

The Search for Identity

Identity becomes a central concern in middle adolescence, for a variety of overlapping reasons. Puberty makes adolescents acutely aware of change. Looking in the mirror, the adolescent knows he is no longer the child he used to be—but not what sort of adult he will become. Sexual awakening invites a new type of intimate relationship with members of the opposite sex, unlike any the adolescent has known before. Preparing for adulthood is no longer a game. Decisions about education that will have long-term consequences (especially whether to go to college and, if so, where) will have to be made in the near future. The array of occupations and lifestyles available to adults in my society is vast. How can a teenager choose? Finally, teenagers have the intellectual capacity to reflect on themselves and their future. They can imagine being someone other than who they are now and living a life that is quite different from that of their parents or the one their parents imagine for them. They are also aware that their parents and peers see them in different lights; that they behave differently in different situations; and that how they appear to others doesn't always reflect how they feel inside.

The challenge for adolescents is to assemble these different pieces of the self into a working whole that serves both the self and society. They must connect the skills and talents they developed in childhood to realistic adult goals, and reconcile their private images of themselves with what other people see in them and expect from them. They need to feel unique and special, on the one hand, and to belong or fit in, on the other.

A period of exploration, of trying on different roles and identities, is a necessary part of this process. Adolescents need a moratorium—a time-out, when they are relatively free from the kinds of adult responsibilities and obligations that restrict experimentation and can investigate possible futures without making irrevocable decisions. Ideally, exploration will lead to commitment. The

young person has achieved an identity when he or she is able to make at least tentative commitments to an occupation, a lifestyle, a sexual orientation, and political and religious beliefs.

In previous generations, the "identity crisis" was thought to take place mainly during adolescence. As the period of adolescence lengthened (see chapter 1), however, so has the period of identity development. Because most teenagers know they will go to college, and many expect to stay in school even longer, some adolescents may not delve fully into experimentation and exploration until they are well into the early years of college. I discuss the search for identity here because this is a time when the process begins for most individuals. If your high schooler seems uninterested in these matters, it isn't necessarily cause for concern; he may just be following a somewhat protracted (but altogether normal) timetable.

Trying On Identities

For most adolescents, the development of identity is a gradual, cumulative, and relatively peaceful process that begins in middle adolescence and continues into young adulthood. Most adolescents are able to "find themselves" without losing the values and standards they acquired in childhood, to "get it together" without getting into trouble. Only a minority of adolescents experience a full-blown identity crisis. Nevertheless, many go through spells of brooding, indecision, and self-doubt. Although sometimes painful, this self-searching is normal, healthy, and desirable. An adolescent who never questions what she is taught, never wonders where she is headed, and never explores different identities is likely to be inflexible, dogmatic, and overbearing—or shallow, conforming, and other-directed—as an adult.

If early adolescence is a time for distinguishing oneself from one's parents, middle adolescence is a time for distinguishing oneself from the crowd. The quest for identity now takes the form of exploration and experimentation. The teenager tries on a variety of different political attitudes, religious persuasions, occupational interests, and romantic involvements. At the time, these tentative identities have an all-or-nothing, do-or-die quality. Today's political cause will change the world; today's boy- or girlfriend is the one and only. In fact, they are poses, and the adolescent may change his plans and passions almost as often as he changes clothes. In late adolescence and young adulthood the search becomes

more introspective (“Who am I *really*?” “What do I believe?” “What do I want in life?”) and also more pragmatic (“How can I achieve my goals?” “Where am I willing to compromise?”). Typically this is a period of “de-illusionment” (though not necessarily disillusionment). The young person must give up the childlike faith that he can be or do anything he wants for a more realistic assessment of his capabilities and opportunities. He must also face the fact that settling on one direction means abandoning others, at least temporarily.

