



Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula®
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES
Clint Eastwood Youth Program



Stepping into the teen “Twilight Zone”

Adolescence is when most children begin to take on adult characteristics. Their bodies become more “adultlike,” they begin to show signs of adult competencies (driving, working, making their own plans, etc.), and we begin to see who they will be in the “real world.” Under this mask of adulthood, however, teenagers are in a sort of “twilight zone.” Their emotions are often in a state of constant flux, and they may experience confusion that they have trouble putting into words.

As the parent of an adolescent, you may feel that you no longer “know” the person inhabiting the changing body of your child. You may become concerned, worried, or doubtful of your parenting ability because you see many strange and hard-to-understand behaviors in your teenager. These behaviors may include informing you how “stupid,” “unfair,” “unreasonable,” and/or “old” you have become and may be accompanied by eye rolling and exasperated sighs.

Most teens go through periods of:

- mood swings
- irritability
- anger
- withdrawal
- argumentativeness
- lack of respect for parents/authority

While many of these behaviors are developmentally “normal,” they can also signal a bigger problem. It can be extremely difficult to differentiate between “normal adolescent changes” and signs of substance abuse or mental health problems. It’s important as a parent to be attuned to patterns or changes that may signal a more serious problem.

Make time to talk

As you try to sort out whether your child’s troubling behavior is “just adolescence” or a larger problem your teen needs help with, try to obtain more information about what is behind the disturbing behaviors/mood changes. One of the best sources for more information is your teen. Ask your teen questions and listen closely to the responses, as well as paying attention to the child’s eye contact, body language, and other behaviors.

Here are some helpful hints to make talking with your teen more successful.

Prior to a serious discussion, think about what you will say/ask.

- Review and rethink what you want to say. If someone were speaking these words to you, what/how would you feel?

- Come up with a time and place when you are both likely to be free of other demands or distractions.
- Give some thought to when your child might be most receptive to a discussion: morning? night? alone? with friends? while driving? with reference to a specific event?
- Consider when it would be best for you to have the talk: before/after work? on a day off? while driving? alone, or with your partner?
- Think about what the real purpose of this discussion is: to prove you are right? to get to the bottom of specific problem behavior? to discover what is going on with or troubling your teen? to sort out “normal” teen behavior from “a problem”? to let your teen know he or she is loved but you are worried about specific behavior? or . . . ?

OK, now what?

If you are concerned that your teen’s behavior is more than “normal” adolescent acting out, gather information, review grades, and talk with teachers, friends, or other adults who have close contact with you and your child. Ask for their input about any behavior changes they may have noticed; this can help you put things in perspective. Once you have your information and are clear on what you want to say and what your purpose is, give thought to what you want the outcome to be:

- clarification of the problem?
- a closer relationship?
- helping your teen through a difficult time (adolescence)?
- getting your teen to a professional for evaluation/treatment? . . . etc.

The source of problematic adolescent behavior can be very difficult to isolate. Two of the top contenders for serious behavior problems are drug abuse and mental illness. While there are drug tests, they test a specific time and for specific substances. There are no definitive tests for adolescent mental health disorders. Frequently, mental health and substance abuse occur together (dual diagnosis or co-occurring conditions).

When you are concerned, it’s best to start by taking a serious, thoughtful look at the behaviors you are seeing. Then talk with your adolescent, watch/monitor his or her behavior, and seek help. Family therapy is an option that can help you to work through problems as well as to find new ways of improving your family relationships. If you suspect drugs/alcohol, mental health problems, or a combination, seek an evaluation from a qualified mental health practitioner.

This information is brought to you by Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula’s Clint Eastwood Youth Program, providing a structured program to treat drug and alcohol abuse as well as mental health problems.

For more information or to schedule a free screening, please call **373-0924 or 800-528-8080**



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