

# Developing Adolescent Identity

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## Other recommended reading:

Article: [Help Kids Recognize Their Identity in Christ](#) by Jennie Allen from Focus on the Family

Article: [How to Help Your Youth Find Their Identity in Christ](#) by Aaron Crumbey from Ministry Today

Article: [Finding Identity, Belonging, and Purpose in a Competitive World](#) by Caleb Roose from Fuller Youth Institute

Article: [Adolescent Girls and Their Identity in Christ](#) by Kiley Helgerson from YouthWorker

## Adolescent Identity Development: The Factors of Change

Among the profound and exciting changes taking place in adolescence is the process of self-discovery. Our teens are working to figure out who they are, making adolescent identity development a central feature of teen life. Young people's identities are shaped by lots of factors — family, cultural and societal expectations, experiences with institutions like school and the media, and friends. Young people also take active steps and make choices that shape their identity. They select the environments and people they want to be around. They adjust their beliefs and behaviors based on feedback. And they reflect on all of this while working to figure out who they are.

Adolescent identity is developed, in part, based on relationships and feedback received from others. As young people move from early to late adolescence and their brains continue to develop, their adolescent identity is also likely to change.

While your tween or teen may not be doing all of these, here are a few ways they may be changing as they seek answers to the question, "Who am I?":

### Early Adolescents (11-14):

- Desire to identify themselves in multiple ways outside of their role in the family

- Increase awareness of themselves as part of a peer group (for some, navigating where they fit into the social landscape may take time and involve multiple changes)
- Develop flexibility in how they present themselves in different situations
- Prioritize personal values and decisions to reflect how they see themselves
- Experience greater sensitivity to feedback from others, particularly peers

### **Middle Adolescents (14-18):**

- Begin to imagine their own adolescent identity and role in the larger world
- Actively explore adolescent identity alternatives — trying on different hats to see which one fits best
- Consider themselves and their beliefs in relation to broader social-cultural groups like gender, race, and religion
- Take stronger stances on social, ethical, or moral issues
- Increase stability in how they see themselves across different places and social groups

### **Late Adolescents (18-24):**

- Give deeper consideration of self in terms of adult roles or career goals
- Think about who they are in the context of intimate relationships
- Begin to balance idealistic views of who they may become with a more accurate understanding of reality
- Can make strong commitments to personal and social group identities (gender, race, religion), but new experiences can result in further exploration and change

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## **The Process of Exploring One's Adolescent Identity**

Typically, young people will shift from not giving much thought to identity to actively engaging in the process of exploring identity options. This shift can be prompted by an experience — sometimes positive, sometimes negative — that creates just enough conflict to get them thinking about their place in the world. Or it can come when youth begin noticing that how they act with their friends may be different than how they act with family.

Not only are teens working to create a meaningful sense of self overall, they may also be trying to understand themselves in relation to different aspects of identity — gender, religion, race, sexuality, and others. Ultimately, teens want to create a sense of self that is consistent — meaning that they feel harmonious and in alignment with each other. That is a tall order.

## **Identity as a Family Affair**

For some young people, defining aspects of their identity can come from participation in rich family traditions — religious and cultural affiliations may be particularly shaped by family experiences. During adolescence, teens with a strong connection to a particular identity may engage in activities to deepen their understanding or connection to this aspect of themselves. This may include joining clubs or organizations related to this aspect of their adolescent identity.

As teens explore, they may be excited to share newfound knowledge with you. If they share something that you have already given deep consideration, remember that it is still new for them and they may not be looking to you for answers. In fact, it is a good time for you to remind yourself that your children are experts on their own lives and their active search for answers to the question, “Who am I?” is helping them gain even more expertise. Your role is to be a sounding board. You supportively listen to their growing understandings and developing thoughts. And you guide them when needed.

## **Support the Navigation Process**

How tweens and teens see themselves is going to be shaped in part by how others — you, peers, teachers, siblings — see them. They may also be influenced by how teens “like them” are portrayed in the media. For some teens and in some settings, the range of “possible selves” seems endless. For others, it may be limited by lack of access to opportunities or by stereotypes about expected outcomes. Both ends of this spectrum can be challenging, but consistent support from parents empowers teens as they envision themselves in the present and future.

Parents can help by conveying that figuring out who they are — with all of the ups and downs that may bring — is normal and healthy. It is important to be open as youth try out different presentations of themselves. Of course, being consistent with the rules and boundaries you’ve created to keep them safe still applies. Choices that involve risky behavior or compromise morals require action even if they are part of the identity exploration process.

## **When Identity Development is a Challenge**

For some teens, the process of identity exploration may be more challenging. For teens feeling like they don't know who they are or where they fit in, you can help by asking them to share their experience. Ask how they feel when they're with different people or doing different activities. Ask when they feel most connected, disconnected, or the most comfortable. Telling teens to just "be themselves" may not be helpful if they're struggling, but giving opportunities for self-reflection can create the space to start figuring out the answers on their own.

Of course, even if young people appear to have a strong sense of self, sudden changes — moving to a new town, loss of a loved one, changes in family structure — can leave them feeling like they must reinvent themselves. Just like when you became a parent for the first time and had to figure out how your new role fit into your previous version of yourself, teens need support to create a clear sense of self under new circumstances.

## **Offer Your Love**

Even when our teens don't yet feel good about themselves, it is critical they know we will love them just as they are. It is our stable presence and unwavering love that supports them to withstand challenges and offers them the security that allows them to find themselves.

## **Identities Online**

Social Media tools provide a wealth of opportunity for teens to create, test, and recreate various versions of themselves. In an era where hanging out face-to-face with friends after school may be challenging, many teens use social media to stay in close contact with the same friends they have at school. Other teens use social media or gaming sites to tap into their creativity and imagine new, virtual identities. Some may go online to connect with peers who share similar interests in music, fashion, or other hobbies.

What's important to remember, is that more often than not, you are not the intended audience for your child's posts. As teens use online spaces to project themselves to virtual audiences, they may do so in a way that seems inconsistent or out-of-character with how you see them. The feedback teens receive through their self-portrayals online is part of the process of identity development. Jumping to conclusions or interpreting their posts out-of-context may push teens to find ways to hide their online personas from you. If you're concerned, engage them in a discussion (not a lecture) to find out more about why they choose to present themselves in a particular way.

## Choosing the Best Hat

As teens work towards building a sense of themselves that hangs together in the different settings they find themselves, it is critical they have your support. This is especially true when they seem resistant or say they don't want it. In fact, we know that warm and supportive parenting helps increase young people's clarity about themselves. And this can pay off. As teens develop a clearer sense of self, parents feel like they can provide more support...and teens report fewer negative interactions with parents!

While you can't control the final set of "hats" your child decides fits best, what's most important is to support the process of gaining a consistent sense of self across different settings. Young people who can navigate the terrain of possible identities and land in a space where they can say, "This is who I am!" with confidence will have a strong, grounding foundation as they make increasingly complex and impactful decisions going forward.