What should parents expect during the high school years? Many adolescents test themselves (and others) by:

- **Changing interests, plans, and friends.** Commitments made at this stage are tentative, with no strings attached. A girl who has taken ballet classes for years may suddenly decide that this phase of her life is over. Often-expressed plans to become an architect may be displaced by a newfound interest in poetry. Two best friends may drift apart as one seeks identification with the jock crowd and the other with the theater group.
- **Obsessing about appearances.** To the adolescent who is exploring different social roles, looking the part may seem all-important. The teenager may suddenly develop mannerisms that seem phony and affected, such as changing the spelling of her name or adopting a new accent and vocabulary. Or she may dress in ways that seem bizarre to you but are vital to her fragile identity of the moment.
- **Falling in love.** Sex is not the only, or even the most important, motive for teenage romance. As the noted writer Erik Erikson put it, “To a considerable extent, adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffuse [self-image] on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation.”
- **Taking up causes.** Campaigning to save the environment, demonstrating against military intervention, walkathons for cancer research, and other causes give teenagers both the feeling of being special and important and the feeling of belonging to a group. The teenager can stand out *with* a crowd. Devotion to causes may be motivated as much by the desire to be somebody notable as by interest in the cause.
- **Doing nothing.** Some of the most important experiments in identity take place in fantasy and daydreams—imagining what different social roles and

identities would be like, pondering one's place in society, and thinking about relationships with friends, family members, and teachers. Doing nothing (listening to music, fooling around with the family dog, staring into space) can be valuable. A certain amount of solitude is related to healthy adjustment in adolescence, and perhaps at any age.

How Parents Can Help (Or Hinder)

As I have said, the achievement of identity depends on a period of exploration and experimentation. Unless the adolescent has tried on different ways of looking, acting, thinking, and being, she cannot know who she *really* is (as distinct from the person other people want or expect her to be). Many parents accept this principle with regard to dating. "Play the field," they tell the adolescent. The same parents may balk, however, when the adolescent plays the field with regard to religious beliefs, political ideas, or activities and interests that might affect her future.

MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE

Identity is an area where parents may, with the best of intentions, do more harm than good. One danger is parental *overidentification* with the adolescent. All parents have hopes and dreams for their children. When the adolescent makes a sudden, unexpected detour, it is easy for parents to feel disappointed, even hurt. A mother who is a nurse may dream her daughter will become a physician and be devastated when the teenager announces plans to go to acting school ("Half the waitresses in New York call themselves actresses! You're so bright; don't throw your life away"). A father may feel alienated when his son, who showed promise of becoming a star basketball player, begins to spend all his time at his computer ("Great! My son the nerd"). Parents may not understand why their daughter dresses punk when they've filled her closet with the very best preppy skirts and sweaters ("Purple hair just isn't you, dear. What will people think?").

There is nothing wrong with wanting the best for your child. But parents who feel threatened and angry about an adolescent's search for identity need to examine their own motives. The nurse-mother may be asking her daughter to redeem her frustrations at taking orders from physicians; the jock-father may feel he is losing his best buddy; the preppy parents may need their daughter to

confirm their shaky social status. All of these parents are asking their adolescent to help them with their own unfinished business.

On one level, these parents may be right, of course. A medical degree does offer more security than acting classes; exercising only your brain and not your body isn't healthy; and purple hair might make the wrong impression at a job or college interview. But it's not a parent's job to tell adolescents who they are or to dictate their interests and tastes. It's one thing to suggest that your daughter test her talent for acting in summer stock, or keep her options open by looking at colleges that have good programs in biology *and* acting; it's another to tell her that she is a fool. The father might rekindle his friendship with his son by challenging him to design a program for keeping track of sports statistics and predicting the outcome of games. As for the girl with purple hair, the best advice is for parents to tell her they think her hair looks ridiculous (not that *she* is ridiculous) but that it's her decision.

The second danger is parental *overcontrol*. All parents want to protect their children. But the time has come to step back, offer advice when asked (but not interfere), suggest alternatives to the adolescent's plans (but not to plan her life for her), present your thoughts and judgments as your own, and recognize the adolescent's right to ideas and dreams of her own. Letting go isn't easy. No parent wants to see an adolescent make foolish decisions, get hurt unnecessarily, invite failure, or spin her wheels. The temptation to step in and take over is strong. But adolescents need to make their own mistakes and develop their own resources for dealing with frustration, disappointment, and pain.

Overcontrol can be insidious and disguised. Controlling parents may let an adolescent set his own curfews, choose his own clothes, decide when to do his homework—but also finish his sentences, solve his personal problems, constantly remind him of the way they do things, and thus subtly build an iron cage of expectations.

ADOLESCENT RESPONSES

Adolescents tend to react to overidentification and overcontrol in one of two ways. The first is what is called *identity foreclosure*. The adolescent accepts his parents' plans and dreams for him without question. He plans to go to law school, not because he is interested in the law, but because everyone has always expected him to be a lawyer. He attends the Baptist church because his family

members have always been Baptists, supports Republicans because they have always been Republican. On a first date, he imagines what his parents would think of the girl. Seeing things through their eyes is reflexive. In effect, this young man has bypassed adolescence. Instead of seeking his own identity, he has received his identification from others. The result later in life may be feelings of emptiness and depression, or simply "adjusted blandness."

