

**TEENWORK: Easing The Transition to Adulthood**  
by Marybetts Sinclair

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As the parent of two adolescents, I have the privilege to spend time with a fair number of teens. As a massage therapist, I have the privilege of working professionally with a good many more. Knowing what adolescence is like in America today causes me deep concern. Gone are many of the stresses of yesterday, including backbreaking physical work, early parental death, and strictly repressive sexual mores: where sexual abuse was swept underneath the carpet, and physical punishment by parents and teachers was sanctioned. Today's teens face a different world altogether. With no more maturity than the teens of a century ago, they must deal with constant exposure to seductive images of violence, sexuality, and physical perfection; where cigarettes, alcohol and are marketed to them and illegal drugs are easily available; where families are weakened, and where taboos against sexuality no longer protect them. What can we as massage therapists offer right now to the often needy and stressed-out teens of today? And can we help introduce them now to self-care tools that they will need as adults? These questions are the heart of this article.

In addition to the normal stress of growing up , teenagers must also deal with the new stresses particular to our time, including;

Vastly greater exposure to the adult world's problems at earlier ages than ever before through the mass media, especially television. Many hours are spent watching news coverage of violence, disasters, scandals, and T.V. programs dealing with adult sexuality and violence. Taking in copious quantities of gore and cruelty to others is highly stressful, whether children realize it or not.

Deterioration of family support: The amount of time parents spend with their children dropped 40 percent between 1965 and 1989.\*\*\* Sinclair, p.12. Divorce rates continue to climb, and the help available from the extended family continues to decline, partly because we Americans move so often.

High rates of physical and sexual abuse.

Declines in church attendance; churches can be an important source of support for teens.

Overscheduling of teens: those whose days are crowded with sports, music, and other afterschool activities are all too common these days; they are being conditioned early to live a stressful, Type A lifestyle.

One out of five American children is poor and likely to be in a single-parent family. A child growing up in poverty is more apt to experience abuse, neglect, malnutrition, ill health, poor housing, and substandard day care. Childhood poverty also places young

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people at risk for a range of long-term problems, including poor health, failure in school, teenage pregnancy, crime and drug abuse.\*\*\* Sinclair, p.10

Life-threatening drugs and activities are more accessible than ever before.

So this is the new world our adolescents have to live in, and here's how can we tell that these new stresses are taking a toll on them:

The United States is experiencing great increases in rates of school dropout and juvenile crime. Arrests of adolescents are thirty times higher than in 1950.\*\*\* Oster, p.15. Substance abuse is now common. The average age of first use of drugs is now 12 years old and dropping. Alcohol-related accidents are the leading cause of death among teenagers. \*\*\*Oster, p.16. (As with prescription drugs that can alter moods, drugs and alcohol can damp down the intensity of a teen's emotions without dealing with their real-life stresses). Suicide rates have doubled among teens since 1968. Ten percent of teenage boys and eighteen percent of teenage girls have attempted suicide. \*\*\* Oster, p.15. Signs of severe depression are more common in teens, according to surveys, and an estimated 5% of adolescents suffer from severe depression. \*\*\*Fields, p.110.

Sexual activity, with its risks of pregnancy and venereal diseases, is now beginning at younger ages. Research suggests that about half of all teenagers have sexual intercourse before graduating from high school, and nearly 1 in 10 teenage girls get pregnant each year. \*\*\*Oster, p.15

Sex and its possible consequences can create many additional pressures and stress. ( A client of mine who is now 22 years old told me recently that she became sexually active when she was 14 years old, and that it was the worst thing that ever happened to her. The stress of it — worrying about being pregnant, sneaking around so her parents didn't find out, and dealing with an intimate relationship — led her to develop an eating disorder with which she was still struggling.)

