

"Signals and Responses to Mental Health Challenges in Today's Teens"

Sarah Burdge, Ph.D.
Clinical Director, sarah@acs-teens.org
Adolescent Counseling Services
www.acs-teens.org

GOALS FOR TODAY:

- Recognize the signs of struggle in your child
- Tools and information you need to have a more open and genuine conversation with your child.
- Tips on what to do to support your child

THE QUESTION.....

- What is wrong with these kids these days...
What has changed?

THE ANSWER.....

- Nothing has changed with our kids!
- Society around children is What has changed!

SOCIETAL CHANGES

- Technology
- Pressure to succeed
- Family structure
- Lack of supervision
- Peer pressure
- Lack of understanding
- Drugs

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES:

- Physical
 - Puberty
- Psychological
 - Think and feel differently
 - Disagreements
 - Independence
 - Vulnerability
 - Experimentation

IN SHORT, MIDDLE SCHOOL IS A TIME FOR...

- Struggle with sense of identity
- Feel awkward about self
- Focus on self, alternating between high expectations and poor self-concept
- Interest and clothing style influenced by peer group
- Moodiness
- Realization that parents are not perfect!
- Less overt affection shown to parents, sometimes rude
- Complaints that parents interfere with independence
- Tendency to return to childish behavior, particularly when stressed

IN SHORT, MIDDLE SCHOOL IS A TIME FOR...

- Up and down physical and emotional energy.
- Risk taking, increased curiosity, love danger and adventure but yet their feeling are easily hurt.
- Immaturity but worry a lot about what their friends think about them.
- Need for independence yet still want to be pampered and protected
- Withdrawn and desire for private life but worry about being accepted by peers.
- Demand privileges but avoid responsibilities

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- * The human brain is not fully developed until age 25
- * The teen brain goes through a re-wiring between ages 11-19.
 - * Previously integrated functions (ex. - awareness of when one's room needs to be cleaned) are lost as "re-wiring" occurs. This is normal!

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- * Brains are programmed by absorbing examples of those around them
- * Teen brains need adult brains to help connect the dots of understanding about their own inner experiences
- * Teen brains cannot advance beyond the skill level of primary caregivers - (Our own self-awareness is key)

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Emotional Problems
 - A recent National Institute of Mental Health Study indicates that one in five children have some sort of mental, behavioral, or emotional problem, and that one in ten may have a serious emotional problem.
 - Among teens, one in eight may suffer from depression.
 - Of all these children and teens struggling with emotional and behavioral problems, a mere 30% receive any sort of intervention or treatment.
 - The other 70% simply struggle through the pain of mental illness or emotional turmoil, doing their best to make it to adulthood.

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Emotional Problems (San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, 2007))
 - About 20% of parents were somewhat or very concerned that their child might be depressed.
 - 25 % of 7th, 9th and 11th graders reported symptoms of depression in 2006 meaning that they felt so sad or hopeless for at least two weeks in the previous year that they had stopped doing some regular activities.
 - Further, 16.3% of the 7th, 8th and 11th graders reported they seriously considered, and 8.2% reported they actually attempted, suicide during.

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Signs and symptoms of teen depression
 - Teenagers face a host of pressures, from the changes of puberty to questions about who they are and where they fit in. The natural transition from child to adult can also bring parental conflict as teens start to assert their independence.
 - With all this drama, it isn't always easy to differentiate between depression and normal teenage moodiness. Making things even more complicated, teens with depression do not necessarily appear sad, nor do they always withdraw from others. For **some depressed teens, symptoms of irritability, aggression, and rage are more prominent.**

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Signs and symptoms of teen depression
 - Sadness or hopelessness
 - Irritability, anger, or hostility
 - Tearfulness or frequent crying
 - Withdrawal from friends and family
 - Loss of interest in activities
 - Changes in eating and sleeping habits
 - Restlessness and agitation
 - Feelings of worthlessness and guilt
 - Lack of enthusiasm and motivation
 - Fatigue or lack of energy
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Thoughts of death or suicide

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Signs and symptoms of teen depression

If you're unsure if an adolescent in your life is depressed or just "being a teenager," consider:

 - how long the symptoms have been present
 - how severe they are
 - and how different the teen is acting from his or her usual self.
 - Are these struggles interfering with their school or social life.

While some "growing pains" are to be expected as teenagers grapple with the challenges of growing up, **dramatic, long-lasting changes** in personality, mood, or behavior are red flags of a deeper problem.

THIS ALL SOUNDS SO GOOD BUT HOW DO I RECOGNIZE TROUBLES!!!!???

- Drugs and alcohol (San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, 2007)
 - Children start drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes earlier than they use other substances.
 - Some students report use as early as the fifth grade (1.6% reported having drunk a full glass of alcohol, and 1.1% reported having smoked a cigarette in the past month.
 - In the 11th grade, 41% of students reported having consumed alcohol in the previous month, 21% reported having smoked marijuana and 18% reported having smoked cigarettes.
 - These percentages are all higher than comparable percentages for 11th graders in California.
 - In addition, 16% of seventh graders, 30% of ninth graders and 36% of 11th graders reported that they had been offered an illegal drug at school in the previous year.
 - Asian/Pacific Islanders appeared less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs than children and teens of other ethnic/racial groups.

OTHER ISSUES

- Sexuality and Gender
 - During the teen years, the hormones that cause the sex organs to grow and function also cause strong sexual feelings.
- Body Weight/Eating Disorders
- Social Media
- Independence/individuality/social roles
 - Bullying, etc.

SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK N' ROLL

- Difficult topics to discuss with your children
 - Sex: Discuss definitions of sexual behaviors, puberty, physical changes, menses, oral sex.
 - Help your child to be responsible so they can make a decision.
 - Help them understand what their feelings about sex are.
 - Are they ready for sex and how do they know what that means or feels like?
 - Help them make up their own mind about when is the right time to have sex.
 - Empower them to say "no" when not ready or not willing.

SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK N' ROLL

- Difficult topics to discuss with your children
 - Sex: Explore your own attitudes
 - Studies show that kids who feel they can talk with their parents about sex -- because their moms and dads speak openly and listen carefully to them -- are less likely to engage in high-risk behavior as teens than kids who do not feel they can talk with their parents about the subject. So explore your feelings about sex. If you are very uncomfortable talking about sex because my parents never talked with me about it. But I want us to be able to talk about anything -- including sex -- so please come to me if you have any questions. And if I don't know the answer, I'll find out."
 - Even if you can't quite overcome your discomfort, don't worry about admitting it to your kids. It's okay to say something like, "You know, I'm uncomfortable talking about sex because my parents never talked with me about it. But I want us to be able to talk about anything -- including sex -- so please come to me if you have any questions. And if I don't know the answer, I'll find out."

SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK N' ROLL

- Difficult topics to discuss with your children
 - Sex: Relax
 - Don't worry about knowing all the answers to your children's questions; what you know is a lot less important than how you respond. If you can convey the message that no subject, including sex, is forbidden in your home, you'll be doing just fine.

SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK N' ROLL

- Difficult topics to discuss with your children
 - Drugs and Alcohol: Encourage choice
 - Allow your child plenty of opportunity to become a confident decision-maker. An 8-year-old is capable of deciding if she wants to invite lots of friends to her birthday party or just a close pal or two. A 12-year-old can choose whether she wants to go out for chorus or join the school band. As your child becomes more skilled at making all kinds of good choices, both you and she will feel more secure in her ability to make the right decision concerning alcohol and drugs if and when the time arrives.

SELF-HARM

- "Experts said the rises were likely to be due to a variety of factors, including pressure to succeed at school, the damaging effects of social media, family breakup, growing inequality in recent years, children's body-image fears, a history of abuse, including sexual abuse, and increasing sexualization."
- Self-Harming behaviors have quadrupled in past 10 years.
- Cutting - Peer-pressure, self-soothing, suicidal ideation
- Take seriously and seek support for any teen who is self-harming. This is a clear signal that they are overwhelmed in some way and need guidance.

SELF-ESTEEM!!!

Your main task as a parent is to:

- Build self-esteem in your children...
 - Kids who feel good about themselves are much less likely than other kids to turn to illegal substances to get high and/or to engage in risky behaviors.
 - As parents, we can do many things to enhance our children's self-image. Here are some pointers:
 - Offer lots of praise for any job well done.
 - If you need to criticize your child, talk about the action, not the person. If your son gets a math problem wrong, it's better to say, "I think you added wrong. Let's try again."
 - Assign do-able chores. A 6-year-old can bring her plate over to the sink after dinner; a 12-year-old can feed and walk the dog after school. Performing such duties and being praised for them helps your child feel good about himself.
 - Spend one-on-one time with your youngster. Setting aside at least 15 uninterrupted minutes per child per day to talk, play a game, or take a walk together, lets her know you care.
 - Say, "I love you." Nothing will make your child feel better.

BOUNDARIES! GOOD OR BAD?

- Boundaries are good as long as you explain!
- Our teens need us to set limits to ensure their mental, emotional and physical safety
- But if we don't help them understand WHY we are setting them, then there is a greater likelihood for push back
- We need to be active in helping their brains connect the dots

SOCIAL MEDIA! – A CURSE AND A BLESSING

- Learn about different social media apps WITH your teen - have them teach you
- Help them identify how different social media material impacts them
- Teach them learn to CHOOSE what types of social media interactions to engage in and when to seek adult guidance
- Make sure they know what to do if:
 - On-line Bullying
 - On-line sexual content
 - Being approached by an on-line stranger
 - Self-harm threats
 - Concerns for on-line friends
 - How to determine if on-line content is reliable

TIPS!

- Have fun together...and give space!!
 - It may take more work to find ways to have fun with your teen as they develop more interests in outside activities. Be creative!
 - Your teen needs to have safe adventures on their own with their friends. Don't suffocate. When they exhibit trustworthy behavior, NOTICE! This is inspire them to do it more.

TIPS!

- Difficult topics to discuss with your children:
 - Music
 - Depression and Suicide
 - Tattoos
 - Piercing
 - Racism
 - Spirituality
 - Homosexuality

TIPS!

- Ask for input from a professional if you have any concerns about your teen's well-being
 - We are here FOR you to be a support.
 - Don't wait! - Early intervention is always the best path
 - Children are meant to be raised by a village. You are not a failure if you can't do it all!

More Tips!

- You are **NOT** your child's best friend!
- Ask questions but LISTEN mostly!
- Turn the TV, Radio, DVD, PC's OFF!
- Have dinner together as often as possible!
- Take short and long drives with your kids and LISTEN to what they are talking about!
- You are not a failure as a parent if your child does not attend an Ivy League school
- Say "NO" when appropriate!
- If you threaten, then follow through!

More Tips!

- Be involved!
- Listen to their songs... ask questions!
- Watch their TV shows!
- Read their magazines!
- Level yourself to them...not the opposite!
- Celebrate and praise ALL passing grades!
- Is it your need or your child's to be successful at everything
- **RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU ARE WRONG AND APOLOGIZE!**

RESOURCES

- Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS)
www.acs-teens.org or 650.424.0852
- www.talkingwithkids.org
- www.kidsdata.org
- Books:
 - Parenting from the Inside Out - Daniel Siegel
 - The Whole Child Brain - Daniel Siegel