Screens, Media & Healthy Development

Early Adolescence (Ages 12 to 15 or 7th grade through 9th)

Early adolescence is typically characterized by the onset of puberty and is a stormy time of development. There is tremendous physical change (the body is undergoing a transformation from a childish body to an adult body). Simultaneously there are neurological changes – the young adolescent's brain is rewiring, often resulting in a decline in executive functioning skills (organization, decision making, etc.). This transformation is accompanied by an onset of hormones which may lead to extreme emotions, moodiness, and irritability.

While there are tremendous physical changes occurring, there are also psychological changes taking place. Amidst all this change, the young adolescent is insecure of who they are and where they belong. They are hyperaware of their peers. They have a desire to belong and find their place. At times this manifests itself in hiding (big sweatshirts and hoodies) and imitation or following (trends and cliques).

All of this change is essential as is the work of the young adolescent in order to orient themselves to this new stage of development.

Given the insecurities and tendencies of a young adolescent, screen time (phones, gaming, texting, social media, music and film) must be highly monitored by the parents and adults in the adolescent's life. Adolescents are observers and imitators; therefore, the behaviors, the way in which people communicate, the values presented are all being modeled to the young adolescent, and this includes those they see on screens. Parents and other adults must be vigilant about what they let their adolescent see because what they see is being absorbed and becomes part of their formation.

Recommended screen usage for a young adolescent:

- **No smart phones for a young adolescent (this includes smart watches)**. If there is a need to communicate, consider a family flip phone that is not "owned" by the adolescent but rather used when needed. Consider a land line so your adolescent can call peers or make arrangements for jobs, etc. If a landline is not possible, allow your adolescent to use your phone to make calls.

- **Gaming needs to be restricted.** The best scenario is to have no video gaming. If gaming is something your family has deemed valuable, a recommendation of

2-3 hours on the weekend or the same as the length of a movie. Other considerations for gaming: What is the nature of the game your adolescent is playing? Is it violent? What language does your adolescent use during gaming sessions? Does he/she demonstrate positive behaviors after gaming? Does your adolescent exhibit addictive behavior towards these games (anger, outbursts when gaming is denied)? Lastly, consider what your son or daughter is not doing when he/she is are gaming (reading, spending time in nature, having authentic in-person eye-to-eye contact with people, quiet time).

- Social media should be completely off limits. The work of adolescents is to become who they were created to become, to discover their gifts and talents, to find strength and security in themselves, to develop healthy relationships with adults and peers. Social media contradicts all of this and undermines what the Adolescent Program is attempting to do. Instead, it promotes inauthenticity, comparisons, and great insecurity. Adolescents on social media begin to dress, speak, and act differently. Appearance becomes the most important thing, cliques with others on social media follow, and the role of the adults in the adolescent's life (parents, grandparents, teachers, etc.) is minimized and sometimes completely rejected. Lastly, the dangers posed to adolescents regarding whom they may meet online cannot be overstated. Consider dropping you son or daughter off in the middle of a big city *alone* for hours; this is analogous to giving adolescents access to social media. They are at risk, and they put their friends and peers at risk as well. Prohibiting social media is a decision that benefits everyone in the community.

- Film and music should be monitored. Often parents have a tendency to "open the flood gates" for film and music during their sons' and daughters' adolescent years. There is certainly a desire for increased music and film at this age. This is part of their entry into the adult world, and with parental oversight, this can be a positive. Things to consider when choosing film and music: Are the images, the behaviors, the values portrayed in the film in line with your family's values? Is there a redeeming message your adolescent can take from the film (a heroic deed, perseverance)? If the film presents more provocative or adult themes, are you allowing the needed time to discuss with your adolescent and give him/her the time to process? Are the lyrics of the music your adolescent is listening to ennobling? Do they promote the dignity of all people? Are the lyrics in line with the values you want for your adolescent?

- **Texting should be monitored, and group texting is strongly discouraged.** Students in the Adolescent Program have ample time to socialize. There must be a time to "turn off" the socializing and allow the adolescent to process his/her day. Asking a question about homework etc. on occasion is fine, but a phone call would be a better way to communicate about this, giving the adolescent practice with verbal communication and phone etiquette. A habit of texting about homework is an indication that your adolescent is not taking the time to write down their assignments in their agenda and thus, more responsibility in this area is needed.

