship wanes. This can be a source of grief to both girls and a source of concern to the parents. However, it is normal. Frequently friendships resume when the later maturing girl develops. Over time, early maturity can be a positive for the girl as she becomes the "expert" in the eyes of her peers, she has managed menstruation successfully, and is a resource to newly menstruating girls.

For boys, it is much harder to mature late. Ask the parents: "What does our culture value in young men?" Answers will likely include: strength, size, speed, athleticism, etc. Boys who mature early develop these attributes sooner and generally experience greater social approval based on their physical attributes and athletic accomplishments. Boys who are slower to mature may struggle to compete athletically and may even be teased by their peers. If it is a severe situation, boys can develop feelings of inferiority which continue into adulthood and may require professional intervention. Boys who have been friends throughout elementary school may mature at different times and find themselves with little in common and the friendship wanes.

Both girls and boys may experience teasing based on their physical development or lack of harassment. At that point, it is appropriate for parents to intervene (for example, contacting school authorities).

This period of rapid growth and development is difficult for teens. Their bodies are changing daily in unpredictable ways. Some of the changes may cause embarrassment or anxiety. There may be periods of fatigue. Parents may recall their infants and toddlers often ate and slept more prior to growth spurts. The same pattern can occur in adolescence. Studies show teens do require more sleep than preteens. Dietary and caloric requirements are greater. Adolescents may need four or more meals a day with a fifty-percent increase in caloric intake. Adequate iron intake is important. Girls who seem to be suddenly "lazy" or sedentary may need to be evaluated for anemia. Frequently, a surge in appetite occurs prior to the growth. The cultural
obsession with thinness may interfere with growth and maturation. Parents are wise to stress health rather than calories or weight.

V. Group Problem Solving

With increased understanding of normal physical growth and development, parents can respond to these changes in ways which are helpful and supportive for teens.

Ask: "What can parents do?" Possible answers to be included:

♦ Normalize growth and development patterns for their teens. Even when the teen is dissatisfied with his/her rate of growth, normalize there are many patterns of growth and development. Listen, support, and encourage the teen. Provide information on the wide range of normal. Good health habits will best promote full development.

♦ Understand and accept that mood swings are normal. Try to stay calm and even tempered. Avoid reacting to the mood swings.

♦ Prepare elementary school children for early physical maturation. Even if the parent's individual child is not developing, it is likely someone among his/her peers will develop early. This is an important opportunity to open the discussion of physical maturity and sexuality to create a climate where teens can come to parents with questions.

♦ Understand and empathize with the teen's feelings of awkwardness. Do not call attention to the changes with comments or teasing. Teens will enjoy growing taller than their parents, and references to this fact may be well received by the teen. It is important to be sensitive and respond to the teen's level of comfort with remarks about his/her body. It may take the teen a long time to feel comfortable with his/her new or rapidly changing body. Parental teasing is experienced as cruel and hurtful, not funny.

♦ Refrain from comparing the teen to others.

♦ Carefully monitor the activities of early maturing girls. Do not encourage early dating or romantic relationships. These girls are very attractive and may draw the attention of older adolescent boys. Studies show the earlier girls begin dating, the younger they become sexually active.

♦ Provide nutritious food for meals and snacks. Emphasize the importance of maintaining good physical condition and eating a healthy diet rather than calories or weight.

♦ Be aware of what parents model about the importance of appearance. A parent who obsesses about his/her weight is a significant role model for teens and may escalate a teen's preoccupation with thinness. Parents who focus on physical appearance can inadvertently reinforce the teen's dissatisfaction with his/her appearance.

♦ Encourage adequate rest (although adolescents seem to enjoy staying up later). Sleeping in on weekends may be healthy for them.
VI. Instruction (This may be a good beginning point for a second session.)

Psychological/Emotional, Social, and Cognitive Growth and Development

These three domains are grouped together because areas of growth and development are so interrelated it is difficult to talk about the domains separately.

Erik Erickson has summarized growth and development through a series of "ages and stages" in which each stage has a unique development task. For example, an infant’s task is to develop trust in the world. Babies learn the world is a safe place, when they have a need and cry, adults who love them will respond and keep them fed, warm and comfortable. The developmental task of adolescence is identity formation. The teen is driven to develop his/her own identity, independent of and separate from that of his/her parents. The teen is driven towards this identity formation in the same way a crawling baby is driven to learn to walk. The next developmental task of young adulthood is intimacy, to be able to love, marry and nurture children. An adult cannot have an intimate relationship until he/she has an independent well formulated identity. That is the task of adolescence.

