

# Raising 21st Century Teens: Issues & Solutions

By Roni Cohen-Sandler, Ph.D.

## Why School is Exhausting (It's not Just Academics!)

When middle school or high school students are tired, it's easy for parents to think of sleep deprivation and the pressure of so many academic demands. After all, kids often stay up late to do their homework, and are then expected to get to school on time the next day, show up for class prepared, listen carefully in class, take good notes, stay organized, track their assignments, remember meetings with teachers, and do well on tests and quizzes—not to mention, participating in clubs, band, and sports—every single school day. That would wear out anyone.

## What's Really Tiring

But what I hear from teens and tweens is that it's not so much their work load or pressures to get good grades that are exhausting them, but rather the social and emotional challenges of being in school. This week, in fact, every young person in my practice talked about this:

- Kendra, a fifth grader, was upset and confused because girls are playing with her at recess one day, and then shunning her the next day.
- James, a high school junior, told me, “I sit at different lunch tables. I don't really have a group. I'm the funny kid. Except what happens when I'm not in the mood to make jokes?”
- George, a bright, studious sixth grader new to middle school, admitted, “I try to ignore the bullies, but sometimes my teacher puts me in work groups with them.”
- Jan, a freshman, talked about worrying constantly about her closest friend, who's been either picking at her food or skipping lunch altogether, yet angrily denies she's getting too thin.
- Keira, a sophomore who gets along well with her peers but struggles to live up to the high standards she sets for herself, summed it up when she said, “It's hard to love high school.”

If your children aren't telling you these sorts of things, you're not alone. Teens and tweens rarely offer parents details of their day—who said what, how they reacted, and how they really feel as they walk the hallways of school, enter classrooms, and try to find seats at lunch tables. Most also keep their innermost feelings and vulnerabilities from teachers and school administrators, who see only the outward personas teens project. But without this information, you may not realize how powerfully kids are affected by everyday, seemingly mundane situations and interactions with classmates. Here is an inside look into what may be draining your kids' energy and emotional resources.

## **“Everyone’s Looking at Me!”**

Social anxiety is endemic to this age group. With peer relationships becoming increasingly important, most kids desperately want to feel accepted and included. As they develop a sense of who they are, they’re on the alert for their peers’ approval and affirmation. Many kids truly believe that “everyone” is constantly looking at them and scrutinizing them throughout their day. That is why many students become exquisitely self-conscious, monitoring how adults and classmates respond to everything they say, do, and wear. Instead of being present in the moment, teens maintain vigilance over all their interactions, much like a spectator (or harshest critic). This added work only further drains whatever energy they have.

Wayne, an eighth grader who finds schoolwork challenging, worries about whether his teacher will call on him and potentially expose the learning issues and flaws he struggles to hide from his classmates. Jessica, a sixth grader, says, “I zone out in class because I think, ‘What are my friends going to think if I say that?’” Chelsea, a seventh grader, is too upset to eat lunch in school because “I heard one group talking about me, that my outfit was so ugly. So now I feel a little nervous when I walk in school. I usually look down. I walk in the middle of a group of girls.” Gil, an eighth grader, told me recently that he dreads every gym class because “everybody knows” he’s not a good athlete...

## **“I Don’t Know What to Do!”**

For all their focus on peers, teens and tweens all too often encounter social situations they don’t know how to handle—yet are reluctant to talk about. These social dilemmas preoccupy them, siphoning their attention and consuming their energy. Brenda, for example, a 6th grader, expresses a common problem when she says, “When my friends ask, ‘What grade did you get on that?’ I don’t want to tell them, but I don’t know what else to do. I don’t want them to get mad.” Another quandary that follows many teens even through high school is whether to help friends cheat. Allen, a junior, says, “I never know what to do when some kid asks to copy my homework. I want to say no, but if it’s my friend I feel like I should help them.”

Stickier situations arise, as well. Valerie, a junior, finds it stressful to deal with an ex-best friend who is in many of her classes. “She’s always finding subtle ways to be competitive with me, saying stuff that other people might not pick up on, but I know what she means. I wish I didn’t have to see her; it makes every day hard.” Diana, a sophomore, told me, “Just before my chem test this week, my friend Olivia came up to me and asked me if it was okay if she dated my ex-boyfriend. Whoa! I really needed time to wrap my head around that one. I know we’ve been over for awhile, but I had a lot of feelings...”

## **“I’m Trying to Keep it Together!”**

Many teens and tweens use up energy during the school day trying to keep their feelings and behavior in check. With the hormonal surges of adolescence, many of them are already moody. But they can become flooded by intense, mercurial feelings triggered by events as typical as disappointing grades, reprimands from teachers, upsetting encounters with classmates, or the opposite, not feeling the sense of connection they desire. Other kids struggle to rein in urges to be nasty or aggressive, especially when peers make comments designed to provoke them. It is even harder for kids who have to manage anxiety, depression, impulsivity, or volatility with the strict guidelines and punishments for infractions of many schools.

Unbeknownst to their parents, kids come up with various tactics to help them get through the school day. Since freshman year, Charlotte has been seeking refuge with her guidance counselor whenever she feels overwhelmed. Andrea, a sophomore, regularly flees to the school nurse's office for a nap "when I can't take it anymore and feel like I'm going to lose it." Adam, a senior, has a favorite stairwell he goes to, where he knows he won't run into anyone he doesn't want to see.

For those who simply can't face whatever awaits them in school, staying home is the best option. What is not immediately obvious is that many of the headaches and stomach pains that lead to absences are manifestations of emotional exhaustion. Some kids may not even be aware of the connection between their thoughts, feelings, and symptoms. Nevertheless, watching videos or going online in the sanctity of their bedrooms can be a compelling, sometimes addictive, act of self-protection.

## **What Can Parents Do?**

Even if your kids do divulge these sorts of things, it's unlikely they're looking for you to provide solutions. In fact, they'll probably chafe if you even try to offer quick fixes. It may be enough to realize that they're legitimately exhausted by these behind-the-scenes experiences. Maybe you'll understand why they don't energetically start their homework right after school. Here are some other suggestions:

- Honor their need for down time. When they seem to be staring off into space or doing nothing after school, now you have a better idea of what they may be thinking about. So you might pause before automatically urging them to stop wasting time.
- Understand their need to process their daily experiences. You might better appreciate why kids bristle or answer in monosyllables when you ask, "How was your day?" or "What happened at school?" That's exactly what they're going to their rooms to ponder.
- Ask gentle, open-ended questions to invite discussion. Then wait patiently for them to respond. If they don't, back off. When they sense you're open to these issues and won't judge them, they'll be more likely to elaborate.
- Acknowledge their feelings. Reflect on the emotions kids seem to be feeling and empathize with them, even if it's hard for you to completely understand them.
- Be a sounding board. When kids do divulge these sorts of personal reactions, be an especially good listener. Guide them to consider different perspectives, without expecting to solve their problems.

Except in cases of bullying or harassment (which require your intervention), there may not be much you can do to address the social situations that are depleting your child's inner resources. But by being more aware of what is going on, you might listen to your teens and tweens differently, perhaps more alert to signs of emotional exhaustion and hints about what may be causing it. All your teen may need from you is to feel understood. This is a powerful catalyst for learning about themselves, coping better with difficulties, and learning lessons that will guide them throughout their lives.