
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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The Tough and Tender Lives of Adolescent Girls

Teenage girls live in a world unlike any other, by nature of their age, gender, and socio-cultural context. Developmentally, they may be at different places at different times – alternately dealing with evolving adolescent hormones, craving adult responsibilities, and needing attention and comforting like a younger child. Like the frequently fluctuating emotions of adolescence, these varying needs are normal.

While navigating the exhilarations and challenges of this stage may be difficult for parents, it can be even more difficult for the girls, themselves. They are trying to find a unique identity, while simultaneously existing in the frameworks established by family, peers and society. The peer group gains tremendous importance at this age, and many of the challenges faced by adolescent girls revolve around relationships and their social network. Ideally, they will find both female and male friends who provide healthy support and share in positive experiences.

Girls and their parents should be aware of common challenges that arise during adolescence, and be comfortable seeking help when needed. Teenage girls may experience depression or unmanageable stress. They may begin using alcohol or other drugs. There are often concerns regarding body image or eating behaviors, relationships, or sexual behaviors. There may also be issues related to abuse – either by another person, or self-inflicted (like “cutting” or high-risk behavior). In any of these circumstances, counseling may help girls draw on their strengths and deal with these challenges.

Like everyone else, teenage girls need a healthy support system. This should include not only family and peers, but also community involvements to remind the girls that there is life outside of the peer group. They should be encouraged to develop an identity that is based on skills and interests, rather than on popularity, appearance or sexuality. They need to be taught healthy ways to manage stress. Important adults in the girl’s life, especially women, need to model self-care and self-respect, and avoid self-deprecating comments that may be second nature.

Most importantly, parents can help their adolescent daughters build a strong emotional core by helping them feel loved, protected and respected, even in times of family conflict. This will provide a foundation of self-esteem and confidence for navigating adolescence and beyond.

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