

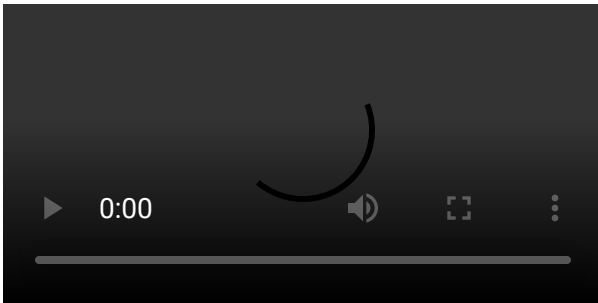
Parenting Tweens: What You Should Know

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Explaining the challenges of early adolescence

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As our kids get older we spend a lot of time thinking about what can go wrong during the teenage years. We worry about [reckless driving](#), [unprotected sex](#), [alcohol](#), and [drugs](#)—to say nothing of the whole [college](#) application process. We’re so focused on the challenges of *adolescence*,

and how to respond to them, that we tend to overlook the crucial stage that precedes it.

Pre-adolescence, often referred to as the “[tween](#)” years (defined loosely as the years between eight or nine to twelve) is a time of monumental shifts in your child’s physical, *cognitive*,

emotional, and social development. It’s a time of growing independence but it can also be scary for kids. So while it’s completely normal for your child to start turning away from you and relying more on friends, kids this age are still very much in need of parental support and guidance—even when they tell you otherwise. In order to help, you need to understand how your preteens and tweens are changing both inside and out.

Physical changes:

Girls especially are heading in to puberty at an earlier age than they used to. It’s not uncommon for it to start at 9, 10, or 11 years old, with boys tending to trail just a little behind them. Some parents feel as if their little kids have morphed into new beings practically overnight. “My son grew six inches and his voice changed completely all when he was eleven,” says Michael Levine, a professor at Rutgers University. “I kept messages of his little boy voice on my phone for a year because it all happened so fast. I wasn’t quite prepared for it.”

Laura Kirmayer, PhD, a clinical psychologist , says that those kinds of physical changes can result in awkwardness, clumsiness, and actual growing pains from extreme growth spurts. They can also cause kids to become really [self-conscious about their bodies](#). And yet, despite how major the changes may look on the outside, they’re not as fundamental as what’s going on inside.

Cognitive changes

The biggest shift according to Dr. Kirmayer is a complete change in the way your preteen thinks. It's at this age that kids go from the more literal and self-absorbed perspective they've been using to view the world for the first 8 years of their lives to what Dr. Kirmayer calls a "meta-cognitive state." That means "they're starting to develop the ability to be aware of their own thoughts as well as others' thoughts," she explains.

Which means all of a sudden they may go from being blissfully uninhibited to caring what other kids think of them, wanting to fit in, feeling left out, and [comparing themselves to their peers](#). "They're starting to realize that there are other opinions and values and viewpoints than their own," Dr. Kirmayer says, "and that's a whole new world that they're being exposed to and having to learn how to regulate and tolerate."

Social changes

Because the hallmark of this age is an awareness of others—especially of peers—the social landscape of your child's life changes profoundly during this period in ways that are both good and bad. Major social factors that come up during pre-adolescence include:

Independence: Because of the change in the way they see themselves and each other, pre-adolescents become progressively more attuned to their peers and less identified with their families and parents. Luke Hruska will be 10 in August and this summer, when the family went on their annual vacation to Watch Hill, Rhode Island, his mother, Flossie Crisp, says they saw a dramatic change.

"He used to be the kind of kid who at a birthday party would linger on the sidelines," she explains. "This summer I saw a major transformation where he was sort of drunk with this new-found self-confidence and he'd go hopping off on his bike with his friends at 6:30 in the morning without telling us. So he has a lot more [self-confidence](#) in good ways and bad ways because there's a little bit of swagger and attitude." At 12, Luke's sister Bea is already at the eye-rolling stage when it comes to her parents. "She has definitely reached the age where she's [embarrassed](#) by us and she thinks we don't understand," Crisp says.

