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Adolescent Health Issues

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Chapter 1

ADOLESCENT HEALTH ISSUES

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Adolescence is the critical period or rather process in human development, where the individual leaves the dependency of childhood and enters a period in which dramatic changes occur, eventually resulting in what society identifies as adulthood. It is a complex developmental time involving sociological, psychological and physiological issues that starts with puberty and ends sometime in the third decade of life with central nervous system maturation (parents would want this period to be much quicker and shorter). The goal of adolescence is to develop an autonomous adult, who is capable of functioning at intellectual, sexual, and vocational levels acceptable to society.

Prevention and management of health problems in children and adolescents can prevent considerable morbidity in adults. Working with adolescents is difficult, frustrating and very rewarding at the same time. We hear all kinds of sad stories and have to live with the frustrations of not being able to wave a magic wand and change someone's life. We also see our fair share of good stories with teens doing good deeds and achieving high levels of success. It is the bad stories, however, that grab our attention, because of their sad and tragic consequences and our desire to understand why they happen.

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We all know that in the Western World the leading causes of mortality continue to be accidents, homicide, suicide, sexually transmitted infections, eating disorders and teen pregnancy. All are preventable yet they continue to happen. So whom should we blame? The parents for being busy and/or uneducated, the media for portraying sex, drugs and violence as a “normal” way of life, the school system for not educating our kids about real life, the health care industry that continues to deprive many of our teens access to health care, or our local and federal leaders both political and religious for giving bad examples with their continuing scandals of corruption and inappropriate sexual conduct!

It would be extremely simplistic to say that one or the other bears the blame. With the technological advances and the availability of modern communication systems including the internet, our teens are bombarded with a sea of information that is frequently inaccurate or age-inappropriate. The literature and real life experience are overall in agreement that improvement of all aspects of our societies is needed to help prevent many of our teens’ problems. The parents should do their part in finding a way to spend quality time with their kids and to educate them on all aspects of life. Schools should do a better job of teaching real life skills and knowledge rather than purely academic subjects only. As a society, we should be able to provide better environment and health care for our adolescents. Our leaders should be providing good examples and so should the celebrities. If each one of us contributes, maybe we can improve our future by improving the current status of our adolescents who are our future.

About a third of youth have a chronic illness or disability and a significant number have diseases that limit daily activity. Nearly three-quarters of this group have one health condition, 21% have two, and 9% have three or more. Research suggests that 13-18% of American children and adolescents have a special health care need. Approximately 90% of children with severe illness reach age 20 years in developed countries, and the impact of chronic illness on the lives of these children and adolescents is considerable.

In this book we have brought together papers that discuss various aspects of adolescent health, behaviors, parenting and educating adolescents from different countries and different cultures.