

A Guide for Responding to Adolescent Problems

1. Warning Signs of Serious Problems

Some adolescent behavior, while irritating or worrisome to parents or leaders, is not dangerous for the teenager. Other behavior, however, if intense and persistent, can be a sign of deeper and more severe problems with serious consequences for the teenager's well being. Serious disturbance, evident only in about 20% of all adolescents, sometimes has its roots in childhood. However, some disturbances, such as anorexia nervosa, appear for the first time during adolescence. The following are some behaviors that may be signs of emotional disturbance in adolescents:

1. The adolescent is withdrawn for long periods of time and shows no interest in others.
2. The adolescent has no friends of the same age and is not integrated into a peer group.
3. The adolescent is docile, never acts independently, never initiates activities.
4. The adolescent continually runs away from home or school.
5. The adolescent frequently gets into fights, physically abuses others, and shows unrelenting anger over minor irritations.
6. The adolescent's emotional state moves from high to low without any intervening or leveling off.
7. The adolescent is consistently depressed, preoccupied with death, or threatens or attempts suicide.
8. The adolescent engages in indiscriminate sexual activity with a number of partners.
9. The adolescent is often drunk or under the influence of drugs.
10. The adolescent loses a dangerous amount of weight or engages in food binges, frequent vomiting after meals, and alternate bouts of excessive eating and starving out of excessive concern for appearance.

A young person who exhibits these behaviors will not stop or change as a result of lectures, stricter rules, or punishment. These behaviors are frequently symptoms of serious disturbance. Professional help may be necessary.