



CENTER FOR PARENT & TEEN
COMMUNICATION

Teen Identity Development

5 Tips for Parents



#1 Teens build their personal identity on messages they receive from people they know and trust.

- Parents, peers, and other adult mentors send messages to teens that help them figure out who they are. **Expose your teen to people from different backgrounds and life experiences** to give them a wealth of identities to draw from.
- Teens may build their identities around their peers' interests. This could be religion, activism, athletics, hobbies, or academics. **Teens should be encouraged to explore**, as long as they are not placing themselves in danger and their new interests or affiliations don't conflict with the core value of respecting other people.
- Teens are always looking to their parents for feedback. **Be a sounding board** for your child as they try out their different identities. Make sure your teen knows you love them without condition, just the way they are.
- Media representations of teens are often inaccurate and stereotypical. We need to **highlight positive representations of teens** that depict their idealism and desire to do the right thing.

#2 Self-exploration is important.

- For teens, self-exploration can be challenging. **Recognize they need consistency and support** during this stage of their life.
- Teens are particularly sensitive to feedback from others, especially peers. **Allow your teen to explore** joining different groups and spending time with diverse people.
- Teens may begin exploring or questioning different aspects of their identity, including their gender or sexual orientation. **Supporting and loving your teen** is the most important thing you can do.
- **Teens must try new things and test new values** before discovering which "hats" fit best.

#3 Openly and honestly discuss race, gender, religion, sexuality, stereotypes, and biases.

- **Race, gender, and religion** can be fundamental parts of one's identity development. It is important for teens to be confident in what they mean to them.
- **Talking about these topics early and often** helps teens understand what they mean and how they can affect others.
- **Embrace and celebrate** what makes us different and unique. Doing so makes it easier for teens to have meaningful relationships with people of different backgrounds and recognize injustices faced by minority groups.
- **Loving and accepting** your teen has several benefits for all teens, but especially LGBTQ+ youth who often face challenges as they come out.
- **Feeling good about and connected to a group** that shares your identity is linked with improvements in school performance, mental well-being, and physical health.



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#4 Be a role model by making reflective and thoughtful decisions.

- Identity development starts in earnest during adolescence and continues for the rest of our lives. **Model giving second chances and growing from experiences** early on so your teen can follow your example.
- Adolescence is a time when we start making important decisions about who we want to be when we're older. Work to **model careful consideration of weighing the options** when making big decisions.
- **Model what a healthy adult looks like.** Make time for pleasure to show that adulthood is still fun while maintaining boundaries and safe decision-making.

#5 Be a supportive parent by encouraging safe exploration. Expect teens to want more independence.

- Allow teens to **experience new things** integral to their identity, like sports, art, music, religion, community service.
- **Get involved** if your teen is engaging in behaviors that threaten safety or morality.
- Teens must know **you will love them as they are.**
- Your teen may **make new friends and grow apart from others.** This is a normal part of identity exploration.
- Your teen may **grow more distant** as they try to discover themselves and push family away. It can be helpful to remind yourself that this is temporary.
- Your teen may **express themselves in different ways on social media** -- a popular and important part of adolescent life.
- Be cautious of social media while allowing teens their independence. **Highlight the positive messages** spread on social media and challenge the undermining ones.