

# FOCUS ON YOUR PRETEEN

**Butterflies begin as humble caterpillars. As they wait** patiently in their chrysalises, nature takes its course. When the time is right, they struggle to break free from the safety of the chrysalis. Squeezing through the tight casing removes the sticky residue from their wings, allowing butterflies to take flight and become the beautiful creatures that they are.

Comparing the transformational struggle of butterflies to preteens' developmental experiences makes sense. The preteens before you today are really adults in the making. The struggles they face and the challenges they present to you now are part of a necessary and exciting process. When preteens start to outgrow the safe cocoon parents have created for them, they are doing exactly what they need to do to reach adulthood. They must stretch themselves and expand their horizons, sometimes trying to be more adult-like than they are prepared to be. At other times, they may become stuck in the cocoon and need encouragement to move forward. As an asset-building parent, your appropriate response to these struggles is critical to your preteens' success.

Part Three focuses on issues prevalent in preteens' lives and offers some strategies for responding in asset-building ways to your preteens' needs. Issues are addressed in alphabetical order for easy reference.

## **AFTER-SCHOOL HOURS**

ASSET 11: Family Boundaries

ASSET 17: Creative Activities

ASSET 18: Child Programs

For the most part, kids' school hours and parents' business hours are out of sync. School days may start after a parent's work day begins, and they end at least two to three hours before most parents leave work. As kids become preteens, before- and after-school childcare becomes less widely available. When preteens reach the age of 11 or 12, parents begin to leave them unsupervised more often. Preteens who go home alone after school often face a good amount of unsupervised free time. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated in 2002 that there are about 6.1 million latchkey kids. And according to the National Safe Kids Campaign, 4.5 million children are injured each year, most of them kids who are unsupervised after school (Safe Kids Worldwide, [www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org)).

Many parents are relieved when they can finally let their preteens go home after school. After-school care is one less arrangement to make and one less bill to pay. There is something comforting about thinking that the kids are home where they can grab a snack and get started on homework. Many parents feel safer if their children call to check in with them when they arrive home. However, this can create a false sense of security for many reasons.

Parents may think children are responsible and capable simply because they are growing older. Some preteens have started babysitting, and parents often believe preteens can make good decisions for themselves since they can be paid to watch other kids. Neither of these assumptions may be safe to make. The after-school hours are fraught with temptations for preteens, ranging from eating too much before dinner to having friends over without getting parents' permission first.

Law enforcement experts assert that during after-school hours, many unsupervised kids experiment with alcohol, other drugs, and sexual situations, and are more likely to be involved in a crime. Even if your preteens aren't experimenting with risk-taking behavior, it is important to know exactly how they're spending those hours before you arrive home.

## **Parenting Tips**

- *Structure your child's time as much as possible in your absence.* Limit time spent in front of the TV. Sitting on a couch watching TV is an attractive option to many preteens, but one that often interferes with getting homework done, being physically active, or being creative.
- *Encourage some physical exercise,* whether it's working out to an exercise DVD, jumping rope, walking with a trusted friend, or dancing to music.
- *Stock up on healthy, appealing snacks.* Most kids come home from school hungry for a snack. Leave a note suggesting foods and drinks your child can have. Discourage over-snacking.
- *Develop a daily schedule or routine for your child to follow* (have a snack, do homework or chores, and only then watch a limited amount of TV or play video games). Review homework so that your child knows you expect it to be done, or at least started, by the time you get home.
- *Teach your child ways to remain safe* (never open the door to a stranger, don't admit being home alone to a caller, leave emergency telephone numbers in sight for fire, police, ambulance, and parents).

- *Be clear about your expectations regarding having friends over when you are not present.*
- *Install filters or blocks on home computers to ensure that your child cannot get or receive information from Web sites you think are inappropriate.*
- *If your school, YMCA, religious community, or city recreation center offers after-school programs, consider sending your preteen.* Some schools provide later activity buses that drop kids off after school clubs and intramural sports teams have met. Many community programs offer opportunities for socialization, physical exercise, creative projects, and safe places for kids to interact and develop interests. They may also provide tutoring programs for kids who need extra help with schoolwork.

## **ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND OTHER DRUGS**

ASSET 11: Family Boundaries

ASSET 13: Neighborhood Boundaries

ASSET 31: Healthy Lifestyle

ASSET 35: Resistance Skills

Parents often believe their children are not the ones using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, thinking the statistics they've heard cannot possibly apply to their own kids. But sometimes when reality sinks in, it's too late. There are serious consequences when preteens begin smoking or using controlled or illegal substances. Of all addictive behaviors, cigarette smoking is the one most likely to be established during adolescence. The younger preteens start smoking, the more likely they will become addicted to nicotine. Tobacco users are at much greater risk for using other substances, as well.