The second response to parental overidentification and overcontrol is the development of a *negative identity*. The adolescent goes out of her way to reject her parents' standards and values, adopting an identity designed to oppose or negate everything they consider important. Suppose the adolescent is a talented musician and her parents are pushing her toward a career as a cellist. She resents the long hours of practice; she wants time to explore other interests, time to be an ordinary teenager. Ignoring her wishes, her parents plan a summer trip to European music festivals and talk to the school counselor about early admission to Juilliard. She responds by becoming involved in drugs and the druggie crowd. It is better to be somebody bad than to be nobody at all.

Parents are not the only reason why adolescents foreclose on identity or develop a negative identity. An adolescent who is shy or low in self-esteem, having difficulty making friends at a new school, or having problems with schoolwork might adopt one of these strategies. But if these descriptions fit their adolescent, parents should examine their own attitudes and behavior. Are you allowing the adolescent to experiment and explore?

ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Parents can help adolescents in their search for identity by accepting the teenager as a separate person, encouraging experimentation, and providing psychological space. The search for identity is most likely to follow a healthy course when parents are warm but not smothering, when they encourage adolescents to assert their individuality but also to remain connected to the family. How can parents guide the adolescent without interfering?

- **Help the teenager develop a clearer picture of him- or herself.** Parents tend to take for granted the fact that a young person has always been good at math, shown leadership, and demonstrated other strong points, speaking up only when the young person has problems. Look for opportunities to point out

the adolescent's strengths. A teenager with no particular academic specialty may be exceptionally good at resolving disputes among friends and siblings and have a future in careers that require interpersonal skills. You cannot praise an adolescent too much.

Encourage the teenager's special interests. Hobbies are not pastimes (in the literal sense of passing or filling time). They provide young people with experience in setting and achieving their own goals and with opportunities to develop competence and mastery. They are important not only for self-discovery but also for self-esteem. A trip to an art gallery opening, a biography of a writer or scientist, an adult-level book on photography or chess, or the autobiography of a filmmaker will be a special treat to a teenager whose interests lie in these areas. The key is to focus on the teenager's own interests, not those that you think are worthwhile and likely to lead to the "right" occupational choices.

Extracurricular activities can also be important in the development of an occupational identity. Teenagers who are active in high school clubs and organizations tend to have higher occupational ambitions than those who are not. The specific skills a teenager acquires working on the school newspaper or yearbook may not be as important as learning how to work with one's peers and seeing a product (the yearbook, a concert) develop from start to finish. These experiences build adolescents' confidence in their occupational futures.

- **Help the teenager gather information about real-world occupations.** Most young people have little contact with the adult world of work. Many don't even know what their parents do, beyond their job titles. Much of their information comes from the limited selection, and stereotyped portrayal, of careers on TV. A girl may believe that the only career open to someone who is interested in science is emergency room medicine or forensics. (How many research scientists do you see on TV?) A boy may dismiss his interest in art because he doesn't think he is good enough to become a painter and has never heard of such careers as professor of art history, museum conservator, gallery director, or graphic designer.

If a friend or relative works in a field that interests your child, encourage the teenager to talk to that person about what it takes to become a symphony musician or a stockbroker. Better still, help the teenager get a job in an area that interests her. Most government offices, hospitals, and social service

agencies have after-school volunteer programs and summer internships for young people. For example, your state or county may run a Youth and Government Program, which enables high school students to work with lawyers, politicians, and lobbyists in formulating bills of special interest to teenagers for presentation to the state legislature. In large cities, the mayor's office often has a variety of positions for teens 14 and older. Many small and large businesses also offer on-the-job training to teenagers. With persistence, a student might find a position at a law firm, newspaper, research lab, museum, theater company, political campaign, radio station, or animal hospital. School guidance offices usually have lists of positions and programs for teenagers.

Most of the better career-oriented jobs available to teenagers do not pay (and most of the paying jobs available to teens are not career-oriented; see chapter 15). The value of such nonpaying jobs lies in the firsthand experience they provide and the contact with adults who have chosen a particular line of work. A teenager who works at an animal hospital will discover that there is more to being a veterinarian than loving animals and will get an idea of whether she can handle the physical and emotional demands of the job. If she decides she does want to become a vet, her former employer can help her with inside information on different veterinary schools and with letters of recommendation.

