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A Little Privacy,

Please!

What "Me Time" Does for You

By Susan T. Lennon

Max B., 12, of Old Westbury, N.Y., can't imagine what life would be like if he didn't have time to himself. For Max, alone time "takes away stress and lets me relax without needing to be doing something that my parents want me to do ... even though [they] usually interrupt my time alone!" he says. Like Max, most teens go through a time when they need more independence and time away from family. But why the sudden change? One word: puberty.

Why You Need Time to Yourself

"You're learning to self-direct, manage your own time, and not be afraid to be away from your family," says Cheryl Dellasega, a psychologist at Penn State University. There's no set age for it to happen, but at some point, most teens feel they need more time alone. After a long day at school, dealing with friends, crushes, and classwork, sometimes you just may want to hole up in your room and listen to music. And believe it or not, that's good for you.

"This is part of your growth," says Dellasega. "It's a gradual but steady process that has been happening all along."

Your Brain and Alone Time

The need for time to yourself is directly related to your brain. During the teen years, the *prefrontal cortex,* located behind the forehead, undergoes a burst of growth similar to the spurt that happens just after birth. That area is in charge of thinking and judgment. As that part of the brain continues to develop, teens themselves develop more opinions, ideas, and skills. And this all leads to wanting more time alone to process everything that's going on.

Max says that being alone makes him feel more grown up. "A few hours [of privacy a day] would be great, but I don't get that much time, so I'll settle for as much as I can get," he says.

Colleen O., 14, of Livonia, Mich., says her ideal amount of alone time is two hours every day. But Colleen's ideal way to spend time alone involves staying connected. "I usually go online to talk to friends," she says.

Being Alone: A Good Thing!

One good thing about being alone is that it allows you the "space" you need to figure out how you and your family are alike, and how you might be different. "It's not

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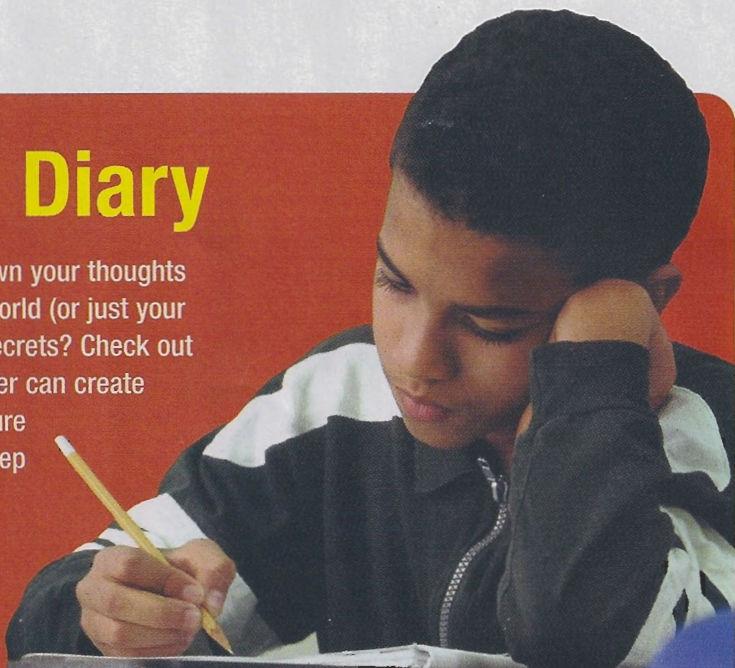
Alone time is a good thing, so it should never make you feel bad.

unusual for kids to go from being real involved to pulling back a little [from familiar activities]," Dellasega says. "You guard your bedroom, hobby, or friends," she observes, "because it represents, emotionally, that you're growing up." And one of the tasks of growing up is discovering who you are and who you will become.

Finding Balance Between Them and You

You'll feel more in balance if you split your time among friends, family, and yourself, rather than always choosing one over the others. "See your friends at home and do family things with your friends," advises Lauren D., 14, from Cromwell, Conn., "so you can be with both of them. It's best to have an even balance."

Colleen says she feels bored when she spends too much time alone. "I actually don't like to be alone *too* much," she says.

So what do you do if "alone time" has become too lonely? It's time to talk to a trusted adult if you experience any of the following:

- thinking that you'd rather be alone in your room than go to school,
- feeling really unhappy when you're alone,
- worrying you don't have a lot of friends or even one good friend to talk to,
- gaining or losing weight without trying,
- wishing you could just disappear and not have to deal with anything.

Alone time is a good thing, so it should never make you feel bad. "If you're feeling awkward or anxious," says Susan Bartell, a psychologist in Port Washington, N.Y., "reach out and ask your parents about what's going on. Don't just rely on friends for information." **CH1**

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