

A Developmental View of the Teen Years

Adolescence is a time for both opportunities and challenges, when youth rapidly and dramatically change physically, psychologically, and socially. Because development during this period is uneven, adolescents may experience some confusion about who they are and who they want to become. Some “try on” different identities by changing the clothes they wear, dying their hair, or piercing their body parts. Others test the limits of what parents, teachers, and community members will tolerate. For the most part, these expressions of individuality are innocent experimentation, but some acting out is associated with extreme behaviors that place our youth at risk for negative outcomes.

Peers exert a far greater influence during this time than at any other period of development. Adolescents engage in an ongoing struggle between conformity (to gain approval) and individuation. Internalized beliefs are consolidated for the formation of character and ethical values that will shape their decisions for years to come. Girls tend to focus on the inter-dependence of relationships, while boys may concern themselves more with rights and justice.

Parents may feel that their teens are pushing them away, but in reality, this is a time when kids need their parents more than ever to support and guide them. Teens must manage a multitude of new responsibilities and choices related to pressures to succeed in school, plans for the future, driving and employment, emerging sexuality, and drugs and alcohol, among others. They are learning

how to achieve goals, resolve disputes, compete fairly, and cope with victory and defeat. With their newly developed thinking and reasoning skills, teens may feel as if they can handle anything, but their lack of experience sometimes gets them into surprising or risky situations.

Though stereotypes abound regarding the chaos and turbulence of the transition from middle childhood to young adulthood, the majority of teens will sail through this period with not much more than the occasional bruised ego if given just the right amount of support from their

parents and the other adults in their lives. Though teens may want to stretch the ties that bind them to family and other caring adults, most kids don't want to sever those ties completely, and they are at risk if they do. The emotional glue of family love and community connectedness is the stabilizing influence teens need to gain resilience in the midst of risk and uncertainty.

This profile describes the current status of teens in Hawai'i, youth ages 12 to 17. Understanding who our young people are and the conditions

in which they live enables us to determine the kind of support they need. With the right guidance from caring adults, most young people can become healthy, happy, and successful citizens who will be assets to our communities.

For more detailed information, see the Data Center for Children and Families at www.uhfamily.hawaii.edu, especially the School Community Profiles and Drug Prevention SIG sections.