Group Activity

Divide the parents into small groups. Ask the parents to make a list of behaviors demonstrated by their teens which make the parents believe their teen is trying to separate from them or distance themselves from their parents. As parents share their responses, relate the teens' actions to the development theory presented below to normalize the behaviors. (For example: teens are embarrassed by their parents or hypercritical of their parents. This is normal, it gives teens the courage to separate from their parents.)

This drive to separate often results in feelings of ambivalence in the teen. This ambivalence may lead to behavior which appears to be contradictory and puzzling to parents. The adolescent is driven to separate from his/her parents. However, it is frightening to be "out there" all alone. Teens typically react to this challenge in several of the following ways.

A. Teens become hypercritical of their parents (This can generalize to all authority figures.) This serves two purposes:

1. Criticism provides a distinction between parents and teens. It helps teens define ways they are separate and "different" from their parents. The first step in identity formation is defining who they are by defining who they are not. They must be "not" like their parents in order to discover what they are like.

2. Being critical of parents gives teens the courage to separate. Throughout childhood, children view their parents as being wonderful, wise, and all knowing. When they reach adolescence, they are driven to separate, but it is difficult to withdraw from a relationship with people who are as wonderful as the parents have been. So the teens must persuade themselves their parents are unworthy of their regard. They become extremely critical and begin to notice the parents' shortcomings or weaknesses. They zero in on parental inconsistencies, glaring faults and minor foibles, and they do not hesitate to point those out to their parents. The teen usually knows the parent's most vulnerable spot and bring out first and foremost. Parents frequently report their teens begin to view them as totally lacking in intelligence. It is as if teens begin to wonder how
their parents have managed to make it in life so far. It is helpful if parents can retain a sense of humor about this.

B. Peer relationships become more significant

As teens push away from the close relationship with their parents, they often feel alone and anxious. They need support and encouragement and so they turn to their peers. To parents, it is ironic and contradictory. Teens are saying, "I have to be me. I'm not like you or anyone else. I am my own person." Then they choose to be just like their peers. They say, "everyone is..." doing something or wearing something and they must do it or have it also. Studies show that teens from strong families with clear values most often choose to be like their peers in areas of hairstyle, dress, music, and entertainment (movie) preferences and that they select peers who share their family values and morals. Teens use the areas of dress, hairstyle, music, etc., to separate. It is a safe way to reject their parents and to create distance between themselves and their parents. This is normal and healthy. It is important for parents to allow this safe rebellion within the confines of parental values and morals. Parents sometimes assume since their teen rejects their opinions in these areas they have no influence in any area. This is not true. Parents remain a powerful influence. Many teens cite their parents as the most important influence in their decisions to abstain from smoking, drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity.

C. Friendships change rapidly

This is related to changing rates of development and levels of maturity. It is also related to the teen's use of relationships to refine their sense of identity. Teens experiment with different identities in different relationships. They are one way with one friend, another way with a different friend. It is a process of deciding which "way" is most natural, comfortable, and successful for them. They are developing their identities in relationships. It is important for parents to realize friendships are constantly shifting. When a teen has a friend the parent does not like, it is probably one friend in a series of friends and will change in the near future. Parents are unwise to make an issue out of a friend unless the child's well being is clearly jeopardized. This makes the friend even more desirable to the teen, and makes it more difficult for the teen to move on fearing "I told you so" from the parents. A gradual shift in friendships is different from a radical and/or sudden change in friends. Gradual shifts are normal; parents should monitor radical change.

It is important for parents to know their teen's friends. If parents have established a pattern of welcoming their child's friends into their home, it is likely the teen will continue to invite friends to their home. Although it is difficult, parents are wise to refrain from making hasty judgments about their teen's friends based on appearance. Establishing positive relationships with the teen's friends has unanticipated benefits for the parents. When parents meet their teen's friend in a public place and that friend greets them warmly, the teen views his/her parents more positively.

D. Peer pressure increases dramatically

Due to the fact peers are such an important source of support, belonging to the group is very important and peer pressure increases dramatically. Cliques are prevalent and important to young teens. There is a social hierarchy, and pressure to fit in with "the" clique is enormous. In the eyes of the young teen, fitting in often "demands" certain clothing, hairstyle, etc. Parents will need to decide how to respond, particularly since many of the "in" items are expensive.
Although peer pressure continues, it generally declines in middle to late adolescence for teens who have developed a sense of identity. At that point, teens who have had an opportunity to decide who they are usually feel comfortable with their decision and experience less internal pressure to conform to others. This can only be achieved when a teen has had the experience of making independent decisions about who and what he/she wants to be. Teens who always agree with their parents and never try out new ideas or never try to separate, often fail to develop their own identity in adolescence and find themselves doing so later in life.

