

## What's special about tweens?

If you're familiar with ripsticks, Sims, Wii, know your child's bestie and have chosen either team Jacob or team Edward, then your little prince or princess has probably grown into a "tweenager".

Tweens are aged from 9-14 years. They are in the middle years — no longer children and not yet teenagers but somewhere between, hence the term "tweens" or "tweenagers".

During these years there is a rush of hormones, peers become more important and tweens become more independent. They move to high school, maybe get their first girlfriend, boyfriend or job, and risk falling victim to advertisers, acne and bullying.

Until recently the early childhood and teenage years had taken the limelight with researchers, governments, and even parents focusing on these critical times. It now appears that the tween years have the potential to be a turning point in young people's lives for better or worse— a time of great opportunity, but also a time of great vulnerability.

### What do tweens want?

Tweens were recently asked what their needs were by the [NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People](#). The results are interesting because, although tweens are known as great consumers and like to have what their friends have, it is clear that what they really want is to be loved and respected for who they are.

[Tweens said they need](#) to:

- feel good about themselves and to be appreciated by others for who they are
- achieve, learn and feel like they are good at some things - both in and outside of school
- be heard, to participate and to be listened to
- be more independent, but also to be safe
- feel like they belong and are supported by family, friends and other people in the community.

### Changes in the brain

Tweens are going through major hormonal changes which alter their physical appearance, structure of their brain and the way they think. [Professor David Bennett](#) from the [NSW Centre for the advancement of adolescent health](#), The Children's Hospital at Westmead, explains that kids get "hyped up" by changes in the brain and the resulting effect of hormones. Girls become more social and care about the opinion of their peers and boys become impulsive and take more risks. At the same time, the executive functions of the brain are not fully in place, so the areas at the front of the brain which control impulse, decision making and strategic thinking are not yet fully formed. Therefore tweens are vulnerable and for this reason Professor Bennett says parents need to be more mindful of what their kids are doing in order to keep them safe.

Just like in the early years of development, it's a time of rapid brain activity with connections in the brain being formed. Positive experiences and opportunities will expand their capacity, however they are also more vulnerable to abuse or mistreatment. Research shows that "warm, respectful parenting" is the most effective style of parenting. Professor Bennett advises not to try being your child's friend or letting him or her do what they want. Instead, he says that parents need to stand firm on values and rules.

Professor Bennett adds that parents often lose confidence in their parenting at this time and for this reason he suggests parenting programs can have a big impact.



Bailey's parents provided their tweenager with solid footholds, secure anchors and dependable belaying.

## Education and school life

This is a wonderful time as tweens, even before they move to high school, are starting to think differently. They can become more excited about learning and more open to new ideas, as they move from concrete to abstract thinking. Professor Bennett adds that it is important for parents to attend their child's school events and take an interest in their schooling, and this helps kids stay connected to school and their community. This connectedness goes a long way to building [resilience](#) (the ability to bounce back after a setback) in tweens.

## Friends and Facebook

The prospect of sitting alone in the playground at lunchtime is a teenager's worst fear. They are concerned about having friends and that goes hand-in-hand with a concern for fitting in. Although family relationships remain significant, young people aged 9-14 are more likely to turn to their friends for support. This emphasis on friends and fitting in also opens up this group to the impact of bullying and cyber bullying. [Cyber bullying peaks in Year 5](#) and blows out in the year of transition to high school. This is because in Year 5 the importance of peer relationships is just starting and during the first year of high school established friendships are changing.

## Outside of school

The report by The NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People found:

"Participation in sport and recreational activities may provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop additional social skills, to achieve and to have positive relationships with others."

These activities provide tweens with an opportunity to do things they enjoy, or are good at, and achieve in a different setting to school. It is good for their self-esteem and very important for them in developing relationships with other trusted adults, such as sports coaches and religious leaders.

The report also found that services have overlooked the tweens, for example, after school care finishes at Year 6, as does vacation care, and many youth focused services are aimed at older teenagers.

## Super consumers

If service providers have overlooked this group, advertisers certainly have not missed them. Advertisers love tweens as much as their parents do. Tweens account for about 11% of the population, but two-thirds of major retailers worldwide actively target this group, according to a 2007 [Australia Institute research paper](#).

According to the Institute's report, advertisers target tweens because they watch a lot of TV, respond to ads with celebrity role models, recognise brands, and keep up to date with new technology.

Tweens become brand conscious because they want to have what everyone else has, they are easily influenced by advertising, and parents seem prepared to pay top dollar to keep their tweens equipped with everything from brand name pencil cases to iPhones.

The media have also been criticised for the sexualisation of tweens. Products that would have once been adult items, such as padded bras, mobile phones, make-up and manicures, are now being marketed to this age group. To deal with this, Professor Bennett suggests that parents should be clear about their own values and discuss these with their tween.

## Tips for parenting tweens

Simple things you can do right now:

- eat meals together - there is a lot of evidence that shows this is powerfully protective for kids in modelling good behaviour and giving them a sense of belonging.
- know what kids are up to with their friends and online
- encourage activities outside of school run by trusted adults
- keep the connection with school and attend significant events
- provide clear and consistent ground rules for behaviour
- undertake a parenting program or read books on parenting this age group.

Source: [www.schools.nsw.edu.au](http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au)