The first step in dealing with the stresses that affect our children is to recognize them; then lets look for ways to reduce their stress where possible, (including supporting public policies that can improve their welfare),and teach children to manage their stress. I believe, based on the children I have worked with, and the experiences of many other massage therapists, that careful, sensitive massage can help teens tremendously, now and in adulthood as well.

Massage can help alleviate stress. The work of the researchers at Tiffany Fields' TRI has consistently shown that massage with teens helps lower levels of stress hormones and alleviate anxiety and depression. Using massage rather than alcohol, illegal drugs, or prescription medications is a healthy and safe way to deal with stress. Massage therapist Annie Siemens of Eugene, Oregon, tells this story: " I was giving a 20 year old girl her first massage. She had been addicted to heroin and gone through a detox program at age 14. Now, 6 years later she still had severe muscle spasm and pain in her back. She was surprised at how good the massage felt and she said to me right there, " This is better than

any drug!” Before this time, she had equated something that would make her feel good, with something that was morally and physically bad for her.” Siemens believes that massage therapists will see more young people with these kind of problems, as people look for safe, empowering ways to deal with stress.

Massage therapist Jane Megard, of Corvallis, Oregon, worked for 2 years with fifteen year old girl who suffered from severe depression. This girl was referred by a therapist who wanted to help the girl find ways to nurture herself. A combination of massage, therapy, and medication proved highly effective for her (It is far too common, however, to see adolescents prescribed mood-altering drugs, such as anti-depressants, without dealing with the causes of their stress). She also worked with a 17 year old girl who had been sexually abused, and had been referred by a counselor who wanted the girl to be able to relax and enjoy touch in a safe environment.

Helping teens understand the connection between stress and what they feel in their bodies will help them now and as adults. For example, an eleven year old boy had a habit of compulsively cracking his neck. When I talked to him about it, he said his neck felt tight, but he had never really thought about it before. I was able to show him, through massage, that his neck muscles needed to relax for him to feel better. I also explained to him that cracking his neck did not relieve the tension, and in fact, could be bad for his joints. I showed him how to gently relax his neck, and explained to him that his neck tension could be an important sign to him that he was stressed. (I did not tell him that I suspected that his tension might be related to child abuse he had suffered). Tension headaches are a common manifestation of stress in teens, and can be dealt with in a similar way.

Massage therapist Jane Megard of Corvallis, Oregon, teaches teens the “rituals of relaxation.” She shows them how to create a relaxing atmosphere at home by giving them some of the elements of the massage. She may give them some massage lotion or a relaxation tape, or show them how to do stretching exercises or use heat. All these self-care tools are far better than the self-destructive ways that many adults use to deal with their inner pain.

Massage can help meet their touch needs. Adolescents start to pull away from their parent’s touch, as part of a move towards independence, often using the words “Don’t touch me!” Although they still need touch as much as ever, most adolescents receive less than they had during infancy and childhood. Some touch-starved adolescents will end up being sexually active when their real need is to be cuddled and held. Massage is a great way to teach them that there are ways one person can touch another that are pleasurable but not sexual. This knowledge can help them as adults when they are forming intimate relationships.

Massage can help form a healthy body image. Huge physical changes will give most teens a feeling of physical uncertainty anyway. Add to this the intense pressure from the media to have a certain appearance which is not attainable by most people. Teens are frequently comparing themselves to the “ideal” teen presented by television and movies.

For example, the thin, hard, tight body, and almost anorexic appearance of most teenage models undermines a teen's positive picture of their own bodies. Massage that feels soothing and relaxing will build body awareness, and help teens realize their bodies are good just as they are. A study done by Tiffany Fields in 1994 found that adolescent girls hospitalized for bulimia had less distorted body images after being massaged twice weekly for 5 weeks. Particularly when the body image is still developing, massage can be of lifelong benefit.

-Lastly, teens have many of the physical therapy needs of adults. They live more active lives, and so have more injuries. In the last 12 months I have done massage with teens who had injuries from bike accidents, high school football, soccer, karate and horse-back riding. Children with musculoskeletal disabilities such as cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, polio, muscular dystrophy and juvenile arthritis can also benefit tremendously from massage.

