



A WAY OF BEING WITH CHILDREN

Withdrawn Teenagers

Tips and Strategies for Parents to Engage with Pre-Teens and Teens

Withdrawn Teenagers

Communicating with a withdrawn child can be challenging for any parent, particularly during the pre-teen and teen years when children are navigating significant emotional and social changes. As they retreat emotionally or socially, it's often a sign that they're grappling with feelings of stress, anxiety, or even a desire for greater independence. This withdrawal can leave parents feeling uncertain about how to connect with their child. However, fostering open communication during this stage is crucial. With patience, empathy, and a few mindful strategies, parents can create a safe, supportive space that helps their child feel understood and more willing to share their thoughts and emotions.

As children grow into adolescents, they need new opportunities to explore and develop a sense of self. While it is normal for adolescents to pull away from parents as they want to gain autonomy, they still require encouragement and support. Pre-teens and teens often expand their social circles, showing a strong interest in social interaction while also appreciating solitude. This can draw them away from the usual interaction and communication with parents. Adolescents face unique challenges in social development. Their social growth is significantly influenced by their household and community environments. Two common challenges include navigating evolving friendship groups as they seek a sense of belonging and coping with peer pressure. Additionally, social media presents both benefits and risks for socialization.

During the pre-teen and teen years, children may experience feelings of depression, social anxiety, bullying, loneliness, hopelessness, frustration, and irritability. These emotions can sometimes also lead to isolation or withdrawal from friends and family.

Withdrawal can manifest in various forms, ranging from short-term to long-term which affect emotional and behavioral well-being differently.

Short-term withdrawal: Brief patterns of solitude or the response to a specific situation. For example, conflict with a friend, or enjoying time alone.

Long-term withdrawal: Prolonged and persistent disengagement that may impact emotional and behavioral health. For example, adolescent is withdrawn for an extended time, significant shift in behavior, fails to engage in everyday activities, has few or no connections in social circle.



Withdrawal Red Flags

Withdrawal red flags that go beyond the typical adolescent behavior and may indicate deeper emotional or mental health concerns:

- **Persistent isolation**
- **Decline in school performance**
- **Changes in sleep patterns** - excessive sleeping/struggling with insomnia; repeated complaints of fatigue despite adequate rest.
- **Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities**
- **Noticeable mood changes** - increased irritability, sadness, or apathy that persists over time, frequent crying spells or moments of extreme emotional sensitivity.
- **Changes in eating habits** - drastic changes in appetite (overeating/undereating), noticeable weight loss/gain without a clear reason.
- **Expressions of hopelessness/worthlessness** - statements like *"Nothing matters," "I can't do anything right,"* or *"What's the point?"*; a preoccupation with negative thoughts or self-criticism.
- **Self-harm or risky behavior** - evidence of self-harm (cuts, burns, bruises cannot be explained); engaging in risky or reckless activities, like substance abuse or unsafe behaviors.
- **Avoidance of social situations**
- **Expressions of suicidal thoughts** - talking about wanting to disappear, die, or expressing suicidal ideation; writing, drawing, or sharing content related to death/self-harm.
- **Unexplained physical symptoms** - frequent headaches, stomach aches, or other physical complaints without a medical explanation; using physical symptoms as an excuse to avoid responsibilities or interactions.

Parents should trust their instincts when something feels "off." If any of these red flags persist or worsen, seeking professional help from a counselor is essential to support the child and address underlying issues

Tips to Engage with Adolescents

- **Provide a safe, non-judgmental environment** - create a space for sharing thoughts and emotions without fear of criticism or punishment.
- **Show empathy and acknowledge feelings**
- **Practice active listening**
- **Encourage buffering relationships** - foster connections with friends and safe adults
- **Establish appropriate boundaries** - set clear, age-appropriate rules and expectations, while also allowing room for independence.
- **Plan engaging activities together** - shared activities build trust and connection.
- **Encourage participation in group activities** - support involvement in sports, school clubs, volunteering, or creative hobbies to develop social skills, build confidence, and form positive relationships.
- **Model healthy social and coping skills**
- **Be consistent and reliable**
- **Give them age-appropriate autonomy**
- **Create rituals for connection**
- **Monitor social media use** - have open conversations about the benefits and risks of social media; encourage balance and monitor for signs of harmful online behavior.
- **Provide professional support** - if your teen seems overwhelmed or withdrawn despite your efforts, don't hesitate to seek help from a counselor or school support services.
- **Be patient and avoid pushing too hard** - if they aren't opening up immediately, avoid pressuring them as it takes time. Respect their need for space while showing you're there whenever they're ready to talk.

Get more resources at: www.centerforchildcounseling.org/awayofbeing