  Group texting has an exclusive nature to it. It can lead to a sub-culture at school with those "in the group" and those not. Group texting can deteriorate very quickly. Adolescents text messages that they would not say in person, and they are in a world without adult supervision to help guide these interactions. In our experience of over a decade and a half of working with adolescents, group texting has been one of the biggest causes of fractures in the community.

- **Internet browsing should be closely monitored.** There is a world of good and useful information on the internet. Adolescents should have access to this. The challenge is that within proximity (a few clicks away) to this good and useful information is inane, inappropriate, and harmful information. Parents and teachers are responsible for ensuring safe searches. Parents and teachers must also limit the time allowed for searches, even of the good, because it can be a rabbit hole and not the best use of an adolescent's time.

Later Adolescence (Ages 15 – 18 **or** 10th grade through 12th)

Late adolescence or the last three years of adolescence is a calmer, more steady time. The adolescent has weathered the storm of puberty and is oriented to his/her changed body (that of an adult body). If young adolescence was navigated well, the latter part of adolescence is a time of tremendous opportunity for focused work, renewed commitment to interests and hobbies, and a time for the development of healthy relationships with peers and adults, including mentoring those younger than they.

The first three years of adolescence (12 to 15 years) was the orientation, the observation, the absorption of what it means to grow up. The second three years of adolescence are the assimilation, the practicing, the incorporation of what they have learned during their first three years of adolescence. These three later years of adolescence are crucial for reinforcing and refining before the adolescent is a mature young adult and going out into the world.

Although this time of adolescence is more stable, it is still adolescence, and the older adolescent is not yet an adult. The older adolescent is still becoming. They are still impressionable and require involved and committed parents and mentors.

If young adolescents have proven to be responsible, they will have earned more freedoms (driving, increased time with peers, employment). These are freedoms that enable an adolescent to practice "adult-like" behaviors. However, many parents fall into the pitfall of giving too much freedom to their older adolescent because their son or daughter seems like an adult and/or, they appear to be mature. **This maturity is inconsistent**. Adolescents do not yet have full executive functioning capacity, and therefore, parents and teachers will need to advise, guide, and continue to make decisions for their older adolescent. Parenting during young adulthood (18 years to 24 years) is much more advisory; older adolescents are not mature young adults yet.

Supervision of screens and media is another pitfall for parents parenting older adolescents. If they hadn't already "opened the floodgates" with screen usage, they most likely will with the older adolescent and this is a mistake. A crucial role for a parent during the older adolescent years is to have ongoing and open discussions about screen usage as well as music and film. Older adolescents are practicing adulthood, so they need to learn how to discern that which is dignified and that which is dishonoring, they need practice with positive communication that ennobles and

builds relationship and community, they need practice discriminating content worthy of watching or listening.

Recommended screen usage for an older adolescent (15 to18):

- **Be very circumspect about smart phones for older adolescents (this includes smart watches)**. With the responsibility of driving, older adolescents may have a need to communicate with their parents when they are driving themselves places. This communication does not need to be via a smartphone. A flip phone is capable of phone calls and texting just as well (although texting a bit more clunky) but will not have the added distractions that come with a smart phone which is much more than a phone, it is a computer with access to the world. If a smart phone is given to an older adolescent, seriously consider stripping the apps to what is essential and that which will not distract from the adolescents' higher pursuits (academics, authentic relationships, and meaningful work).

- **Gaming needs to be restricted.** The best scenario is to have no video gaming. If gaming is something your family has deemed valuable, a recommendation of 2-3 hours on the weekend or the same as the length of a movie. Other considerations for gaming: What is the nature of the game your adolescent is playing? Is it violent? What language does your adolescent use during gaming sessions? Does he/she demonstrate positive behaviors after gaming? Does your adolescent exhibit addictive behavior towards these games (anger, outbursts when gaming is denied)? Lastly, consider what your son or daughter is not doing when they are gaming (reading, spending time in nature, having authentic in-person eye-to-eye contact with people, quiet time).

- **Social media should be completely off limits through the entire plane of adolescents**. The work of the adolescent is to become who they were created to become, to discover their gifts and talents, to find strength and security in themselves, to develop healthy relationships with adults and peers. Social media contradicts all of this and undermines what the Adolescent Program is attempting to do. Instead, it promotes inauthenticity, comparisons, and great insecurity. Adolescents on social media begin to dress, speak, and act differently. Appearance becomes the most important thing, cliques with others on social media follows, and the role of the adults in the adolescent's life (parents, grandparents, teachers, etc.) is minimized and sometimes completely rejected. Lastly, the dangers posed to adolescents about who they are meeting online cannot be overstated.

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