

When to Worry: What's Normal and What's Not



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The adolescent years are a time of intense change. Brains are remodelling, hormones are surging and identities are forming. We expect ups and downs. But if our once-chatty teen suddenly goes quiet, and is unwilling to come out of their room, we worry. If our once easy-going tween is erupting in screaming fits and fights that just aren't their usual style, we worry. Somewhere along the line, every parents asks, "What is normal development, and when should I be concerned?" There are a whole range of uncomfortable and inconvenient moods and behaviours that are developmentally normal in adolescents.

We know they are on track if they:

- Are showing signs of wanting control and independence
- Have their own ideas and values
- Are having inner conflict with moral decisions and are wrestling with either/or decisions
- Move from anger to sadness when faced with things they can't control
- Are curious and playful. This is a key sign of emotional health
- Can rely on and rest in adult care

It's also typical for adolescents to have:

- More difficulty sleeping
- Care more (and sometimes too much) about what peers think
- Swing between childlike and teen-like in the same hour
- Experience intense emotions, sometimes out of the blue
- Seem highly motivated by their agenda and apathetic about yours
- Resist advice, especially when they feel micromanaged
- Forget things you told them yesterday (or 5 minutes ago)
- Experiment with identity
- Crave being seen as capable and respected
- Feel pressure to "have it all together" but not know how

Two Concerning Clues

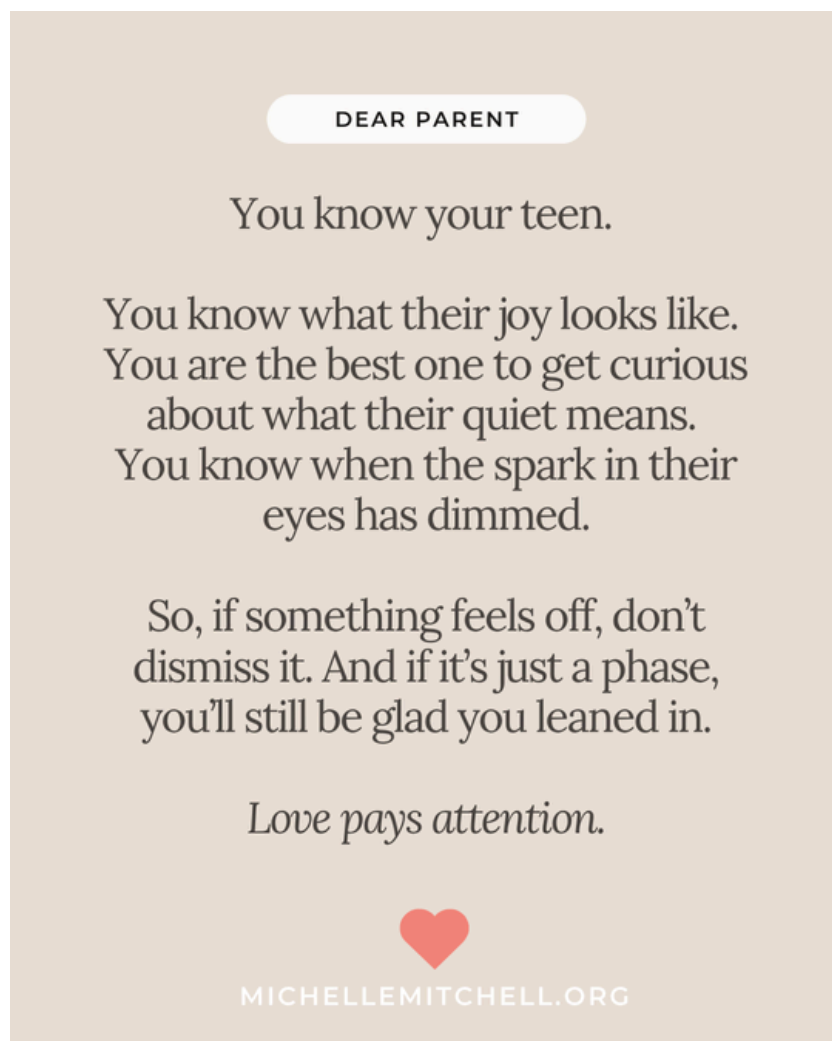
In my work, I am most concerned when there is persistence and significant impact of symptoms in their day to day life. If the answer to any of those is yes, it may be time to lean in, not with fear, but with curiosity and compassion.