And not only those with injury or disability can benefit from massage-the proportion of "normal" children with physical discomfort may be much higher than most of us realize. A 1996 study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, studied the association of musculoskeletal pain with emotional and behavioral problems in children ages 9-12. Out of almost 1800 children, 7.5% had widespread pain unrelated to injuries at least once a week. 6.5% had neck pain unrelated to injuries at least once a week. Children with widespread pain were found to have more emotional and behavioral problems than pain-free children; these problems included depression, irritability, anxiety, aggressive behavior, sleep problems and attention problems. \*\*Mikkelson, page 225. The most interesting thing about this study to me was that these were not children selected from clinical or hospital settings because of pain. Their pains were identified only because researchers asked about them! Presumably, most of them had been suffering in silence for years, and there is little reason to suppose that their physical discomfort would not continue into their teen years.

Massage therapist Annie Siemens tells people that she has a "family practice". She sees teens for a variety of aches and pains They may be complaining of back pain, and their parents want her to check the teen's spine. (Usually the teen has had an injury). She has worked long-term with teens who were injured at a young age and continue to benefit from massage as they grow. She has seen a number of teens with sternocleidomastoid spasm who are unable to turn their heads. She is currently working with an 11 year old girl who has finger contractures, caused by meningitis at the age of five .

One tremendous benefit of massage post-injury for teens is the opportunity to release tension and guarding caused by pain and discomfort. So often we massage therapists see adults with long-term problems that began as a result of trauma! I saw a fourteen year old girl recently who had dislocated her kneecap: not only had it been excruciatingly painful, but required surgery for damage to her knee joint. After preparing her knee with an alternating heat-and-ice treatment, I massaged around the knee, telling her the massage was not supposed to hurt at all. We discussed the importance of not holding a lot of tension in the knee, and I taught her how to visualize the knee and release tension there. I also gave her massage oil to gently massage into her knee twice a day,

partly to stimulate the circulation, and partly to help it feel more like a normal part of her. Jane Megard has found that teens who are very interested in sports are excellent candidates for massage; they want to heal from injuries, improve their athletic performance, and are often highly motivated to do stretching and other kinds of self-care.

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How can we protect teens' privacy, handle concerns about inappropriate touch, and touch appropriately?

1. Have a parent or legal guardian present. Some adolescents may want a parent there only for the first session, but others may want them there each time, or just in the waiting room. Still others don't need their parents anywhere around!
2. Discuss what you are going to do beforehand, let the teen and parent know what you consider appropriate, and ask if they have all their concerns have been addressed.
3. The teen may remain clothed, especially for the first few massages until he or she feels more comfortable. You might choose to massage just the hands, feet, and head, or do pressure points and range of motion. Or the teen may feel more comfortable disrobed but draped, and have the therapist working through the sheet. One therapist told me she may need to be more clinical with teens at first, and give a medical explanation of what she is doing. Another therapist uses a small model of a human skeleton to explain why she is doing massage in a certain area. I once worked with a 13 year old boy who was suffering severe abdominal pain that had been diagnosed as a stress reaction by his doctor. ( A close family member had died recently and his parents had just divorced ). His mother had made the appointment for him and he was clearly uncomfortable with the whole idea. He even brought a buddy along for emotional support. He lay down on the massage table fully clothed, and just pulled up his shirt for me to massage his abdomen. I worked with him for about 45 minutes, and when he got up, he said, " I can't believe how much better my stomach feels!" He left in a very positive frame of mind. To have insisted that his friend wait outside or that he disrobe, would have crossed over his personal boundaries; instead, because his privacy and feelings were respected, he left feeling good instead. A teenage boy I have been working with for ten years has changed in how much of his body he wants exposed. As a seven year old, he wore only his underwear, and was perfectly comfortable with friends and family members coming in and out of the room where he was getting his massage. Increasingly, he has wanted to leave more clothes on. I feel that this is quite natural at his age-he still loves massage, but his privacy is very important to him.
4. Respect the teen's feelings about his or her body, and listen carefully to what these almost-adults tell you. Deep work that is painful is probably not a good idea. When teaching massage at a Mexican clinic for children with disabilities, a fifteen year old girl with cerebral palsy was brought in to be massaged. She began to cry as she was helped onto the massage table. When I asked what was wrong, her mother told us that all the physical therapy she had received had been very painful, and she was sure that this would hurt also. So that first day we showed her mother how to gently massage her-no one else touched her- and she left all smiles. The next day her mother and another therapist massaged her, and again she left happy. By the end of the course a week later, she was