It is important to understand peer pressure is a two way street. Teens select their group of peers based on shared beliefs, preferences or interests. Parents can ask themselves, "What needs does my teen have which are being met by this peer group?" Normal healthy teens do succumb to peer pressure in some areas. Peer pressure can be both positive and negative. Teens both exert and experience peer pressure.

E. Self-esteem normally fluctuates

The adolescent's sense of identity is so fragile, self-esteem is easily diminished. It is strongly affected by the acceptance of parents and peers. Even the teen who has consistently had a strong self-esteem in childhood will experience a roller coaster effect on self-esteem in adolescence.

VII. Group Problem Solving

How to Allow Safe Separation/Rebellion

The challenge for parents of teens is to find the balance between over-control and under-control which will allow the teen to rebel in safe ways. (Distinguish "control" as different from "setting limits.") Providing ways for the teen to separate from parents in areas which are unimportant in the overall life span of the teen is difficult. It is hard for parents to give up the illusion they can and should control their teens. It is important for parents to understand rebellion in this context does not need to be hostile, belligerent, or traumatic. When parents allow normal and healthy separation, it is not always smooth but it does not disrupt the entire family system. Teens are different from each other. Some will quietly question their parents' belief systems and may accept it as their own, having examined and questioned it. Others, who are by nature more defiant, may need to challenge and actively question their parents' belief systems.

Ask: "What happens if teens do not separate from their parents in adolescence?" (The following questions might also be done on a carousel activity.)

Responses to be included:

♦ They never develop into independent mature adults.
♦ They are still living at home when they are thirty.
♦ They struggle throughout life to define their identity.
♦ They are incapable of true intimacy.
♦ They seek relationships with others who will dominate them and control their lives; they feel incapable making decisions for themselves.
♦ They spend their lives rebelling against authority.

Ask: "What happens when parents are too strict and hold on, micro-manage, or control too tightly?"
Responses to be included:

♦ They rebel later - often in college.
♦ They never rebel and never mature.
♦ They escalate their rebellious behavior. If parents are very controlling and force the teen to do exactly what they want and how they want it done, they may experience some "success." However, teens will seek a way to make decisions for themselves. When parents do not allow teens to make decisions in appropriate areas (clothing, how to spend money, hairstyle, etc.), the teen will find other areas where the parents cannot control them. (These are commonly very negative behaviors such as smoking, drinking, sexual promiscuity, or failing at school, etc.) Parents must anticipate teens will make poor choices and so they should allow the teen to practice making choices by taking responsibility and making choices in areas which are not significant in the overall life span of the teen. How parents respond to inevitable mistakes is important. When parents view mistakes as opportunities to learn about consequences of poor choices, they provide their teen with an invaluable learning experience. It gives teen’s firsthand knowledge and experience with the fact poor choices lead to undesirable outcomes. Parents must realize there is a limit to their control. They can force a teen to sit in his/her room with his/her books, but they cannot force the teen to study or to really try. The more force a parent uses to squash a teen’s rebellion, the more force a teen is likely to use in return and the struggle escalates. Teens rationalize they are justified in lying and sneaking because their parents are so unreasonable. Adolescents are driven to separate from their parents.

Ask: “What happens when parents do not exert enough control?”

Responses to be included:

♦ Teens escalate their rebellious behavior until the parent is forced to notice. They may abuse substances, develop eating disorders, fail classes at school or drop out, or become pregnant. Although they resist, teens do want limits and rules.
♦ They are driven to rebel against adult authority. If there is no authority, they may escalate their behavior until they "cross the line" and adults have no choice but to notice their unacceptable behavior.

Ask: "How can parents allow a 'safe' rebellion?"

Responses to be included:

♦ Allowing a safe rebellion requires the parents begin to "let go" and turn responsibility for decisions and consequences over to their teen.
♦ Letting go does not mean "anything goes," nor does it mean parents tolerate or accept unacceptable behavior from teens. It requires the parents to distinguish behaviors which are not desirable from behaviors which are unacceptable. It requires parents to "let go" of areas which are "undesirable" and stand firm on areas which are "unacceptable" with clear limits and expectations. That distinction can be very difficult and letting go is the greatest challenge faced by parents of adolescents.

