

Parents and Family Matter

Strategies for Developing Family-Centered Adolescent Care Within Primary Care Practices



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KEYWORDS

- Positive parenting • Adolescent • Family • Parenting • Positive youth development
- Primary care • Youth

KEY POINTS

- Parental involvement during adolescence is important; however, parents may not recognize that the parenting skills that help teens thrive are different from those they learned for their young children.
- Parenting stress during the teen years can be high, even if there are no other stressors in the family.
- Primary care providers are perfectly positioned to partner with parents, and support them in mastering parenting skills that support healthy youth development.
- Family-centered care does not hinder teens' right and access to confidential care.
- Families need to be supported in the context of their communities and their cultures, considering both their strengths and challenges.

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We have an opportunity to revolutionize the way in which we, as a society, think about parenting, in particular the parenting of adolescents.¹ We can raise awareness about the importance of parenting during adolescence, we can shift negative perceptions about parenting and adolescence, and we can provide tools for raising healthy teenagers. The power to do so is well within our grasp, and the effects will reverberate throughout our schools, our courts, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, and our lives.

—Rae Simpson, Raising Teens²

INTRODUCTION

The family is the foundational system supporting healthy youth development.^{2–7} However, similar to a mobile that includes multiple interdependent pieces, even a well-balanced family can become unsteady when 1 piece shifts. To maintain equilibrium, the system must be flexible and adaptable. Given that a fundamental task of adolescence is renegotiation of the relationship between parents and youth, this developmental stage is particularly challenging for parents seeking to maintain balance within their family system. Despite increased understanding of the importance of parents in the lives of youth, and identification of key strategies and approaches that may help parents to guide their child through adolescence, little support is available to parents during this transition.

Parents receive advice and knowledge about optimal parenting strategies from multiple sources when their children are young, often beginning with prenatal classes and continuing through early childhood education. Yet, although health care, social service, and educational systems provide these messages to parents of young children, similar opportunities are not as widely available during adolescence. For example, when the federal government recently invested in Parenting Home Visiting Programs, only 1 of the 7 funded programs included parents of teenagers.^{8,9} Consequently, parents may be left with 2 impressions: First, that they should not need additional parenting support during their children's teenage years, and second, that the strategies they used with their younger children remain appropriate for their teens.

The consequences of the lack of information and support for parents of teens are profound. Results of a recent analysis of parenting skills by the Center on Children and Families indicate that these parenting gaps have consequences for social mobility.⁸ This research found that children of parents with strong parenting skills, including high parental warmth and verbal communication skills, are more likely to succeed in life compared with children whose parents have weaker skills. The authors state, "By the end of adolescence, three out of four children with the strongest parents graduate high school with at least a 2.5 GPA, while avoiding being convicted of a crime or becoming a teen parent. By contrast, only 30% of children with the weakest parents manage to meet these benchmarks."^{8(p8)} This article presents a clear description of the social benefit of strong parenting skills and identifies the need for interventions focused on building these skills.⁸

Primary care providers are uniquely positioned to provide needed support and education to parents of teens. Although the gap in parenting support is acknowledged within health care preventive guidelines,^{10,11} it is not currently being adequately addressed in clinical care or in training for health care providers.¹² Nevertheless, there is evidence to support "best practices" for parenting adolescents and there are strategies primary care providers can use to coach parents in making use of these developmentally appropriate parenting practices. These skills and knowledge support

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