able to relax and enjoy being massaged by four therapists at once. But had she received painful massage, she would have been traumatized instead.

5. Be careful what you say about the teen's body. Being very concerned with physical appearance is natural as a teen, and tactless or cruel remarks can wound deeply. If the teen says something derogatory about herself ( such as being too fat, too skinny, too flat-chested, too buxom, etc. ), be sure that you are positive. I let my children and young clients know that it is far more important to feel healthy and relaxed on the inside than like someone else's artificial ideal on the outside. I tell them that people come in all different sizes and shapes, and that it would be boring if we were all the same. I can always find something both honest and positive to say, if only about their skin color or texture, the tone of their muscles, or how well their body's self-healing properties are working.

Massage therapist Jane Megard teaches teens that areas they are not pleased with may hold more tension. She teaches them to relax those areas, and talks to them about how to love and nurture them.

Here are some ways to make teens comfortable with the idea of massage:

1. Let them watch a session with a parent or friend first. (After fifteen minutes of watching, they will probably be bored). Or drop by to meet the massage therapist and see the office beforehand.
2. Parents shouldn't force a teen to receive a massage.
3. How about starting a teen off with a short massage as a birthday present? Make it fun- you might begin with a deluxe foot treatment alone first, with a hot foot soak, paraffin dip, salt rub, or whatever other amenities you have available. This will be a highly pleasurable but non-threatening introduction.
4. The gender of the massage therapist may be important- if it matters to a teen, they should always be given the choice.

Here are some ways to encourage teens to come to you:

- Tell your clients you are open to working with their teens: like Annie Siemens , tell them you have a family practice. Tell therapists who work with teens, including school counselors, the same. Offer to give talks about massage to health classes at high schools: call the teachers of these classes. Give demonstrations where teens can see you, such as at health fairs at schools. I have taught family massage classes at conferences and summer camps for a number of years, and have always found them well received. Usually there are a few parents with special concerns about their kids, and a few teens that are especially interested in learning massage. Volunteering to do massage may help you become highly visible; some places that have welcomed volunteers are summer camps for children with disabilities, sports events where teens are competing, and programs for victims of domestic violence. As an infant massage instructor, I have taught infant massage for teenage parents, and found many of them to be receptive to the idea of massage and stress reduction. They always agree when I tell them they may need massage as much as their babies!

- There are so many benefits for teens to receiving massage, and so many ways to let them know you are available to help them. If you stop for a moment and think how massage would have changed your own adolescence, then you will know how much you can help them. Showing deep respect for them as individuals in a unique time of life, and giving them both immediate help and lifetime self-care tools, will make you a very special person in a teenager's life. The more we can make massage available to adolescents, the greater service we will be doing.