Ask the parents to generate a list of activities, behaviors, battle zones, etc., they are currently experiencing with their teens. Use those as examples to work through the following guidelines. There is no single "right" answer, family values and rules differ. In the discussion of consequences, it is helpful to identify natural and logical consequences which will promote a teen's opportunity to learn from choices he/she may make.
**Handout No. 3: Choose Your Battles Carefully: Guidelines for Parents**

- Is this a safety issue?
- Does the activity in question violate any laws? (curfew)
- Does the activity in question violate our morals or values? (profanity)
- Does the activity in question violate our family rules? (no guests in the house without a parent present)
- If there are negative consequences, who will experience the consequences? Or is this the parent's "problem" or the teen's "problem"? (how to spend allowance)
- Will it matter in five years?

Each parent will decide differently based on his/her own belief system. However, this is an opportunity for the facilitator to help parents recognize where they may be attempting to exert too much control or where they could let go.

The following examples may be used to stimulate discussion if the parents do not develop issues to be discussed. Encourage parents to use the above guidelines to develop responses to these issues.

**Example No. 1: A teen's choice of music**

Some music is loud noise to parents, and may be undesirable and annoying. Some music has violent or sexually provocative lyrics, and it is unacceptable. The resolution to this issue doesn't have to be all or nothing. A parent can refuse to pay for music but will allow the teen to earn money or spend his/her allowance on "annoying" music while completely disallowing unacceptable music.

**Example No. 2: A teen's desire for designer clothing, expensive jeans for example**

Parents can:

- Allot X dollars for clothing and allow the teen to decide how to spend it.
- Offer to spend X dollars on jeans (the cost of non-designer jeans). The teen can accept that option or find the money to make up the difference through work or saving his/her allowance.
- Parents can buy one pair of designer jeans and the rest non-designer jeans.
- Parents can refuse to buy them and allow the teen to buy them.

Even when parents disapprove of the superficiality of designer jeans, allowing the teen to fund the purchase of desired jeans is a no-lose proposition for the parents. The teen will learn one of two valuable lessons:

1. It was worth it. The teen learns hard work and/or saving money leads to pride and good feelings.
2. It wasn't worth it. The teen will make future financial decisions more carefully.

With either outcome, the teen makes the choice and lives with the consequence of that choice.

**Example No. 3: Conflict over grades at school**

Several factors may be influencing the teen's school performance:

- It may be socially unacceptable to do well at school.
♦ The subject material is more difficult and the teacher's expectations are greater. The teen may not be able to perform at his/her previous level.
♦ If the teen has never been responsible for his/her own schoolwork, he/she may struggle to manage it successfully now.
♦ At school, socialization may be the teen's top priority.

Parents generally respond by declaring lowered school performance unacceptable and establishing some kind of consequence. For many teens this works well. They improve and school becomes a "non-issue." For other teens, this escalates their resistance to school and their performance declines. It is as if they are saying "You can't make me succeed in school and I'll show you any attempts only make me do worse." The parent applies greater pressure and the teen's performance declines further. The defiance and hostility escalate. When a teen demonstrates this level of defiance, the family may be well served by seeking professional help. Often small changes initiated early in adolescence can have very positive results and avert an escalation.

What Can Parents do? (Handout No. 4: Parenting Adaptations for the Young Adolescent)

Parents can:
♦ Let go as much as possible.
♦ Actively promote independence.
♦ Ask themselves: Whose responsibility is this?
♦ Allow the teen to experience natural and logical consequences.
♦ Avoid trying to "fix" the teen's mistakes for the teen.
♦ Continue to set limits on unacceptable behavior and follow through with consequences.
♦ Recognize and accept the teen's need to be separate and unique. Even though he/she may reject your ideas, continue to set limits.
♦ Expect rapid mood swings and stay calm.
♦ Say "yes" as much as possible - (peer pressure for conformity is high) ask, "Will it matter in five years?"
♦ Accept and love your teen.
♦ Provide physical contact daily - back rub, pat on the arm or back (be sensitive to the teen's potential embarrassment and avoid this in public or in front of his/her friends).

Cognitive Growth and Development

Adolescents' cognitive abilities expand and they are able to engage in increasingly abstract thought. Adolescents are notoriously inconsistent in all areas of maturity but the cognitive inconsistencies are striking. It is helpful for parents to understand these thought processes are normal. They are exasperating to parents, but entirely normal.

