



**Is It Just Adolescent Behavior?
How to Know if Your Teen is in Trouble
and What to Do About It**

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Adolescence is a time of transformation in multiple ways. Teens face several important developmental tasks, the most significant of which is individuating and forming early adult identity. While there is great diversity in how kids move through this transition, self-consciousness and insecurity, moodiness and emotional outbursts, egocentricity, and rebellious behavior are all normal expressions of this developmental stage. The ups and downs of adolescence may be misinterpreted as clinical pathology and conversely actual psychological problems may be missed because they can look quite similar to basic adolescent instability. So, if all of the above are normal, how, then, does one recognize the sources of trouble and signs of a teenager in trouble?

The emotional turbulence of adolescence is in itself a source of trouble for teens. Simply as a function of the massive biological, psychological, and social changes going on at this stage, your child is experiencing a range of new emotions, needs, and motivations. Your teen is rapidly outgrowing the idealized image of his/her parents that gave stability to childhood. In search of new sources of stability, your child often reacts to parental values with open rebellion. This process may strain family relationships to a degree that it drives a teenager to adopt opposition as a lifestyle.

Friends and peer groups play a crucial role in a teenager's development, and may become a source of trouble. Often teens construct what has been called "island cultures" in their attempt to define their personal identities. While such peer groups provide support and can help a teen chart his/her direction, they can be a source of trouble if drugs, violence, or peer pressure becomes the bond that holds the group together.

Teen troubles can arise from dysfunctions within the family system itself. Family problems and conflicts may be taken on by or given to the "rebellious" child in the family. Thus a troubled teenager may be the repository for the unacknowledged troubles of the family. And finally, divorce is one of the most easily identified sources of problems for teenagers. Divorce has significant immediate and long-term effects in terms of altered relationships and economic changes.



Recognizing the Warning Signs of Trouble

There are certain danger signs of which parents should be aware. Withdrawal from friends and social activities, lethargy, sleeplessness, temper outbursts, and excessive self-criticism can be signs of depression, what a teen might describe as “feeling down.” Loss of interest in school and personal appearance, giving away prized possessions, recurrent accidents and risk-taking, and offhand remarks about death can be signs that a teen is thinking about suicide.

Being aware of these signs can help you as a parent recognize a problems that may not simply “go away” and alert you to your child’s need for family and even professional support.

Communication is a Key Resource

Communication is the key to helping teenagers cope with their troubles, whether the troubles are normal adolescent angst or more serious. It takes skill and sensitivity to get teens to open up, but you can develop this skill by following a few guiding principles:

Learn how to listen. No one can tell you what is troubling your child better and more accurately than your child. Maintaining a listening attitude and showing an active interest in hearing what your child has to say on a day-to-day basis will help you to listen and your child to open up in times of stress. Listening to your teen on a regular basis will also give you a standard for distinguishing between your child’s normal concerns and bigger troubles.

When you are listening, use door openers to invite your teen to say more about an incident or their feelings. Common door openers are “I see,” “No kidding,” “Really,” “Say that again, I want to be sure I understand you.”

Give you teen your undivided attention when you are talking. Don’t read, watch TV, or multitask.

Accept what you hear. Emotions are not subject to debate. While anger, fear or jealousy may not seem justified, the emotions themselves are real. Teen problems may seem insignificant to your adult ears, but avoid the temptation to offer a “you’ll get over it” response. Help your child to work through the emotions by talking about them and offering alternative perceptions and ways of handling the situation that triggered the emotions.

Try to not overreact. Listen calmly, even though there may be a difference of opinion. Try to make it a give and take discussion.



If your child has made a mistake, discuss with him or her what went wrong and teach them how to learn from each experience. So long as they are able to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, chances are they won't repeat their mistakes.

Empathize with your teen. Parents often make the mistake of assuming that being a strong role model means presenting an invulnerable façade. The opposite is true. Allow your teen to know you as human being who has faced dilemmas, solved problems, and learned from mistakes, too.

Know that even successful communication can lead you to ask yourself, "Should we seek professional help?" If you are asking this question, then your next step would be to contact a mental health care professional and question him or her about the help they can offer. Resources for locating professionals include your local Mental Health Association or directories of therapists such as www.psychologytoday.com and www.aamft.com

About the Author

Dr. Joyce Gayles is a clinical psychologist and success coach with a thriving private practice, TransformationWorks, in Houston, TX. She specializes in helping people grow and optimize their personal and professional lives.

Joyce opened her private practice as a psychotherapist in 1985. In 1996, she expanded her practice to include success coaching for entrepreneurs, executives, and professionals in business. At TransformationWorks, Joyce offers a variety of services, including psychotherapy individuals, couples, and small groups with an emphasis on healing, personal growth, and transformation, career counseling, and coaching for professional and business development.

Joyce received her Bachelor of Arts degree at Louisiana State University in 1974, and her Master of Arts from Western Kentucky University in 1978. In 1983, she received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Florida State University. She is also a graduate of Coach University; the oldest and most well regarded professional coach training program in the world. Joyce is a member in good standing of the American Psychological Association, the EMDR International Association, the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine, the International Association of Coaches, and the Institute for Noetic Sciences.