On the outside, most young people seem happy-go-lucky, but inside each adolescent is a complex network of potentially explosive pressures and stresses. When a teen’s feelings or fears are tripped by the stress in her or his life, the teen may blow up in ways that catch parents by surprise. An adolescent’s resistance to pressure and stress is finite. So when faced with a continual barrage of pressure, the teen is likely to snap.

Recent studies suggest that this generation of teens is perhaps the most stressed ever. One study found that five times as many high school and college students are dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues as youth of the same age who were studied during in the Great Depression era.

Adolescents with a strong parental and social support system are the least likely to experience the painful effects of the pressures they face. So, it’s simply good advice for parents to familiarize themselves with the typical sources of pressure kids face in order to become better prepared to provide support to their kids. Here are eight daily pressures that appear to be common in the lives of most adolescents.

1. The Pressure to be Perfect
   During my years of being a youth pastor, over and over kids told me that their parents wanted them to be perfect. They felt pressured to be someone they were not capable of becoming or did not want to be. Unreasonable parent expectations raise a teenager’s stress levels.

   One day when I was at a fast-food restaurant, a five-year-old boy was kneeling on his chair and playing with the straw in his soft drink. He held his finger over the top of the straw and drank from the bottom. We have all done this; it’s normal. But when his mother saw him doing it, she yelled out his name so loud that it caused my fries to jump from my plate. Then she proceeded to slap the boy’s hands while shouting at him, “You put your feet on the floor and sit up straight or we’re leaving right now!” Every other child in the restaurant was running around like they were on a playground, but this kid had to sit up straight and not play with his straw. Now, that’s pressure.

   Another common parental pressure toward perfection centers on schools and grades. Luke was excited to tell his dad that he was getting a B+ in algebra. Unfortunately, his father popped his balloon of enthusiasm when he responded, “Why aren’t you getting an A?” The result was that Luke felt more pressure.

2. The Pressure to Succeed
   The pressure to succeed elicits the attitude in our kids that life is a perpetual performance. Psychologist and author, David Elkind, wrote that young people are constantly performing for an “imaginary audience” that watches everything they do. For example, when Emma tripped while walking up the bleachers she felt like crying from embarrassment, thinking that everyone saw her clumsiness. Left to themselves, kids already feel they are performing before their peers.

   When parents add pressure on their kids to excel, achieve, and succeed, it results in burdening them with a fear of failure. No one enjoys failure. To fail is to feel stupid. When kids fail, they fear that others will reject them. While the fear of failure is common even to adults, it is a fear that is intensified during adolescence. Some kids use this fear to ignite their ambition, but most are immobilized by it and give up trying to succeed in anything.
In reality, typical adolescent failures rarely rise to the level of critical importance or are noticed or cared about by others. We must help our children learn that their acceptance isn’t dependent upon performance and that failing isn’t the end of the story; it goes hand-in-hand with growing up, trying new experiences, learning the lessons of what might have gone wrong, and developing new skills.

3. The Pressure to Conform
One of the strongest pressures kids experience during adolescence centers on conformity. Kids find it extremely uncomfortable to be different from their peers; so, they work hard to fit in and be accepted by one of the subcultures on their school campus. Being labeled weird or different at best ignites their fear of failure, and at worst invites bullying. This is why you will see—within subgroups—similarities in dress, language, music, values, and behaviors among kids. These values and behaviors are often dictated by the subgroup itself and inform kids about what is acceptable and what is not in given situations.

Although it may be difficult, we need to teach our kids the biblical truth that they don’t need to conform to the standard of the world (Romans 12:2). We need to encourage them to place high value on friends who accept them for who they are.

4. The Pressure to Make Choices
Kids are really afraid of making wrong choices. Their experience in decision-making is relatively undeveloped because they haven’t yet formed adult-like systems of discernment (part of this is related to brain development) that equip them to make most decisions with ease. It’s been suggested that one of the reasons kids like fast-food restaurants is because the menu remains fairly consistent. Selections rarely change, so the pressure of choice is reduced.

Since young people don’t like to be wrong, they look to others to make decisions for them. Their rationale is to have someone to blame or to share the consequences with them if their choice results in adverse consequences.

This is especially true of moral decisions. Teenagers used to regularly ask me how sexually active I was before I got married. The question was really aimed at hoping that I would draw a line in the sand for them by my experience. (“Since Doug, our youth pastor, had this or that experience, it must be okay for me too.”) I frustrated these questioners by not providing a quick answer to their disguised “How far is too far?” question. I didn’t want teenagers to use my experience to determine their moral boundary. Instead, I wanted them to internalize and own biblically based sexual values so that when they were confronted with a sexual temptation, their behavioral choices could be based on values they had already established.

This internalizing process takes time and occurs when parents are willing to take opportunities to truly listen to their teenagers and talk honestly and openly about values and morals.

5. The Pressure from Home & Family
Every family is unique, made up of differing personalities and styles. If family pressure was made up of nothing more than the continual navigating of relationships at home, it would still be tough. But homes are filled with many daily stressors for teenagers: parental expectations, sibling conflicts, marital conflicts, loss of privileges, divorce, family economic struggles, and troublesome chores, just to name a few.

Unfortunately, the one corner of a teen’s world where she should be able to rest from the pressures of life can be one of the most stressful. When things are going well within the family, teens tend to have a more healthy view of life. But when the family is struggling, teenagers may perceive that their whole world is falling apart. The more dysfunctional or traumatic the home environment, the more stress a teenager feels.
6. The Pressure from Transitions
Every June, some kids graduate from elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. For a time, these graduates feel on top of the world. But come August, these same kids are filled with fear as they prepare to enter the foreign turf of the next level where they begin at the bottom of the social and experiential ladders. Transitions like these and others like changing schools, moving to another city, or changing neighborhoods, tamper with a teen’s sense of security and produce the sense of pressure, which may in turn produce lower academic achievement and increase behavioral problems, and thus increase pressure even more.

7. The Pressure from Bodily Changes
A pressure experienced widely throughout adolescence occurs from the bodily changes teenagers undergo. Each teen is unique and experiences the changes in their bodies in fits and starts and stops and spurts among other times when nothing seems to change at all! Guys fear they will never be able to grow a mustache while girls fear that they will grow one! The only normal in the changing body of the adolescent is that there is no normal!

Since consistent change is part of the developing adolescent body, it should be understood that teenagers are in a continual state of stress.

8. The Pressure from Emotions
Another pressure-causing feature of adolescence is the development of emotions. To many teens, the strength and frequency of their emotions is much like having new emotions altogether. They aren’t sure where the emotions have come from, and they are equally unsure what to do with them. Some studies have suggested that typical adolescents experience wide and repetitive mood swings. Normal kids may shift from extreme happiness to deep sadness within short periods of time. These confusing, extreme, and chaotic feelings produce a lot of stress, particularly in early-to-mid adolescence before they move toward greater emotional control in late-adolescence.

Sometimes parents tend to react to the volume of their teen’s emotions and fail to help kids learn to understand and to channel their emotions in healthy ways. Helping kids to process their emotions can go a long way to reducing their emotion-related stress.

The truth is that pressures and stress are going to be part of the adolescent landscape. Learning to process pressure and stress is actually an important part of adolescent development in order to prepare kids for the pressures and stresses of adulthood. Rather than trying to eradicate all pressure, the wise course for parents is to help manage and moderate the pressures adolescents face so that kids do not become overwhelmed as they journey toward adulthood.

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