A. Changes in cognitive reasoning

Jean Piaget has done extensive studying on how children think and how it changes throughout childhood and adolescence. Children are concrete thinkers, they learn by trial and error. As children approach the teen years, they begin to engage in Formal Operational Thought. Once again, remind parents there is no magical age for this to occur. Some children who are intellectually gifted demonstrate this ability at a much earlier age. Piaget did not include intellectual abilities as part of his studies. Formal Operational Thought is the ability to think abstractly, to think about thoughts and...
ideas, to think about possibilities not just realities, to consider the "what if's" and what could be possible. This allows a teen to develop and consider multiple explanations. At times, this results in a sense of confusion or uncertainty for the teen, suddenly there are too many possibilities. One positive for parents is as teens' thought processes mature, conversation can become very interesting. Teens have fascinating ideas. However, teens also frequently enjoy the intellectual challenge of defending an idea and take great pleasure in arguing just for the sake of arguing. Anthony Wolf suggests arguing also meets multiple developmental needs. Teens struggle with ambivalence throughout their process of separation. They are resentful of their continued dependence on their parents, and at the same time, grateful for the love and support of their parents. Wolf captured this dichotomous thinking in the title of his book: "Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?" Developmentally, teens are driven to separate from their parents; yet, they are naturally desirous of retaining a close relationship with their parents. Arguing meets both of these needs. A teen can initiate an argument with his/her parents because this keeps him/her engaged in a close relationship. What is more emotionally engaging than an intense argument? However, it simultaneously meets their need to separate because the nature of arguing is to separate and be different.

Ask parents: "Do you notice this tendency to argue in your teens?" Have you ever had an experience like this: You are in the midst of a pleasant conversation with your teen when suddenly your teen takes offense or challenges you in order to deliberately provoke a disagreement or argument?"

Arguing is a creative and effective way to meet needs which seem to be mutually exclusive.

Parents can allow teens to stretch their arguing muscles by engaging the teens in discussions of issues that do not involve conflict between parent and teen. Some sample discussion topics include:

- Current events
- Which musician/artist has made the greatest contribution to music? Art?
- Who should the world mourn more, Princess Diana or Mother Teresa?
- Editorials in the local paper

The concept is to pick topics which are interesting to the teen and then parents take an opposite point of view for the purpose of discussion. This allows the teen to have the sense of arguing, of being different from his/her parents, without engaging in conflicts over rules, limits, or family values. Those discussions will occur naturally!

B. Questioning values and morals

Another change in thinking is teens normally question their parents' values and morals. Parents must realize questioning is not necessarily rejecting but is an important step in a teen's development of his/her own code of moral and ethical behavior. This is like a two-year-old who has to learn to say NO before he/she can truly say yes. Teens cannot truly accept morals and values as their own until they have made an evaluation and a decision on their own. This is frightening for parents. Teens try out new identities by experimenting with ideas. This experimentation occurs with philosophical ideas and possible future plans. Often they zero in on the issue which is most important to their parents. If the parents value education most highly, the teen may say, "I'm going to drop out of school. Who needs an education anyway? We never learn anything valuable." If the parents value their religious faith, the teen may say "I'm a nonbeliever. There are too many hypocrites in church/temple." Teens will change their ideas and their sense of identity. Parents are wise to refrain from panic when the teen suggests a dramatically different point of view. Parents should continue to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Parents sometimes believe they can
force their teens to accept their values. For a time they may experience success. Ultimately, each person at some time in life has to decide for himself/herself what he/she believes.

Parents who have lived the values they espouse find it much easier to defend their stated beliefs amount moral and ethical behavior. Adolescents are quick to notice parental inconsistencies between espoused beliefs and observed behaviors. Teens will focus on any hypocrisy they notice in their parents and criticize their parents severely. However, they do not see their own hypocrisy. They will berate parents as hypocrites for wanting to clean the house before company comes, asking, "Why are you so superficial to care about appearances, my friends don't care." Then they will insist they have to have "the" designer jeans or life will be miserable.

C. Inconsistencies

Part of the challenge of parenting young teens is their inconsistency: mature one minute, immature the next. Although they are now capable of engaging in abstract thought, they frequently engage in black and white thinking. They take an all or nothing and occasionally illogical approach to evaluating experiences. It was the best day or it was the worst day and their self-esteem fluctuates accordingly. They love their friend or they hate their friend. The test was impossible so there was no point in studying.