- **Reassure the teenager who can't decide what he wants to do that this is normal and common and that decisions are seldom carved in stone.** Many successful adults didn't discover their true vocation until college or later. Many adults who specialized early regret that they didn't take time to explore different fields, through college courses and summer and part-time employment, before settling on one. And many adults change careers later in life, sometimes more than one. College admissions offices won't think less of a teenager because he hasn't settled on a major, much less formed career plans. Most colleges have liberal arts or general studies majors designed specifically for students who haven't made early career decisions. Many undergraduates change majors during college.

School guidance counselors may offer vocational aptitude tests to teenagers who do not know what they want to do. While these tests are useful for students who do not plan to go to college, they may lead to career foreclosure in students who do not have to make immediate decisions. The teenager may take the results too literally and stop exploring.

Having “too many” interests is common and normal in adolescence. A teenager who has *no* hobbies, *no* favorite activities, *no* fantasies about the future, and *no* plans may be suffering from depression, or abusing drugs or alcohol (see chapters 11 and 16, respectively).

When to Worry

Some confusion and turmoil are a normal part of the search for identity. But intense or lasting distress are not. Psychologists refer to the former as a “normal identity crisis.” This phrase sounds contradictory. In everyday conversation, we use the word *crisis* when something has gone terribly wrong; by definition, a crisis isn’t normal. But psychologists use this term to refer to a turning point in the individual’s psychological development; a point when old ways of thinking about the self in relation to others are no longer adequate, and new ways must be developed before the person can get on with his or her life. From this perspective, a normal identity crisis is a sign that the adolescent is working toward a healthy adjustment; an identity disorder is a sign that the young person is heading toward unhealthy patterns. How can parents tell the difference?

NORMAL IDENTITY CRISES

Adolescents in the throes of a normal identity crisis feel an urgent need to make decisions but an inability to do so. They make plans one week (to enroll in a course, break up with a boy- or girlfriend, look for a job), only to abandon them the next. The religious, political, and moral certainties of their childhood have deserted them, but they haven’t yet developed standards of their own. Distrustful of their own judgment, they feel unable to evaluate their value as student, friend, or lover. Uncertain of their own talents and abilities, they look to others for direction. At the same time, they resist overt attempts at guidance. Although painful for family and friends as well as for the adolescent, an identity crisis of this magnitude is not a cause for serious concern. These adolescents have good days as well as bad days, triumphs as well as defeats, and generally are able to maintain friendships, hold their own in school, and otherwise carry on with their lives. As a rule, their uncertainties resolve themselves over time.

IDENTITY DISORDERS

In some cases, however, identity problems run deeper. Parents should be concerned if an identity crisis is:

- **Acute.** The teenager is not just worried about who she is, but seriously distressed.
- **Pervasive.** The teenager's distress extends to three or more of the following areas: long-term goals, career choices, friendship patterns, sexuality, religious identity, moral values, and group loyalties.
- **Paralyzing.** The teenager is so obsessed with identity questions that she performs poorly at school and is unable to enjoy friends and social activities.
- **Persistent.** The distress and confusion continue for weeks, even months, with little relief.

The difference between a normal identity crisis and an identity disorder are *intensity* and *duration*. Identity disorders do not resolve themselves over time. The danger is that the young person will not be able to make career commitments and form lasting emotional attachments later in life, and so drift or jump from job to job, relationship to relationship, and often therapist to therapist. Early intervention (in the high school or college years) can prevent chronic aimlessness.

The idea that all adolescents experience an identity crisis has become a cultural cliché. As a result, other potentially serious problems—including depression (see chapter 8), an eating disorder (see chapter 8), or a problem with drugs (see chapter 16)—may be overlooked, considered to be just part of the adolescent's search for identity. In fact, these are psychological disturbances requiring treatment.

Identity and Morality

Young adolescents have a personalized sense of moral obligations, based on their desire to be liked. They don't need to be bribed or threatened into good behavior. Earning social approval, maintaining relationships, and feeling like a nice person are their rewards (see chapter 7). They are capable of greater empathy, loyalty, and caring than they were as children. But they don't have their own ideas about right and wrong, and they are easily swayed by the argument

“Everybody is doing it.” In their middle teens, adolescents begin to move toward a higher level of moral reasoning.

