

## CLINICIAN'S CORNER

### Helping Our Teens Transition to Young Adulthood

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As our teenagers with epilepsy get older, they need to transition from the security of being cared for by others toward more self-reliance. This is an important, necessary journey, but one that can involve apprehension, uncertainty, and anxiety (in us as well!). It can also be a time of great joy and satisfaction as we see our teens mature and develop confidence, better skills, and pride. Teenagers with a chronic illness such as epilepsy often travel down this transition path in their own way, with a different timetable, and with unique challenges related to seizures, medication, and being accepted .

As a community, we all have a role in guiding our teens. Physicians and nurses often need to delicately manage both the needs of teens who are starting to make their own choices regarding medication, lifestyle, etc. and the needs of concerned parents. As a teacher, health care provider, neighbor, extended family member, coach, etc., we interact with teens every day, and our comments, suggestions, smiles, and acceptance can have a positive influence. It can be easy to overlook, disregard, and distance ourselves from these young people who may look and act at times like they don't care what adults have to say. But they do.

Parents of teens with epilepsy are often excited for their now-older teen to become independent, but understandably can feel apprehensive and anxious about it. Parents worry about how their teen will manage if they have a seizure while out with their friends, if these friends will respond with acceptance, and if their teen will make the right decisions about such things as drugs, sex, and safety. Some teenagers feel ready to be independent before their skills are in place, and rush into situations without thought. Their parents struggle with the balance between protecting them and letting their teen learn from mistakes. Other teens are very hesitant and prefer to stay dependent. Parents have to sometimes nudge such teens into new challenges and then help them feel safe in doing so.

Here are some suggestions to consider as we interact with and guide our teens through their transition into young adulthood:

1. Be a role model for how to manage life stressors and the ups and downs of daily life. Show your teen how to prioritize the areas of sleep, good nutrition, and making safe choices.
2. Older teens often benefit from becoming their own advocate and authority on their seizures, medication, and epilepsy care. Ensure that they know their medication doses, reasons the medication is being used, and possible side

effects. When away from home, they will make better decisions about their health.

3. Encourage teens to learn how to read their bodies in order to decide how safe it may be to participate in activities. For example, missed doses of medication, lack of sleep, illness, and excessive stress may increase the chances of a seizure, thus when these factors are present, teens may be wise to engage in safer activities until they are rested with adequate medication in their system.
4. The transition to young adulthood needs to have opportunities to build self-confidence through experience. Set up safe challenges first, then repeat, in order for confidence to become stable. For example, try extended daytime stays at a friend's or family member's house before trying overnight stays. Suggest a small volunteer position before proceeding with a part-time job.
5. Memory problems are common in people with epilepsy. Teach teens to be responsible for compensating for their memory problems by using their own calendar, memory notebook, watch alarm, or perhaps a cell phone's reminders. Small digital voice recorders can be used for important appointments or classes.
6. Make a plan with your teen about what they want to accomplish and when, with respect to their independence, friendships, vocation, and living situation. Help them set up realistic goals while at the same time ensuring their safety as much as possible. For example, this year your teen may want to become responsible for taking her/his own medication without reminders, or may want to occasionally go alone to their physician appointments.
7. Consider a camp, youth group, short out of town trip alone to visit a relative, scouting, extracurricular school club, or similar experiences. These activities can be effective in building self-confidence, reducing fear, increasing friendships, and developing self-reliance.
8. Help your teen learn how to cope with difficult feelings such as sadness, loss and rejection, as these experiences may be more common in those who have epilepsy. Bolster self-esteem when possible, express your love openly, encourage problem-solving, and assist your teen in growing from disappointments.
9. It is important to monitor our own anxiety and fear, as we may hold our teen back for our own comfort even if our teen is ready for new challenges. Talk with other parents of teens with epilepsy and learn from them.