David Elkind, a well known researcher and author has done extensive writing on adolescents, particularly their thought processes. He has described this as "Adolescent Egocentrism" and it takes several forms. This way of thinking is unrealistic and distorted and normal.

D. Self-centeredness

Adolescents are incredibly self-centered. It is as if they believe the world revolves around them and them alone. Elkind uses the term "Imaginary Audience" to describe a teen's belief everyone is watching him/her, talking about him/her, then passing judgment. This makes them acutely self-conscious. If a girl arrives at school with a hair out of place (in her view), she is sure before she gets to her locker everyone in the school has either noticed it or heard about it and the teen is embarrassed. Boys are equally self-conscious. If a boy has grown and his jeans are 1/8 inch shorter than the prescribed length, he feels certain "everyone" has noticed it, discussed it, and found him inadequate. Ironically, teens are so self-absorbed, they don't realize all the other teens are equally self-absorbed. Frequently the teen's source of embarrassment goes unnoticed until the teen, out of embarrassment, calls attention to the "flaw" This self-consciousness makes them overly sensitive to criticism from anyone, including parents. They will feel criticized even when there was no criticism intended. The teen's ambivalence emerges here. The teen acts as if the parent doesn't know "anything" and then the teen feels hurt by real or perceived criticism from that same parent. This self-absorption also makes it hard to see another point of view, particularly when it is a view held by a parent.

E. Distorted thinking

Elkind also discussed the concept of a "Personal Fable," which takes several forms of distorted thinking. There is the fable of invincibility: the belief nothing bad will ever happen to them. Teens believe the law of averages does not apply to them, they are above mortality. If there is a danger inherent in an activity, they believe "nothing will happen to me." This is part of the reason they take risks, they do not believe danger applies to them. This is also why scare tactics are ineffective with teens, they simply do not believe they could be harmed. It is probable they know other teens who have engaged in risky behavior with no adverse
consequences. They are likely to know of teens who have driven a car while drunk or used illegal drugs without experiencing any visible harm.

An extension of this belief is the teens' sense they are somehow destined for greatness in life. However, they do not connect destiny with the effort and work it takes to get there. As they dream of future accolades and recognition, they do not even consider studying to achieve those dreams, they believe it is their destiny.

Teens also believe they are unique in the world, and no one else has ever felt how they feel. When they fall in love, they know it is forever and that it is a "one of a kind experience." They cannot fathom their parents ever felt so much in love with such overwhelming emotions. When parents tell them, "I know how you feel" they look at them incredulously, as if they are from Mars because no one could possibly know how they feel. This is also true of negative feelings. They are sure no one has ever felt as discouraged, dejected, depressed, or embarrassed as they have felt. Parents can help most effectively by simply listening. Teens tend to be present-oriented and believe their feelings will never change. Parents can gently remind their teen of the teen's past experiences when they felt an emotion and it did change for the better.

VIII. Group Problem Solving

Effective Parental Adaptations

Ask: "What impact do these normal developmental changes have on parenting and what can parents do?"

Possible responses include:

♦ Accept/expect inconsistencies.
♦ Be prepared for black and white thinking.
♦ Do not overreact to outlandish ideas, present your point of view unemotionally.
♦ Be extra sensitive.
♦ Enjoy arguing - argue about ideas or what ifs.
♦ Do not criticize.
♦ Empathize with the teen's self-consciousness and embarrassment.
♦ Maintain your own sense of humor but do not laugh at the teen.
♦ Remember, maturity is an inconsistent state for many years. There will be moments of maturity and then lapses into incredible immaturity - this is normal.
♦ Keep lines of communication open.
♦ Provide the teen with experiences which connect hard work with a desired outcome.
♦ Allow teens to experience consequences.

IX. Group Discussion

Ask parents: "How do you tell the difference between normal, healthy separation and unhealthy, dangerous rebellion?" (Handout No. 5: Potential Signs of Unhealthy Rebellion)

This is a challenging question because there are no absolutes. Parents should look for any significant change and investigate. Changes in any of the following areas are often identified as significant:

♦ **Friends:** Shifts in friendships are normal. When a teen completely changes his/her group of friends, parents should investigate. This could be a very positive change or a negative change.
School performance: There are many reasons for changes in school performance. Depression and/or substance abuse can have this result. Parents should closely monitor their teen.

Personal habits: This includes attention to hygiene and personal appearance as well as eating and sleeping patterns. Depression and/or substance abuse can have this result. Parents should monitor their teen.

Personality: Anger, belligerence, hostility, apathy, boredom, etc. Distinctive and prolonged changes in the personality of the teen, reflected in their emotions, may indicate a need for investigation.