The high school moralist sees the bigger picture. Looking beyond the immediate situation, beyond friendship and family, the older adolescent asks, “What if everybody did it [stole, cheated, lied]? It would be impossible to function; society would fall apart.” This insight leads to a new appreciation of social rules and expectations. Where the young adolescent saw rules as something adults impose on young people, often arbitrarily, the older adolescent sees rules as coming from society and serving a necessary function. Where a 12-year-old felt good about breaking the rules for a friend, a 16-year-old feels bad about a friend who breaks the rules. In early adolescence, social approval came first and conscience second; in high school, social order and self-respect come before popularity. The high school moralist sees doing right not just as a private matter, but as a social obligation. At this age, adolescents are able to take the perspective of people who are not their personal friends (the store owner) and to think through the social implications of rule-breaking (tighter security, higher prices, ultimately chaos). They realize that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice immediate gratification and personal freedom for the common good. The feeling that they are playing by the rules, doing their duty, and being good citizens is their reward. They stand for law and order.

Some readers may balk at the suggestion that teenagers are advocates of law and order. By reputation, they are the opposite (advocates of *outlawed* behavior and social *disorder*). There are two reasons for this apparent contradiction. First, the development of society-oriented morality is not as regular or predictable as the emergence of the less mature, “good boy/nice girl” morality. Some adolescents have flashes of law-and-order reasoning as early as junior high school; others arrive at this stage only in college. Some young people shift back and forth between the two in middle adolescence. Most teenagers (perhaps 80 percent) use “good boy/nice girl” reasoning most of the time, and some never show more advanced thinking. This doesn’t mean that the young person is “bad” or that his or her moral development is arrested. Our culture often applauds people who put loyalty to family and friends before law and order. Teenagers are not the only moviegoers who cheer when the vigilante hero takes the law into his own hands.

The second reason for the perception that teenagers are moral renegades is that they may not feel loyal to the social system their parents and most other adults support. An adolescent may denounce “American imperialism” and

embrace a radical leftist ideology, or decry "American weakness" and endorse a political stance to the far right. Or she may reject her parents' "materialism" to join a new religious group.

Whatever their particular beliefs and values, law-and-order moralists feel a sense of duty and obligation to something larger than themselves. The drawback is that these moralists tend to be rigid and literal in their adherence to the rules. Psychologists call this *conventional morality*; at this stage, adolescents (and adults) go by the book—whether that book is the Bible, the Constitution, or *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*. They may have the courage to stand up to their parents and peers, but not to stand alone. Only later in life do people achieve true moral independence.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

In many ways, adolescents who have reached the law-and-order stage of moral development are easier to live with. They are more willing to listen to reason. Parents have to push a less mature thinker to consider what would happen if everybody did what the child is requesting or defending. When adolescents turn the tables and challenge parental views by stating, "If you follow that to its logical conclusion . . .," they have reached the law-and-order stage. Adolescents in this stage are less susceptible to peer pressure. The morality of early adolescence was a moral straitjacket. The adolescent's need for approval prevented him from becoming his own person. The older adolescent's commitment to social order gives her the strength to oppose her peers and parents if she thinks they are wrong. When she takes a stand, it is because *she* believes it is right.

Teenagers who have reached this stage can also be extremely self-righteous. Certain that they have all the answers, they berate adults for making such a mess of the world. From their naive perspective, there are obvious solutions to world hunger, climate change, homelessness, and just about any other problem you can name. Real-world obstacles to achieving social ideals seem immaterial; negotiation and compromise are seen as "selling out." Ever ready to say what is wrong with the adult world, law-and-order moralists are also quick to point out flaws and hypocrisies in their parents' reasoning and behavior.

Law-and-order moralists are the backbone of every society. A society could not exist if most of its members did not feel a sense of commitment to the wider community and a duty to uphold law and order. This stage of morality is also

important in the adolescent's personal search for identity and development toward adulthood.

FOSTERING MORAL DEVELOPMENT

How can parents encourage and support more advanced moral reasoning?

ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENCE Teenagers need to become their own authorities on what *they* believe. They want to feel that they have their own ideas about right and wrong, their own political opinions, their own religious convictions. They need to develop their own plans for the future and feel that they are in charge of their own lives. For parents, this means giving up some of their authority.

