# A Parental Survival Guide

ou've heard that the "terrible twos" are one of the most challenging times for parents. But anyone with a teenager in the house knows that the twos are just a warm-up for the real test of parenting mettle: the teen years.

"Adolescence is often the period in a child's life when he or she begins to separate from his parents and develop his own identity," says Lorena Siqueira, MD, Adolescent Medical Director at Miami Children's Hospital. "The child's effort to become more independent can be a difficult time for the whole family."

Dr. Siqueira says a teenager's behavior can be confusing and exasperating for parents. "A teenager may be defiant by refusing to visit her grandmother or clean his room," she explains. "Although a parent may see it as disobedience, it's really quite symbolic. It's one way a teen struggles to assert himself or herself and begins to establish an identity. What she's saying is, 'treat me as an individual'."

# Understanding Your Adolescent

Riding the Emotional Roller Coaster

Whether he's raging on his guitar or she's slamming her bedroom door in a fit of tears,

emotions are high and unpredictable during adolescence. Hormones, growth spurts, changing relationships, successes and disappointments all play a role in the emotional roller coaster ride teenagers often experience.

"Mood swings are difficult," says
Dr. Siqueira. "One day a teen feels
one way and the next day she feels
completely different. It's hard for the
parent to understand what's going
on, but sometimes it's just as difficult
for the child." She says parents
shouldn't take these emotional outbursts personally. "Forgiveness and
support is often the best remedy
whether it's a flood of tears or a
hateful remark."

### Growing, Growing, Gone!

Any parent who has seen a teenager seemingly grow two inches overnight knows that he or she is rapidly moving from childhood to adulthood. Although physical growth is natural, it adds worry and anxiety to the life of a teenager. They want to grow at the same pace as their peers, but it doesn't always work out that way.

"Teens worry whether they're too tall or too short, too fat or too thin. When puberty begins, teenage girls are worried about their breasts. Are they too big or too small? How do they compare with friends? Boys have similar issues," says Dr. Siqueira. "Even a pimple, which may

seem insignificant to the parent, can be completely devastating to a teenager. Parents should be sensitive to these issues and provide as much guidance as possible through these transformations."

### Changes in the Brain

In addition to physical growth, adolescent brains may be changing as well. For years scientists believed a child's brain was fully developed by 5 or 6 years of age. Recent research, however, suggests that additional changes occur during adolescence. Because certain areas of the brain are growing and developing, researchers say it may influence a teenager's decision-making and problem-solving skills.

A teen's brain may also process and interpret emotional information differently—leading to misunderstandings and emotional outbursts. In addition, the maturing brain may not coincide with the physical changes occurring in the rest of the body. All of these combined can create turmoil in teenagers.

"Sometimes intellectual and physical development don't keep pace with each other," says Dr. Siqueira. "You may have a 12-year-old with the body of a 16-year-old. Because the child looks more mature than her age, adults may expect the child to act more mature. On the other hand, children who are late to physically mature can have problems, too. It's

important not to make judgments or assume maturity levels based on appearance alone. You must consider the individual."

### Taking Steps to Success

Parents can survive the teenage years by providing patience, love and support to their children—and by following these steps to success.

### Communicate your concerns.

"Parents need to talk to their children about the values that are important to the family," says Dr. Siqueira. "They should address the many issues facing young people today, too, such as drugs and premarital sex."

Listen to their concerns. Perhaps most importantly, parents also need to learn to listen to what their children are saying. "Don't dismiss what a child says no matter how insignificant it may seem. Help teens learn to cope with whatever is troubling them, whether it's academic pressure or pressure from their peers," says Dr. Siqueira.

Be a role model. Your teenage daughter inherited your flair for fashion, but she's watching more than what you're wearing. "Children watch their parents for the correct ways to act and speak, too, so parents should model the behavior they expect," says Dr. Siqeira. "You can't say one thing and then do another. Children pick up on it. You need to

be consistent in how you demonstrate your values and beliefs."

*Establish the rules.* Parents should also be consistent with discipline.

- "Although teenagers need their independence, they also need limits and rules," says Dr. Siqueira. "A parent's chal-
- lenge is to be consistent. If one day a rule applies and one day it doesn't,
- you'll end up having problems down the road."

### Learning to Live with a Teen

The teenage years are exciting for the child and parents. It's a time of growth, exploration and great change.

"Despite the belief that this is a turbulent period for adolescents, the majority of

- teenagers do quite
  well during this
  time " says Dr
- time," says Dr.Siqueira. "With good communica-
- tion, support and

understanding, parents and adolescents can successfully navigate the teen years and develop positive relationships for a lifetime."

# Profile of an

## Adolescent Medicine Physician

Lorena Siqueira, MD, Director of Adolescent Medicine, joined the staff at Miami Children's Hospital early last fall. She is one of only a handful of adolescent medicine physicians in Florida.

Prior to joining Miami Children's, Dr. Siqueira served on the staff of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and was Director of Adolescent Medicine at Elmhurst Hospital Center.

"I've been interested in adolescent medicine since I began training as a resident at Tufts-New England Medical

Center in Boston," says Dr. Siqueira. "I realized there was a real need to focus on the complex physical, emotional and social issues that face this particular age group."

Dr. Siqueira says adolescent medicine goes beyond school physicals and routine health care. "When I see an adolescent patient, I address the health issue, but we also talk about other issues such as drug use and abuse, sexuality, peer group and academic problems, depression and other things that confront teenagers today," she says. "It all plays a role in the health and well-being of the adolescent."

For more information on Adolescent Medicine or Dr. Sigueira, call (305) 668-5525.



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