Activities: When a teen loses interest in previously enjoyed activities or drops out of activities without a satisfactory explanation, parents should pursue this until they understand the basis for the change.

Withdrawal: When a teen withdraws from family and friends, parents should investigate. This is a matter of degree as some withdrawal from family is normal. Parents should trust their instincts.

Lying and sneaking behavior: This merits a response from parents. It is an indication there is a problem.

Seeking professional help can be difficult. Many families resist out of fear, guilt, financial constraints, embarrassment or pride. Brief therapy can have a significant impact on a family and can help a family get back on track without life-altering consequences for the teen. Most families experiencing normal adolescent behavior do not require therapy, but when it is appropriate it can be tremendously beneficial. It is the strong parent who will recognize a need and reach for professional help.

Note to Parent Educator: Be prepared with names of counselors or family therapists for parents who request referrals.

X. Closure

This module has focused on identifying normal developmental changes in adolescence as the basis for the observed behavioral changes. With increased understanding of normal adolescence, parents can adapt their parenting strategies to promote independence and support their teen in his/her quest to forge an identity.

Ask: "What have you learned about adolescence tonight which makes you think your teen is normal?" Use the responses to reinforce the material presented and to affirm the parents as effective and responsive parents as is appropriate.

Introductory Poem

Poem: The Cat Years

Activity

Activity No. 1: What Is An Adolescent?

Handouts

Handout No. 1: Growth and Development in Early Adolescence
Handout No. 2: Domains of Development
Handout No. 3: Choose Your Battles Carefully: Guidelines for Parents
♦ Handout No. 4: Parenting Adaptations for the Young Adolescent
♦ Handout No. 5: Potential Signs of Unhealthy Rebellion

**Complementary Modules**
♦ Module 5.9: Building a Powerful Parenting Role to Prevent Youth Substance Abuse
♦ Module 6.4: Helping Children Handle Peer Pressure

**Suggested Parenting Quick Tips**
♦ Almost a Teenager!
♦ From Friendship to Romance
♦ Stay Involved in Your Teen’s Life
♦ Suicide is Preventable
♦ Thin-Obsessed Society Sends Wrong Messages to Kids
Poem: The Cat Years

As printed in the San Francisco Chronicle by columnist Adair Lara (permission granted to reprint)

I just realized that while children are a lot like puppies...loyal and affectionate, eager to please, obedient; teenagers are more like mature, independent cats. It's so much easier to be a puppy owner. You feed it, train it, boss it around. It puts its head on your knee and lovingly gazes up at you as if you were a Rembrandt painting. It bounds indoors with enthusiasm when you call it and does all its little tricks on command.

Then around age 13, your adoring little puppy suddenly turns into a quickly maturing, independent cat. When you tell it to come inside, it looks amazed, as if wondering who died and made you emperor. Instead of dogging your footsteps, it disappears. You won't see it again until it gets hungry - then it pauses on its sprint through the kitchen long enough to turn up its nose at whatever you're serving. When you reach out to ruffle its head, in that old affectionate gesture, it twists away from you and gives you a blank stare, as if trying to remember where it has seen you before.

You, not realizing that the puppy is now a cat, think something must be desperately wrong. It now seems so antisocial, so distant, so irritable and moody. It no longer wants to go on family outings. It would much rather be off by itself behind closed doors, having nothing to do with you.

Since you're the one who raised it, taught it to fetch and stay and sit on command, you assume that you did something wrong. Flooded with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your precious pet return to its good old comfortable ways.

Only now you are dealing with a cat, so everything that worked before now produces the opposite of the desired result. Call it and it runs away. Tell it to sit and it jumps on the counter. The more you try to move closer to it, the more it wants to distance itself.

Instead of continuing to act like a dog owner, you now need to learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a dish of food near the door and let it come to you. Remember that cats also need your help and affection. Sit still and it will come, seeking that warm, comforting lap that it has not entirely forgotten. Be there to open the door for it when it wants to come in.

And one day, quite unexpectedly, your grown-up child will walk into the kitchen, give you a big hug and say, "You've been on your feet all day. Let me finish up those dishes for you!" And then, you suddenly realize, your cat is a dog once again.
Activity No. 1: What Is An Adolescent?