Social Hierarchy and Cliques: "Pre-teens are looking more to their peer group for advice and guidance," says Dr. Kirmayer. "At the same time they're all going through major shifts physically and cognitively, and are feeling the awkwardness and self-consciousness of all that—and that's where you can run into some of the really tough social dynamics." This is the age when [bullying](#) can really become a big problem.

Molly Cobhern's family actually moved to a different town because of her middle school experience. "My pre-teen years were *terrible!*" says Molly, who's now in high school. At the time, her mother, Tina, admits she thought the [problem with the school was mostly academic](#). She didn't realize Molly was being targeted by the "mean girls" in her grade. "Molly's personality was such that I didn't really know how bad it was because she was like 'I don't like these girls anyway, I'm fine, I'm fine.' "

It turns out Molly wasn't fine. "She was [pissed and angry](#) and frustrated and it had an impact on her academic performance. And so there was tension in the house over that," Tina says. "We were blaming her for bad grades but she was just unhappy. She had it coming from all sides." The family moved after Molly finished sixth grade and her mother saw a huge change. "She was 13 when she finally admitted that it had really gotten under her skin."

The Gender Code: The gender code is the barrage of cultural messages received by both girls and boys everyday, from the media, from parents and teachers, [from commercials and fashion magazines and the Internet, telling them what it "means" to be a girl or boy—how they should look, act, think, and feel](#). "The gender code comes in loud and clear at this time, while their bodies are also changing," says Harvard

psychologist and school consultant Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, “and that brings with it all kinds of issues about [what it means to be a boy and a girl](#) that are harmful to both genders.”

For girls this is the age when body image issues start to arise. Studies show that self-esteem in girls peaks at age 9 and for many decreases sharply by age 12. [Girls are objectified and sexualized](#) at an earlier and earlier age (just take a look at a Bratz doll). The problem and its consequences have become so widespread over the last decade that in 2007, the American Psychological Association formed a Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. “If you grow up as [a young girl being prematurely objectified](#), says Douglas Bunnell, PhD, a clinical psychologist, “that begins to create an internal representation of yourself. It’s not just that people are susceptible to the culture, but it actually becomes a core part of the way you see yourself.”

Boys don’t have it much better when it comes to the cultural cues they receive.

“One of the really hard things for boys at this age,” says Dr. Steiner-Adair, “is that the messages from the dominate culture are so harmful to them about their capacity for love, for real friendships, for relationships. They say that anything to do with real feelings—love, sadness, vulnerability—is girly, therefore bad.”

Self-Identity: Don’t be surprised if you see your kid trying on a new personality every other week during the tween years. While kids feel a certain pressure to fit in, they are also experimenting with who they want to be, how they want to dress and talk, and what kind of humor they think is funny. They may take on the role of leader one week, follower the next, rebel the week after that. “They’re still trying to flesh out who they are,” Dr. Kirmayer says. “So you see them trying out different trends. They’re really still testing the waters.”

Emotional development

Just to add a little more drama to the changes taking place, the early adolescent brain is also evolving with regard to emotional development in ways that makes kids both more sensitive to their own emotions and to those of others. They develop a heightened reactivity to emotion, but their brain development lags in the regions that are active in regulating emotions.

“They’re fumbling with the ability to interpret other peoples’ emotions and even their own emotions,” says Dr. Kirmayer. “It’s a tough stage and a lot of parents will talk about how suddenly their child is really moody. It’s normal for kids this age to have these really intense swings of emotions and interpersonal dynamics. But it’s histrionic. One day it’s ‘you’re my best friend *ever*’ and the next day it’s ‘you’re not my friend any more *ever*.’ It can be really hard for parents.”

Imagine looking at the world one way your entire life and then having the way you perceive things, including your own feelings and thoughts and your place in the world, shift over the course of a few months. This is the exciting, sometimes frightening new territory your pre-adolescent is navigating every day. She is not the same little kid she was just a few months ago, but she still needs her parents’ support and guidance. In order to set the stage for a good relationship with her as she moves into adolescence, you need to change the way you relate to her in keeping with the seismic shifts going on in her.

Frequently Asked Questions

What ages are tweens?

Tweens are between the ages 8 and 12.

What age is a preteen?

A preteen, which is often referred to as a “tween,” is between the ages 8 and 12.

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