

Family Living

Focus

by

Janice Stoudnour

Bedford County

Cooperative Extension



OH TO BE IN SEVENTH GRADE AGAIN

A couple of weeks ago I attended my youngest son's seventh-grade open house. This was a great time for students and parents to meet the teachers and become familiar with the school layout. While sitting in the auditorium listening to the high school principal speaking (I know I should have been listening to him, but my mind was wandering), I couldn't help but wonder what the other parents were thinking. Were they thinking about their first day of seventh grade? During parents programs I often ask parents to shut their eyes and take a journey back in time to when they were in seventh grade. We travel with our minds beginning at home in the morning, through the school day, and back home again. I ask parents to think about the smells, the colors, the sounds, and the sights. How did they feel when they got home from school? Who were their friends? If you want to get in touch with what your adolescent is thinking and feeling, take this memory trip. You'd be surprised as to how quickly you'll

relate to what your child is experiencing.

The principal was still talking when my mind shifted from parents to the students—the class of 2003. Seventh grade is a wondrous time for adolescent development. The most obvious change we see in adolescents is their physical development. It is an understatement to say that their bodies are changing in leaps and bounds. Sometimes, though we often overlook the cognitive, social, and emotional development changes. These are just as important as the physical changes. These are the changes that usually drive parents crazy because they come in the form of eyes rolling, slamming doors, endless phone conversations, and back talking to just name a few.

One of the most interesting things that I observed at the open house was the student interaction. A lot of the girls automatically got into cliques with students they already knew. They would put their heads together and then one or more would turn and smile at a boy sitting with his parent. A quick blush would flash across his

face and he would quickly look their way, but not lingering too long or else he wouldn't be cool.

When the schedules were handed out, students that knew each other clung together in hopes of finding a schedule match.

"Yes!" one boy exclaimed, "I have gym and lunch with you!"

Forget the social studies and math, his only concern was having a friend to be with during the most social times of the day. This is a normal reaction for adolescents. This is the stage when they want more than anything to be like everyone else even when they find themselves the least alike. Think about this a minute. It's like taking your daughter shopping and she wants what everyone else has, but she doesn't want the same thing. (If you have a teenage daughter you've encountered this phenomenon, but you didn't quite understand it. As a parent of adolescents, you have to soon realize that logical thinking isn't always the cognitive mode.) I usually shrug it off as a part of this stage of development.

Because puberty follows an individualized biological timetable, your adolescent is in a holding pattern waiting for his or her physical changes. Wouldn't you feel like you're on an emotional roller coaster too if you didn't know when different parts of your body would start or even stop growing? I am sure at least one seventh grader in that auditorium silently questioned, "Am I normal? Am I like everyone else?"

As we traveled down the hall to work our way through the schedule, all of a sudden my son disappeared. I looked around and saw other parents who too had been deserted. I quickly remembered the three hard truths that all

parents must accept about adolescents (there are more that we'll discuss at another time):

- They don't want to be seen with their parents.

- They see being close to, or reliant on, their parents as "babyish."

- They often choose friends over family.

I said sarcastically to another abandoned parent standing beside me, "Boy, wasn't it great going through the schedule with our kids. It certainly made me feel much more secure about the first day of school!"

Another parent exclaimed, "I'll bet they all went for the refreshments. They'll be back when the food is gone." He was right. My son showed up a few minutes later and said not to bother going to the cafeteria, the food was about all gone. Oh yes, he also noted that he needed to complete his task of meeting his teachers. (Eating seems to be a boy's first priority in this stage of development — fill the stomach and the mind will tag along.)

As we approached each teacher, my son reassured each one that he was nothing like his older brother, but was more like his older sister. I guess he felt that this was a good way to prevent any negative expectations any teacher may have just because he does look a lot like his brother. (His sister always told teachers that her cousin was her sister and that her older brother was her cousin. It's tough being the younger sibling. They'll do what they have to do to survive an older sibling's legacy.)

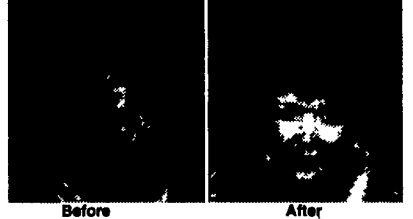
I was amused when one parent standing alone and shaking his head said to me, "You know I just don't understand teenagers. I took

my oldest daughter to visit a college that was a five-hour drive one way. I was happy and excited to take her. To my dismay, in five hours time she uttered less than a dozen words to me. On the way back, she just sat and cried. I was speechless. I didn't know what to think."

We patted his back, and shared in his parental pain. As parents of adolescents, it's hard to know when to back off and leave them alone. Then again, it becomes a fine line when to say enough is enough. Welcome aboard the adolescent roller coaster — they're in the front seat and you're in the back hanging on by your fingernails.

I am sure that all parents that attended the open house have hopes and dreams for their children. Many are proud that they have given them advantages they never had; others are determined that they can prevent them from making the mistakes they made. Seventh grade seems to be the gateway to adulthood and the catapult towards becoming a teenager.

What can the seventh grade parents expect from their adolescents this year? Putting moodiness, sulking, privacy, and short tempers aside (these are givens), parents can expect them to be like the caterpillar becoming a beautiful butterfly developing each in his or her own time. A word of advice for parents is to stay involved — school is the heart of the social world your child has now become a member. Don't drop your membership role as a parent. You're the person that they most desperately need now regardless of how they act and the things they say.



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