Some questions that might help you unpack this are:

- Is this behaviour happening often and across different settings (home, school, social)?
- Is the feeling or behaviour appropriately linked to a specific setting and situation, and therefore a reasonable given the circumstances?
- Is it having a negative impact on their ability to function (eat, sleep, relate, learn) and how long has this been impacting them?

Let's Get More Detailed

The below table is adapted from several trusted sources, including *Middle Path Counselling's* article on teenage behaviour. I hope it draws a helpful comparison between what is typical behaviour as opposed when to be concerned and seek help. Please note that it is not a diagnostic tool but a reflection tool.



Typical Adolescent Behaviours	Concerning Signs
Wanting more independence and privacy	Complete withdrawal from family and friends
Moody or irritable at times	Prolonged sadness, hopelessness, or apathy
Changing interests or style	Dramatic shifts in personality or values
Pushing against rules and testing limits	Aggressive, hostile, or highly defiant behaviour
Stress around exams or friendships	Panic attacks, chronic anxiety, or emotional shutdown
Sleeping in, staying up late	Ongoing insomnia, oversleeping, or constant fatigue
Occasional self-doubt	Frequent negative self-talk or self-harm threats
Exploring identity and peer groups	Being influenced into risky, dangerous, or harmful choices
Wanting to fit in	Excessive comparison, body shame, or intense perfectionism
Occasional risk-taking (mild rebellion)	Repeated substance use, unsafe sexual activity

How Can We Help?

It can be hard to know how to help, besides making an appointment with a professional. That is why I have put together this short list of really practical guides for you. Here's what I have found makes the most difference:

- Stay available without pressure. Remember two words – soft and close.
- Ask open-ended questions, without demanding answers. Some kids will take days to come back to you with anything insightful to say!
- Name what you notice with gentleness. Try saying, “I’ve noticed you seem quiet lately. Want to talk, or not? Both are okay. I just want to let you know that I’m here.”
- Be willing to listen without fixing. This is hard for most parents, but it will pay off if you are able to sit with them through big feelings. They borrow your calm in these moments.
- Trust your instincts. You don’t have to “know” every detail to know how to parent your child.
- If you need to adjust boundaries for their safety, explain why, and do so regardless of how they might respond.

Please know that you can speak to a GP, school counsellor, psychologist or mental health professional without them if necessary. A third party is exactly the place to process your emotions. You’re not overreacting by checking in with someone who is outside of your home and relationship. You’re parenting with care.

A Final Word

Even the most emotionally aware adult can feel uncertain about when to step in or hold back. But no one knows your adolescent like you do. You know what their joy looks like. You are the best one to get curious about what their quiet means. You know when the spark in their eyes has dimmed. So, if something feels off, don’t dismiss it. And if it’s just a phase, you’ll be glad you saw them and leaned in. Love always pays attention.



You can find this blog of Michelle's website here:

<https://michellemitchell.org/when-to-worry-whats-normal-and-whats-not/>

Please note: Michelle's blogs are written as free resources and are meant to support as many people as possible. You are welcome to Distribute them through your education or community organisations without asking Michelle's express written permission. Michelle appreciates that you accredit her words to her, and reference her website.

References:

- Yoon, J. S. (2004). Teacher characteristics as predictors of teacher–student relationships: Stress, negative affect, and self-efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(7), 845–859.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Harvard Family Research Project.