## References

1. Bedell, Jefferey, "Life Stress and The Psychological and Medical Adjustment of Chronically Ill Children", Journal of Psychosomatic Research, vol.21,1977
2. Brownlee, Susan, "The Biology of Soul Murder", U.S. News and World Report, Nov. 11, 1996. This article discusses the physiological effects of stress on children, especially on their brains, and whether or not these effects are reversible.
- 3 . Dumont, L., M.D., Surviving Adolescence: Helping Your Child Through the Struggle to Adulthood, Villard Books, N.Y., 1991
4. Field, T., "Massage Therapy for Infants and Children", Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, vol.16, no.2, 1995. This article reviews the effects of massage on infants and children with various medical conditions. Adolescent conditions include: bulimia, anorexia, and depression. Generally, massage has resulted in lower anxiety and stress hormones, and improved clinical course with each condition.
5. Mikkelsen, Marja, M. D., et al," Psychiatric Symptoms in Preadolescents With Musculoskeletal Pain and Fibromyalgia", Pediatrics, vol. 100 No.2, August 1997, pages 220-227. This study of 1756 children ages 9-12 used pain questionnaires and depression evaluations filled out by children, and behavior evaluations filled out by their parents and teachers, to study the association of musculoskeletal pain and emotional and behavioral problems. Out of the study's sample of children, 124 ( or 7.5%) were found to have widespread pain. It concluded that musculoskeletal pain and depressive symptoms are highly correlated. The study's authors concluded that both pain and depression in children are real problems that should be treated.
6. Pauly, Martha, " A Child's Second Chance", Natural Health, May-June 1998  
Physical therapist Martha Pauly tells the story of what happened to her 12 year old daughter, who was showing signs of depression such as fatigue and stomachaches. She saw a psychiatrist who prescribed Prozac, and her condition dramatically worsened; now she began to have insomnia, nausea, a total loss of concentration, suicidal thoughts, headaches, and horrible, vivid nightmares. She was hospitalized, and when her condition did not improve, was prescribed Lithium, Pamelor, Dapakote, and Paxil. Her condition continued to worsen. 10 months after the first psychotropic medications were begun, her family tried a different approach: she began taking vitamins, flower essences, and St.

John's Wort, and receiving craniosacral therapy. At the same time, she was gradually weaned off all her prescription medications. She made a complete recovery, and her family now thinks her depression was triggered by hormone imbalances and a tendency to be overly perfectionistic.

7. Oster, G., and Montgomery, S., Helping Your Depressed Teenager, A Guide for Parents and Caregivers, John Wiley and Sons, N. Y., 1991

8. Sinclair, M., Massage for Healthier Children, Wingbow Press, Oakland, California, 1992

**Resources:**

1. Conscious Living Foundation, P.O. Box 9, Drain, Oregon, 97435. 1-800-752-2256 or (541) 836-2358. Provides stress management training for all ages, including:

\* workshops to teach adults how to help kids and teens learn skills to deal with stress

\* relaxation tapes and books for children, including some that are specifically for teenagers

\* holographic music, cassettes, and biofeedback equipment

2. Quieting Reflex Publications, 119 Forest Drive, Wethersfield, Connecticut, 06109  
QR Publications produces and sells materials that teach children, adolescents, and adults how to deal with tension and stress. The Quieting Reflex for Adolescents program is a stress management program by a classroom teacher, Elizabeth Stroebel, and a physician and stress researcher, Charles Stroebel, M.D. Adolescents learn to recognize their own fight and flight response, then use easy abdominal breathing and elements of progressive relaxation and autogenic training.

3. The Touch Film with Dr. Jesse Potter

This is a great film to show a group, since it's quite funny, but very effective at showing the different touch issues that affect children at different ages. Psychologist Dr. Potter's warmth and insights show the emotional and physical benefits of touch as well as the consequences of lack of touch.

Available for rental or purchase from:

Sterling Productions, Inc.

1609 Sherman Ave., Suite 201

Evanston, Illinois 60201

(312) 475-4445

4. Touch Research Institute, Department of Pediatrics, University of Miami School of Medicine, P.O. Box 016820, Miami, Florida, 33101. Publishes a newsletter and holds a yearly Touch Research Symposium. Sponsors ongoing studies on the use of touch with a variety of children's and adolescents' medical conditions.