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What is a serious problem?

Acceptable teen behavior varies with age and differing family values. However, the following behaviors should always be of concern:

- Depressive symptoms that lasts for two weeks or longer
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Unprotected sex

Depression in teens may show itself as sadness, hopelessness, irritability, anger, casual sex, or use of alcohol or drugs. No one behavior means depression; a youth in serious trouble probably will display several symptoms.



The following behaviors are danger signs of depression or substance abuse:

- Unusual failure to do chores, follow rules, arrive home on time
- Loss of interest in goals, activities, or hobbies
- Temper flare-ups
- Rapid change in friends
- Lack of care in personal appearance or hygiene
- Abrupt change in school attendance and grades
- Unusual isolation and withdrawal from family
- Secretive and defensive behavior regarding actions and stealing money or objects

When a teen has both a substance abuse problem and depression, most professionals suggest it's first important to overcome drugs or alcohol, and then treat the depression.

What is normal behavior?

It can be hard to tell the difference between normal behavior and problem behavior of young teens. Young teens often take up new behaviors and want to try new things. A teen's dress or actions may look strange or risky, but are completely normal and not a cause for concern. It is considered normal that a young teen:

- Follows fads in clothes, hairstyles, and music
- Comes home 30 minutes to an hour late occasionally
- Spends more time alone or with friends
- Shares less openly with parents or family members

Teens naturally take risks. Trying out for the team or the school play, calling someone for a date, or standing up for their beliefs are all normal, healthy risks. Teens also test the abilities of their rapidly developing bodies and minds. Teens can show great courage, such as risking their safety to save a child from a water accident.

Gradually let go

From their child's birth to around age 18, parents gradually need to widen a child's responsibilities. Parents do almost everything for their child during infancy. However, the child gradually learns to do simple things – feeding oneself, walking, making needs known, learning how to dress, and so on. Parents usually are anxious for the baby and small child to do more and are proud of each new milestone. It's easy to forget; however, that young teens also need to continue to do more things for themselves. The long-term goal is for children to learn to live on their own and make good decisions.

Parents who continue to solve their teen's problems for them make it more difficult for their teen to become a responsible adult. Unwanted parental control at this age has outcomes that are not healthy.

Some children with controlling parents never learn to stand on their own two feet. Even as adults, they cannot make decisions and may have trouble living away from home. Others react to excessive control by becoming rebellious. When they no longer live at home, they may behave in ways their parents had tried to prevent. They may use alcohol or drugs, engage in unhealthy sexual activities, or other dangerous behavior. On the other hand, parents who gradually let their young teen take responsibility and solve his or her own problems help prepare that teen for adulthood.

