

adolescent insight

POSTURE

DOES POSTURE MATTER?



Posture is often a point of conjecture between parents and their teens.

When we, as health professionals, carers, parents, teachers and coaches can see posture changes occurring and the adolescent is not aware, there becomes an apparent 'problem' that is only observed from, in the opinion of the adolescent, the outsider's point of view.

All the nagging about standing straight, and threats about getting neck pain when they are older will not change their point of view.

So, why do we start to see posture issues? There is no evidence that can give us directive around this, however clinically and with knowledge around growth and development, there is more to add to the picture.

Let's start where it all begins, and perhaps this is best to start by understanding some language around this time of life.

Adolescents is defined by the 'World Health Organisation' as a phase of **enormous physical and psychological changes, spanning between the years of 10-19 years of age**. "Youth" is defined as 15-24-year age group and these two age groups combined as "young people".

During the "adolescence" phase of life an individual develops across many fronts, with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics (puberty) to sexual and reproductive maturity, the development of mental processes and adult identity and the transition from total socio-economic and emotional dependence to relative independence. The body also undergoes enormous growth, and maturation of the musculoskeletal system, some of these body systems can continue maturation and development into mid 20's. These changes affect the individual differently and whilst there are many gains to celebrate, there are deficits to understand.

When looking at posture, focus is in on **the time of adolescence that encompasses spine and pelvic growth** (rapid growth), this will happen AFTER their rapid growth of arms and legs, age wise, roughly 13-15 years of age. During rapid growth phases of the body, there is a relative reduction in body awareness and a change in the way our body controls that area.

Clinically in practice, this is when the 'posture concerns' and comments from parents start, VERY seldom are comments from the teen themselves, rather they start 'my mum says my posture is bad, or mum says I will get a hump like her if I don't stand up straight'. Comments may also come via the teen from their coach or relative, but not, 'my friends have told me, or I have noticed.... (unless there is a family member with a 'bump' at the base of the neck that they are aware of and don't want to get).

The difficult part with teens...their posture 'problem' is everyone else's perceived problem, and not theirs, so the internal drive to fix it (teens generally are VERY body conscious) is lacking, rather they feel nagged and when they look in the mirror, they don't see the 'problem', so with tact, genuine concern AND without judgement, broaching the posture subject may be taken better.

Is there a need to be concerned about 'bad posture'? This is still up for discussion, what research suggests is that with a worsening 'posture angle', teens report more neck and upper back pain. This is exacerbated by heavy school bags if walking for extended periods and when taken as a part of the whole picture, maintaining any one particular extreme 'posture' and not having variability or movement out of that position may not load the bones, muscles and other structures optimally over time.

So...what can support persons do to support their teen?

- Get on their level, educate them about this growth phase (spine growth).
- Check in about whether they have noticed it, slouching posture is observed from a side profile, you may ask them if they want you to take a picture of them (consent is important), so they can see from side on.
- Express concerns/reminders but without judgement; 'oh, you are always slouching' vs 'let's all check our body positions'. I am sure parents, coaches and health professionals will often find themselves in a 'slouch/slump' position.
- Offer stretch options out of the slump/slouch, again, not as a 'nag' but rather place a roller in the lounge, let them know you have put it out if they want to use that whilst watching their show.

What happens if poor posture appears earlier? Check in with a paediatric physiotherapist, or doctor. Sometimes, there are other reasons, hypermobility, may be one of them. Keeping children and teens active with a variety of movement opportunities both at home (dance/yoga/pilates/ball games/home exercises) and/or external activity (team/individual sport/exercise) is key. Posture requires endurance, our stability/posture muscles are activating for long periods so even walking is a great endurance task for posture muscles.

Download and view the 'Study Tips' for posture options whilst studying.

References:

