



ProjectTEACH

Your Child's Mental Health: Mental Wellness in the Teen Years

As your child transitions through the teen years, so will your concerns about his or her emotional and mental health. However, the typical teen isn't as likely as younger kids to voice his or her concerns directly to parents. Remember, your primary care physician is trained and ready to answer your questions about this complicated time in your child's life. Annual visits are a great time to do this.

It's important to remember that even though you might feel like your teenager is more distant, you still know your child best. Now is the time to combine what you know about your child with the other social interactions that characterize his or her life. In particular, this is the time that challenges like sleep disturbances, disordered eating, depression, and drug and alcohol use begin during these vulnerable years.

All of this means that the questions you bring to your doctor will be a combination of 1) your personal understanding of your child, 2) worries that your child may have voiced to you or to friends and mentors, and 3) the concerns that your doctor brings to the visit.

Now that your child is older, he or she will need some alone time with the doctor. Teens often have their own questions that parents don't think to ask. There are also things that are better discussed without a parent in the room. As a parent, you can still help your child prepare for this opportunity. It is an important time to check in with your teen directly and with their community.

Preparing to Talk with Your Teen Before a Primary Care Visit

Talking about the issues below is best done over time, instead of all at once before a visit. Many parents worry that teens aren't listening when they ask difficult questions. But preparing for your teen's primary care visit means asking some of these questions, and evidence suggests that teens listen carefully to their parents even when they appear like they aren't listening.

- Start with open-ended questions, and narrow topics down if your child seems interested in talking more.
- Talk directly to your teen – do not be vague. This is the best way to make sure you are both talking about the same thing.

Keeping the above guidance in mind, below are some important questions to start with.

- Do you have any concerns you'd like to discuss with your doctor? Do you have any concerns that you'd like me to discuss with your doctor? Remember that unless what you tell your doctor seems really dangerous, your conversation at your check-up will be confidential.
- Your doctor may ask about school: Are things going OK? Are any subjects particularly hard? Are there any teachers who are more difficult? Why?
- The doctor may also want to hear about your friendships and the kinds of activities you are involved in, like sports and even social media. He or she will probably address bullying: Do you ever feel bullied?
- Your doctor will probably ask you about drugs or alcohol. You'll get to talk about this without me in the room. Even so, I want to check in with you: Do you have any questions for me?
- I'm also pretty sure your doctor will talk to you about sex, including birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. Are there questions you have for me?

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From these general questions, move to more specific issues.

You can also start to gently inquire about some symptoms of emotional distress that begin during the teen years. If your child answers any of these questions in ways that worry you, contact your doctor immediately. It is always better to seek reassurance than to be sorry you didn't check in.

- How are your eating habits? How do you feel about the way you look?
- How do you feel about yourself? Are you happy? What's interesting to you these days?
- How is your sleep? When do you go to sleep? Is it hard to wake up?
- How much coffee and energy drinks are you consuming?
- Do you have any worries? What do you worry about?
- Do you ever wish you weren't alive? Do you have thoughts of hurting or killing yourself?
Have you ever hurt yourself?

Finally, there are questions that some parents will find harder.

These include asking about gender and sexual orientation. Although these issues are discussed more openly than they used to be, it is still important to begin these discussions gently, but directly.

- Have you had thoughts or concerns about your sexuality? Do you think you're straight or gay, or are you still figuring that out?
- Do you identify with your gender? Do you think of yourself as a boy or as a girl? Do you want to talk to the doctor about these matters? Is there anything you'd like me to ask?

Many parents and teens will feel anxious about these kinds of questions. Be straightforward, and if you have any concerns as you prepare for your visit, remember that you can check in with your doctor. These are fun years, but they can be quite a ride. Try to hold on and enjoy them!

SUMMARY

Remember, you know your child best. But if your answer to any of these questions makes you think, look at your thoughts as an opportunity to ask your doctor more questions. After all, that's what your doctor is there for!