

Warning Signs: What to Look Out For

Development shows up differently in each child and there are typical behaviors that are developmentally appropriate. However, the problem behaviors that come up for adolescents typically are those that have reached an extreme and are the warning signs for mental health issues. It is helpful to think of these “warning signs” in relation to any other physical diagnosis; think about if someone started to experience symptoms of a fever, runny nose, sore throat, cough – we would take this seriously and take our child to the doctor to see if they are sick with the flu. These symptoms or “warning signs” are the same – they could potentially lead to a diagnosis and could, if left untreated, possibly lead to detrimental consequences.

It is helpful to know and be able to recognize what behaviors are beyond typical and to take these behaviors seriously. Most of these behaviors are maladaptive coping skills that the adolescent has learned to cope with their stressors or triggers.

A behavior may be a problem when:¹

- The behavior creates more severe consequences (long term and if you begin to see short term)
- The behavior creates physical or emotional harm
- The behavior significantly reduces the quality of life for the teen and his or her family

Problem behaviors include:

- Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts**
 - Thoughts of suicide could present as passive or active. Passive thoughts may include, “My family would be better off without me” or “I wish I could go to sleep and not wake up”. Active thoughts are much more urgent in terms of safety which could include plans of how to commit suicide, gathering means to commit suicide and/or active attempt on their life.
- Self-injury (e.g., cutting or burning the skin, may also see scratching)**
- Using drugs and/or alcohol (beyond experimentation)
- Over eating, restricting or engaging in purging behaviors
- Promiscuity
- Refusal to go to school and truancy
- Complete disengagement from parents
- Running away from home
- Increased conflict with and/or isolation from others – friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, siblings, family members
- Loss of relationships
- Lack of self-care – decreased frequency in showering/bathing, brushing teeth, brushing hair, changing clothes
- Decreased self respect
- Failing grades OR grades that are lower than the normal pattern
- Suspension or expulsion from school – could start as being called to the principal/dean’s office and/or beginning to get detention
- Health issues – reports of headaches, migraines, stomach aches and/or fatigue

¹ Miller, A.L., Rathus, J.H. & Linehan, M.M. (2007). *Dialectical behavior therapy with suicidal adolescents*. Guilford Press: New York.

****Suicidal ideation and self-injurious behaviors are to be taken seriously by parents. It certainly is scary if this is something that is experienced. Remember, due to the fragile nature of the severity of these behaviors and thoughts, parents should remain non-judgmental and not shame their child. Discuss with your child their safety plan and how, as the parent, you can help with their safety. If they are unable to stay safe, take him or her to the nearest emergency room for a safety assessment from a mental health professional.**

To note, the following are developmentally normal behaviors that your adolescent may engage in that do not happen frequently.²

- Being more argumentative or critical with parents
- Minor violations of rules (e.g., missing curfew)
- Refusal to talk about emotions or school tasks
- May spend time in bedroom alone or request to be alone
- Experimentation with hobbies, clubs, music, clothes, makeup, jobs, interests and/or friend groups
- Spending more time with friends than family (including texting and on social media)
- Mood swings
- Exploration of physical intimacy such as dating and sex
- Acting shy or self-conscious
- Belief that he or she can take risks without severe consequences
- Dramatization due to belief that no one else has felt how he or she feels

If you notice your child engaging in behaviors frequently and then lead to negative consequences and maladaptive behaviors listed above, that is also a warning sign to be aware of.

² McNeely, C.A. and Blanchard, J. (2010). *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

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