High school students can and should make many of their own decisions. One way to help them make good decisions—without stepping on their toes—is to ask questions that will help them to think a decision through: “What will make you happy in the long run?” “Have you weighed the pros and cons?” “Is there another way to solve the problem?” “What other choices do you have?” The decision may be whether to break a date with a close friend to go out with a boy she has long admired, whether to quit the soccer team where he is always left on the bench or hang in, or whether to stay friends with someone who is smoking marijuana. These are important decisions, with moral implications, but not matters of life and death (in those cases parents *should* step in). Tell the adolescent what you would do, but let the final decision be his. “I hope you will think about what I’ve said, but you have to decide what is best for you. If you have given this serious thought, I’ll respect what you decide.”

Middle adolescents often feel torn between loyalty to a friend and going along with the crowd, abiding by its rules. Say your son discovers that the school's star linebacker has been paying someone to write his term papers. He tries to talk about it with a group of friends, but they say, “It's none of our business. Besides, we might win the championship this year.” Or your daughter's best friend was sexually assaulted by a senior but managed to get away. She made your daughter swear never to tell anyone. Now another friend is dating the same boy. What should they do?

Conflicts between personal loyalty to the friend or group loyalty to the team and the school and to abstract ideas of right and wrong are not unique to adolescents, but they may be especially painful at this age. Teenagers tend to see

these as either/or questions (“*Either* I can be loyal to my friend *or* I can do what’s right”). You can help by, first, asking what they would do if none of their friends would know what they decided—what would make them feel good about themselves. Then help them work out a strategy that doesn’t violate their sense of loyalty *or* their ideas of right and wrong. The boy might speak to the linebacker: “The team really needs you, and if you get caught you won’t be able to play for the rest of the season.” The girl might try to convince her friend to tell the other girl what happened: “How are you going to feel if he attacks her, too? If you’re embarrassed to talk to her yourself, I’ll go with you.”

More subtly, but equally important, parents need to grant teenagers intellectual independence, the right to think their own thoughts. Parents are sometimes caught off guard when adolescents begin expressing independent opinions: They feel as if their whole value system is under attack. Some common reactions are “Where do you get such ideas?” “Who told you that?” “You sound just like so-and-so,” “You don’t mean that,” and “You’re just trying to provoke me.” Technically, these parents may be right. A teenager who is entering the law-and-order stage may parrot stock phrases, borrow pat ideas, and seem on the way to becoming less, not more, independent. But pointing this out may undermine the teenager’s confidence in his right to disagree.

Suppose your daughter suddenly announces that she is against abortion and may join in a demonstration against a local family planning clinic. As a longtime prochoice feminist, you’re horrified. You happen to know that her best friend’s mother is active in the right-to-life movement and has given your daughter books and pamphlets that you consider pure propaganda. What should you do? First, try not to take her opinions personally (“No daughter of mine is going to be at that march!”). However painful it may be, encourage her to articulate her views: “I know some people think abortion is wrong, but why do *you* think so?” Help her to see that the issue is a complex one and that you did not arrive at your position lightly. By all means say how strongly you disagree, but acknowledge her right to her own opinion. A teenager who agrees with your views needs practice in articulating his positions, too: Take turns playing devil’s advocate.

ENCOURAGE ACTIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY While discussion is important to moral development, discussion alone may not be enough. Parents shouldn’t force a teenager to be active in the community, but the desire to “do something” should be encouraged.

As noted earlier, most communities have programs that place teenagers in volunteer positions—in nursing homes, day care centers, hospitals, and institutions for the mentally or physically handicapped—or train teenagers to work as tutors or peer counselors (for example, on drug prevention). A teenager who is concerned about the environment might participate in community cleanups; one who is interested in politics might work for a political candidate. Some schools make community work part of the social studies curriculum.

Some schools now require community service for graduation. Research on whether such involuntary service promotes positive development has yielded mixed results. Community service that is done willingly is better for teens than when it is coerced, but there is no evidence that forced community service has harmful effects.

Volunteer work has the most impact on teenagers' hearts, minds, and moral development when it is combined with structured classroom opportunities for reflection and discussion. Students who participate in these programs show the greatest gains in social responsibility and concern for the welfare of others. They are better able to listen to another person's problems and suggest a workable solution. Their feelings of competence and self-esteem increase. And their attitudes toward adults are more positive. If your school does not have such programs, parents and siblings can fill in. "Home seminars" are most valuable if all members of the family are involved in some kind of community service (even if it's babysitting or feeding a neighbor's parakeet) and share their experiences.