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## Articles

### **Moving Toward Independence by Lynn Bennett Blackburn, Ph.D., ABPP**

Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, a time of turmoil, a time of rebellion. During adolescence, a teenager looks to peers for the support and security once provided solely by family. Adolescence is a time of preparing to leave the nest, a time of establishing independence, moving from reliance on parents to reliance on friends to reliance on oneself. Being an adolescent with epilepsy may complicate this process, but it does not have to prevent the achievement of the important goal: moving on to being an independent, competent adult.

**Being in control:** During the teen years, your child needs to take increasing control of his/her epilepsy. This involves having access to epilepsy information. Encourage your teenager to make a list of questions for the neurologist. Respect your teenager's desire to have time alone with the neurologist or nurse to raise questions that s/he might not be comfortable asking in front of you. If you have access to the Internet, make your teenager aware of good sights for accurate epilepsy information. For example, the Epilepsy Foundation web page ([www.epilepsyfoundation.org](http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org)) has a section just for teens called "Blurt." When your teenager visits other epilepsy-related web sites (and s/he will), try to keep communication open. Encouraging your teenager to "educate you" about the information that s/he has found will be more acceptable than a "house rule" attempting to restrict your teenager to selected sights. Because epilepsy refers to a wide range of seizure types and syndromes, warn your teenager that all "epilepsy information" will not necessarily apply to her/him.

**Dealing with being different:** The last thing that a teenager wants to be is different from his/her peers. Remember, the peer group is an important steppingstone to independence. Having a chronic medical condition can make you feel different. Having a brain disorder that is poorly understood by the general public can make matters even worse. Your teenager's attitude towards epilepsy and her/his access to accurate information are the key weapons in the battle for peer acceptance. During the childhood years, it is appropriate for parents to make the decisions about whom to tell and what to say. During adolescence, your teenager needs to have input into these decisions and some control about the "how" and "when" of sharing with important adults in the teenager's life (e.g. school staff, coaches). Respect your teenager's need for privacy and control when it comes to sharing this information with friends. Stories posted by teens on the "Blurt" section of the Epilepsy Foundation website as well as the videotape "Untitled-I Am Not My Epilepsy," available through the Epilepsy Foundation of the St. Louis Region, may be helpful to your teenager in approaching this issue.

**Dealing with driving:** To a teenager, driving is important. It is a "rite of passage," a sign of trust and responsibility. The keys to the car are the keys to freedom. Listen to some of the young people I have met. "You don't know how humiliating it is to have your dad drive you to the prom," lamented one teenager with epilepsy. "Sure my friends will take me places," commented another teenager, "but I hate to always be the one who needs a ride." "I have no future until I can drive," concluded a third teenager.

Trying to argue that driving isn't important will alienate you from your teen. As a parent, you cannot solve this problem for your teenager. However, you can offer some tools. If you live in an urban area, teach your child to use public transit before s/he turns sixteen. Learning the public transit system will appeal to your teen and his/her friends as a means of early independence when they are too young to drive. At sixteen, they'll be less likely to see public transportation as a poor substitute for driving. Offer rides that get your teenager close to the destination, but not necessarily to the front door. Offer financial help, giving your teenager money to help friends in paying for gas or with the cost of a limo for prom. Encourage "double dating." Challenge your teenager to make suggestions that s/he feels would help. (See the sidebar on Epilepsy and the Missouri Driving Law.)

**Dealing with drugs and drinking:** All parents are encouraged to talk to their children about the use of drugs and alcohol. For the teen with epilepsy, the consequences of using street drugs or of alcohol consumption can be severe. Encourage your teenager to talk with the neurologist about the implications of alcohol and drug use for her/his specific situation. Provide rules and consistently enforce consequences that encourage appropriate decision making on the part of your teenager. Remind your teenager that you are always willing to be his/her "excuse." "My parents will ground me for life" is often better accepted by peers than the frequently offered advice to "just say 'no.'"

**Dealing with sexuality:** Attitudes towards sexuality in general and specifically towards sexual activity are highly personal, related to family standards and religious principles. Teenagers typically turn to friends for answers to questions in this area. Encourage your teenager to talk to the neurologist as well. Anti-epileptic medications can affect sexual function, cause birth defects, and lessen the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. Keep in mind that if your teenager is female and the neurologist is male, or visa versa, your teenager may not be comfortable in discussing these issues. In such cases, offer your teenager access to a medical professional of the same gender.

As the parent of a teenager with epilepsy, you know that you cannot solve the challenges of adolescence for your teenager. However, you can provide your teen with opportunities to gain information, respecting her/his need to question medical professionals in a private and confidential manner. You need to be available to your teenager when s/he needs you. You can encourage independence by providing your teen with responsibility for managing his/her epilepsy. You can give your teenager the opportunity to make decisions recognizing that sometimes s/he will make mistakes. You can take comfort in knowing that the occasional mistake is an essential step to learning to make a better decision the next time.

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