

# Parents Make A Difference!



## Parenting Teens through Perils & Possibilities



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Think back to your own teen years. Your parents probably told you how things were when they were growing up and in many cases, you just shrugged your shoulders or rolled your eyes and considered their views to be “old fashioned”. And now you are the parent of a teenager. While you may feel your own teen years are not that far behind you, in reality, your teens are growing up in a very different world than you did.

According to Stephen Small, UW-Extension Human Development & Family Relations Specialist, the world has changed a lot since most of us were teens and even more from the days when our parents were growing up. There are few times in life that are full of more change, promise and challenge than adolescence.

Professor Small identifies four major trends for you to consider as you support your children through the teen years.

### **ADOLESCENCE IS GETTING LONGER**

Adolescence is getting longer, expanding well beyond the traditional years of 13 to 19. What was once a relatively short stage of life has nearly doubled in the past 60 years. Children today engage in teen-like behaviors at younger ages than previous generations. According to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) of 5,309 students in 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades from 25 school districts in southwest Wisconsin, many of our teens are “growing up fast”. When this survey was conducted in the fall of 2015, we learned a lot about our young adolescents in southwest Wisconsin:

- 70% of our middle schoolers had already consumed more than a sip or two of beer, wine or hard liquor;
- 15% of them had already used inhalants (sniffed glue, breathed aerosol spray, inhaled paints to get high);
- 4% had already taken prescription medication that belonged to someone else; and
- 3% of our middle schoolers have used marijuana.

An earlier start to adolescence means that teens will likely be exposed to more risky ideas and behavior before they are developmentally ready to cope with them. Plus, parents who may have been looking forward to the freedom and benefits of their “empty nest” years may have to postpone them if they are still supporting dependent children.

On the other hand, a benefit of a longer adolescence is that teens can continue to receive emotional and financial support until their decision-making skills are more fully developed. They have more time to play, socialize and learn, as well as to experiment with career options.

### **YOUTH HAVE MORE CHOICES THAN EVER BEFORE**

Today’s young people are far less bound by limitations of gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. A generation ago it was rare to see women doctors, welders, soldiers or engineers; today, women hold a place in all these professions. It’s easier today to change vocational choices made during adolescence with the addition of more education and training.

For some teens, though, too many choices can be confusing and overwhelming, possibly playing a role in today’s higher rates of mental health problems. Among our teens in southwest Wisconsin:

- 14% of high schoolers reported seriously considering suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey;
- 12% of high schoolers made a plan or how they would attempt suicide; and
- 9% report attempting suicide in the 12 months prior to the survey with 3% reporting the need for medical attention.

Middle schoolers in southwest Wisconsin are also struggling with mental health concerns with about 13% reporting thoughts of suicide.

## CHANGE IS HAPPENING AT RECORD PACE

The past 30 years have brought major transformations in technology, work, family life, the economy and culture. But the breakneck pace of change can also fuel stress, depression, anxiety and disappointment when expectations are not met. In southwest Wisconsin, 28% of middle school students and 42% of high school students said that they feel stressed “most of the time or always”.

In addition, physical challenges, such as obesity, are more widespread as young people devote more hours to sedentary screen time. In the survey, 15% of our teens estimated watching at least 3 hours of television on an average school day and 31% of the teens played video games or used a computer (other than for homework) for that same amount of time.

## THE WORLD IS GETTING SMALLER

Global media, new technology and a world economy have made the earth feel like a smaller place. Music, movies and other media boost cultural connections with people who live in far-off places. But a smaller world also means that tragedies happening in other parts of the globe can provoke a sense of anxiety and fear. Cultural traditions, norms and the collective identities of families and communities may become blurred or lost in the face of a shared popular culture, making it harder for young people to gain stability and establish their own identities. Fortunately for southwest Wisconsin teens and their parents:

- 83% of middle & high school students say they can stand up for their beliefs;
- 76% believe that they are good at making decisions and following through on them;
- 76% report that they can resist negative peer pressure & dangerous situations; and
- 71% feel good about themselves.

## Remember – parents make a difference!

Professor Small has some tips for parents who want to help their teens navigate the shifting sands of today’s changing world.

- ⇒ Help your teen become a life-long learner who is adaptable and views change as an opportunity rather than something to dread. How? By modeling that behavior in your own life and by responding to change in a way that is supportive and not fearful.
- ⇒ Keep in mind that you can learn from your child. More than ever, it’s essential that parents listen to their children about their experiences and assumptions about the world. Paying attention and listening are other ways to model life-long learning for children.
- ⇒ Teach teens how to cope with uncertainty and change. Strong coping skills, including being able to remain calm in the midst of change, are critical for living a balanced life in a sometimes unbalanced world.
- ⇒ Encourage youth to understand and respect those with different values and beliefs. At the same time, helping teens develop their own values, principles and appreciation for their roots can give them a personal rudder to navigate a diverse world.
- ⇒ Foster your teen’s ability to set priorities and make wise choices. Provide opportunities to make choices and take responsibility at home, while still under your guidance.
- ⇒ Older youth are best served when parents act more like coaches, as they place more responsibility on the young adult.

To learn more about issues affecting teens and preteens, consider joining the “Parentetical” online community which features weekly postings about parenting topics based on research and the collective lessons and wisdom of parents. “Parentetical” can be accessed at <http://myparentetical.com>.

“Parents Make a Difference” is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a program of the Department of Public Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Extension and local school districts. This newsletter is adapted from the UW-Extension newsletters “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” This issue of “Parents Make a Difference” was adapted by Ruth N. Schriefer, UW-Extension Iowa County from a press release by Dr. Steve Small, UW-Extension Human Development & Family Relations Specialist and UW-Madison School of Human Ecology Professor. This issue was reviewed by Bev Doll, UW-Extension Grant County; Amy Mitchell, UW-Extension Crawford County; Lori Berget, UW-Extension Lafayette County; Chelsea Wunnicke, UW-Extension Richland County; and Debra Ivey, UW-Extension Iowa County. Thanks are extended to the 5,354 7th to 12th graders from Southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2015 YRBS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; Crawford County (608) 326-0223; Iowa County (608) 930-9850; or Richland County (608) 647-6148. Or visit our website at: <http://www.cesa3.org/yrbs.html>