

RESEARCH



FINDINGS

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Stages of Adolescent Development

by Sedra Spano

Adolescence is a time of great change for young people. It is a time when physical changes are happening at an accelerated rate. But adolescence is not just marked by physical changes—young people are also experiencing cognitive, social/emotional and interpersonal changes as well. As they grow and develop, young people are influenced by outside factors such as: parents, peers, community, culture, religion, school, world events and the media. There are a number of different theories or ways of looking at adolescent development (see chart). Each theory has a unique focus, but across theories there are many similar elements. While it is true that each teenager is an individual with a unique personality and interests, there are also numerous developmental issues that just about every teen faces during the early, middle and late adolescent years (AACAP, 2003).

The feelings and behaviors of middle and high school adolescents can be categorized into five broad areas: 1.) moving toward independence; 2.) future interests and cognitive development; 3.) sexuality; 4.) physical changes; and 5.) ethics and self-direction. Specific characteristics of adolescent behavior within each area are described in the following material. Teenagers do vary slightly from the following descriptions, but the feelings and behaviors are, in general, considered typical for each stage of adolescence.

Early Adolescence (approximately 10-14 years of age)

Movement Toward Independence: emerging identity shaped over time by internal and external influences; moodiness; improved abilities to use speech to express oneself; more likely to express feelings by action than by words (may be more true for males); close friendships gain importance; less attention shown to parents, with occasional rudeness; realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their own faults; search for new people to love in addition to parents; tendency to return to childish behavior during times of stress; peer group influence on personal interests and clothing styles.

Future Interests and Cognitive Development: increasing career interests; mostly interested in present and near future; greater ability to work.

Sexuality: girls physically mature faster than boys; shyness, blushing, and modesty; more showing off; greater interest in privacy; experimentation with body (masturbation); worries about being normal.



Physical Changes: gains in height and weight; growth of pubic and underarm hair; increased perspiration - body odor develops; increased oil production of hair and skin; breast development and menstruation in girls; growth of testicles and penis, nocturnal emissions (wet dreams), deepening of voice, growth of hair on face in boys.

Ethics and Self-Direction: rule and limit testing; occasional experimentation with cigarettes, marijuana, and alcohol; capacity for abstract thought.

Middle Adolescence (approximately 15-16 years of age)

Movement Toward Independence: self-involvement, alternating between unrealistically high expectations and

worries about failure; complaints that parents interfere with independence; extremely concerned with appearance and with one's own body; feelings of strangeness about one's self and body; lowered opinion of and withdrawal from parents; effort to make new friends; strong emphasis on the new peer group; periods of sadness as the psychological loss of parents takes place; examination of inner experiences, which may include writing a diary.

Future Interests and Cognitive Development: intellectual interests gain importance; some sexual and aggressive energies directed into creative and career interests; anxiety can emerge related to school and academic performance.

Sexuality: concerns about sexual attractiveness; frequently changing relationships; more clearly defined

Theories of Adolescence

(Muuss, R., et.al., 1996; Rice and Dolgin, 2002)

Developmental Area	Primary Theorist	Main Focus
Biological	G. Stanley Hall, Arnold Gesell, James Tanner	Focus of the period is physical and sexual development determined by genes and biology.
Psychological	Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud	Focus on adolescence as a period of sexual excitement and anxiety.
Psychosocial	Erik Erikson	Focus is on identity formation; adolescents struggle between achieving identity and identity diffusion.
Cognitive	Jean Piaget	Focus is on formal operational thought; moving beyond concrete, actual experiences and beginning to think in logical and abstract terms.
Ecological (interaction between individual and environment)	Urie Bronfenbrenner	Focus is on the context in which adolescents develop; adolescents are influenced by family, peers, religion, schools, the media, community, and world events.
Social Cognitive Learning	Albert Bandura	Focus is on the relationship between social and environmental factors and their influence on behavior. Children learn through modeling.
Cultural	Margaret Mead, Carol Gilligan	Focus is on the culture in which the child grows up.

sexual orientation, with internal conflict often experienced by those who are not heterosexual; tenderness and fears shown toward opposite sex; feelings of love and passion.

Physical Changes: males show continued height and weight gains while female growth slows down (females grow only 1-2 inches after their first menstrual period).

Ethics and Self-Direction: development of ideals and selection of role models; more consistent evidence of conscience; greater goal setting capacity; interest in moral reasoning.

Late Adolescence (approximately 17-21 years of age)

Movement Toward Independence: firmer identity; ability to delay gratification; ability to think through ideas; ability to express ideas in words; more developed sense of humor; interests become more stable; greater emotional stability; ability to make independent decisions; ability to compromise; pride in one's work; self-reliance; greater concern for others.

Future Interests and Cognitive Development: more defined work habits; higher level of concern for the future; thoughts about one's role in life.

Sexuality: concerned with serious relationships; clear sexual identity; capacities for tender and sensual love.

Physical Changes: most young women are fully developed; young men continue to gain height, weight, muscle mass, body hair.

Ethics and Self-Direction: capable of useful insight; focus on personal dignity and self-esteem; ability to set goals and follow through; acceptance of social institutions and cultural traditions; self-regulation of self esteem.



What Parents Can Do

When young people feel connected to home, family, and school, they are less likely to become involved in activities that put their health at risk. Parental warmth and strong, positive communication helps young people establish individual values and make healthy life decisions.

ACTION ITEMS

- ★ **Nurture a positive relationship with your teen and listen to him/her.** When parent-teen interactions are characterized by warmth, kindness, consistency, respect, and love, the relationship will flourish, as will self-esteem, mental health, and social skills. Active or engaged listening is probably the skill parents need to practice the most.
- ★ **Encourage independent thought and expression in your teen; allow him/her to make and learn from mistakes.** Teens who are competent, responsible, and have high self-esteem have parents who encourage them to express their opinions and who include them in family decision making and rule setting. Healthy development requires that parents allow adolescents to make mistakes, within limits. Parents can help their teen by not doing everything for their adolescent as they develop; adolescent development is sometimes a series of “three steps forward and two steps back.”
- ★ **Show genuine interest in your teen's activities.** Having interest in the day-to-day “comings and goings” of teenagers lives allows parents to monitor their adolescents' behavior in positive ways. Parents who, together with their teens, set firm boundaries and high expectations may find that their teen's abilities to live up to those expectations grows and grows.

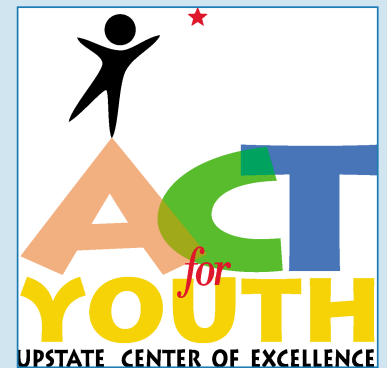
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