

The ABCs of Coping With Adolescence

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Adolescence corresponds with critical developmental occurrences in biological, emotional, social, familial, and cultural domains; teens thus live in a context of tremendous and often difficult personal change. Teens unable to cope successfully with these changes are at high risk for problem behaviors, including substance abuse, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and dropping out of school.

The importance of developing coping skills for adolescents is often underestimated by school administrators; the reality is that young people's development of these skills are instrumental in helping them avoid problem behaviors and in enabling them to responsibly and actively participate in their own education in schools.

The A, B, and 3 Cs of Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth

What adolescents need for social, emotional, and academic growth and the development of sound character is well known and within the reach of most parents and educators to provide. These needs can easily be remembered as A, B, and the 3 Cs: **A**ppreciation, **B**elonging, **C**onfidence, **C**ompetencies, and **C**ontributions.

- ◆ **Appreciation:** Do not underestimate the importance of small gestures of appreciation to adolescents.
- ◆ **Belonging:** Adolescents have a strong interest in belonging to groups in which they are able to be relaxed and do not feel pressured to perform under stressful situations.
- ◆ **Confidence:** Teenagers' confidence can be eroded when they feel humiliated, either by real or exaggerated issues related to their appearance or relationships, or because teasing and belittling is a part of the culture of their school or peer group.
- ◆ **Competence:** Doing well on assignments and projects, exercising leadership skills, initiating one's own actions, and working effectively in groups are key signs of social, emotional, and academic growth.
- ◆ **Contributions:** While adolescents appear to be self-centered, that does not mean they are selfish. Quite the contrary! Teenagers are eager to make contributions to the world that are meaningful and noteworthy, but few have a clear sense of how to engage in such endeavors and often lack opportunities to do so. Yet those working with adolescents in informal education settings often note the powerful impact of activities in which teens are able to be contributors to others and to causes, not just consumers and recipients.

What Works Best in Schools

Thus, A, B, and the 3 Cs are extremely important guideposts for educators to refer to as they structure classrooms, school rules, and their relationships with teens. These guideposts can be translated into a set of practices that schools can reasonably be expected to adopt:

- ◆ Respect students' biorhythms and their needs for physical outlets (e.g., minimize sitting/lecture-mode of teaching)
- ◆ Provide outlets for creativity (e.g., vary types of student products beyond formal written reports)

- ◆ Give opportunities to participate in setting rules
- ◆ Provide clear boundaries; be sure students know expectations about truancy, substance use, and violent behavior
- ◆ Give opportunities to set and review personal norms/standards and meet academic goals
- ◆ Balance the academic emphasis with chances to think “outside of the box”; encourage membership and leadership roles in school-related groups, teams, and academic, athletic, aesthetic, civic, or service-oriented clubs, including those linked to but outside of school

Projects for Home–School Partnerships

Ensuring the smooth passage to young adulthood requires the coordinated action of parents and schools. A further strategy to aid healthy development and foster the academic progress of teens is to engage parents by assigning projects that will lead teens into areas of clear relevance and understanding to parents. The projects and workshops listed below tend to be cross-disciplinary and are of obvious importance in everyday life. Parents should be systematically involved in each one, even if only as interviewees or resources for planning, though they can play substantial roles. As parents are given the opportunity to engage in dialogue with school staff about projects such as these, excellent suggestions for roles they can play often emerge. These are usually tailored to local contexts, and are far richer for it. Moreover, many of these projects provide an impetus to get community entities and groups involved in the educational process, thereby adding them to the partnership. With teens, especially, fostering the ABCs is not a simple matter, and they are best learned by embedding them, as in the projects below, into activities that do not announce themselves as beneficial.

Popular Projects Linking Home and School

- ◆ Identifying, understanding, and learning to accept differences in one’s classroom, school, and community
- ◆ Analyzing mass media, television, print, radio, movie theater, billboard, and Internet-based advertising, especially those directed at teenagers and their siblings
- ◆ Comprehending the workings of democracy, government, press and media
- ◆ Realizing the importance of the environment (e.g., spaceship Earth, earth as habitat/ecological environment, global interdependence, ecosystems)
- ◆ Examining the reasons for and interrelationship among prejudice, terrorism, freedom, citizenship, and liberty
- ◆ Identifying and resisting negative group influences
- ◆ Developing involvement in community projects
- ◆ Apprenticing/training for leadership roles

Give Teens the Skills to Soar

In conclusion, key social and emotional skills will help teens develop positive bonds to home and school, a greater sense of personal possibilities, and a positive view of themselves in their social environments. Taken together, these should act as deterrents against unhealthy lifestyles and serious patterns of problem behaviors and at the same time allow the academic tasks of school to have the potential for greater appeal and relevance than is currently the case for many students.

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