Bring a life size picture or model of two adolescents, a boy and a girl. Ask the parents to describe "teenagers" by writing adjectives on post-it note. As the parents share their responses, stick them onto the models. Encourage both positive and negative descriptors. Note the similarities between boys and girls.
Handout No. 1: Growth and Development in Early Adolescence

Physical Growth in Early Adolescence

♦ Puberty is beginning
♦ Growth is rapid and irregular
♦ The adolescent may be uncomfortable with his/her rapidly changing body
♦ This may be a period of awkwardness or clumsiness
♦ The teen may be displeased with his/her appearance
♦ It may be a painful period for an early or late bloomer

Psychological/Emotional Growth

♦ Mood swings are characteristic
♦ The teen's primary task is to develop a sense of identity
♦ Adolescents are pulling away from parents, beginning to separate
♦ Teens may be very sensitive
♦ Emotions may be characterized by ambivalence
♦ Self-esteem fluctuates

Social Growth

♦ Peers become increasingly influential
♦ Conforming to peers is important
♦ Acceptance by the peer group is important
♦ Friendships shift as maturity levels and interest change
♦ Peer pressure increases
♦ Adolescents communicate more with peers and less with parents about day-to-day events
♦ Teens experiment with identity through relationships

Cognitive Growth

♦ Adolescents engage in increasingly abstract thought
♦ The ability to consider numerous possibilities leads to uncertainty
♦ Teens become argumentative
♦ Criticism of parents is normal
♦ Teens look for parental inconsistencies
♦ Present-oriented
♦ Adolescents can be highly self-centered
♦ Self-consciousness increases
♦ Teen views him or herself as unique
♦ Inconsistency characterizes this age
♦ Experimenting with new ideas occurs as part of developing identity
Handout No. 2: Domains of Development

- Social
- Cognitive
- Emotional
- Physical
Handout No. 3: Choose Your Battles Carefully: Guidelines for Parents

Ask yourself these questions:

Is this a safety issue?

Does the activity in question violate any laws? (curfew)

Does the activity in question violate our morals or values? (profanity)

Does the activity in question violate our family rules? (no guests in the house without a parent present)

If there are negative consequences, who will experience the consequences? Or is this the parent's "problem" or the teen's "problem"? (how to spend allowance)

Will it matter in five years?
Handout No. 4: Parenting Adaptations for the Young Adolescent

- Normalize irregular growth and development patterns.
- Listen, support, and encourage the teen. Keep communication open.
- Understand and accept that mood swings are normal. Try to stay calm and even-tempered.
- Prepare elementary school children for early physical maturation.
- Understand and empathize with the teen's feelings of awkwardness. Do not call attention to the changes with comments or teasing.
- Refrain from comparing the teen to others.
- Carefully monitor the activities of early maturing girls. Do not encourage early dating or romantic relationships.
- Provide nutritious food for meals and snacks. Emphasize the importance of maintaining good physical condition and eating a healthy diet rather than calories or weight.
- Be aware of what parent’s model about the importance of appearance.
- Encourage adequate rest.
- Let go of as much as possible.
- Actively promote independence.
- Ask yourselves: "Whose responsibility is this?"
- Allow the teen to experience natural and logical consequences.
- Avoid trying to "fix" mistakes for the teen.
- Continue to set limits on unacceptable behavior and follow through with consequences.
- Recognize and accept the teen's need to be separate and unique. Even though he/she may reject your ideas, continue to set limits.
- Say yes as much as possible - peer pressure for conformity is high. Ask, "Will it matter in five years?"
- Accept and love your teen.
- Provide physical contact daily - back rub, pat on the arm or back (be sensitive to the teen's potential embarrassment and avoid this in public or in front of his/her friends).
♦ Enjoy arguing - argue about ideas or what ifs.
♦ Accept and expect inconsistencies.
♦ Be prepared for black and white thinking.
♦ Do not overreact to outlandish ideas, present your point of view unemotionally.
♦ Be extra sensitive.
♦ Do not criticize.
♦ Empathize with the teen's self-consciousness and embarrassment.
♦ Maintain your own sense of humor but do not laugh at the teen.
♦ Provide the teen with experiences which connect hard work with a desired outcome.
Handout No. 5: Potential Signs of Unhealthy Rebellion

Parents should look for any significant change and investigate. Changes in any of the following areas are often identified as significant:

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- **School performance**: There are many reasons for changes in school performance. Depression and/or substance abuse can have this result. Parents should closely monitor their teen.

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- **Lying and sneaking behavior**: This merits a response from parents. It is an indication there is a problem.

Parents generally have good instincts about their teens. Anytime a parent is concerned, that parent should listen to that instinct and investigate.