

Adolescence

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Adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change. Generally seen to begin about age 13, at puberty, and continuing through the late teens, adolescence is the process of becoming an adult -- physically, emotionally, and socially.

At puberty, the young adult becomes sexually mature. Accompanying the vast physical changes is an increase in the intensity and diversity of the teen's emotional feelings. Such rapid physical and emotional development often produces a sense of confusion and bewilderment in the young adult. This may be compounded by the expectation of society that the adolescent begin to take on responsibility for self and others.

During adolescence, parents come to have less influence over their child. Oftentimes this generates mixed feelings in the parents. Wanting their child to be more independent, they may, at the same time, be reluctant to allow their daughter or son to make choices that may differ from their own. Parents may fear that their adolescent might embarrass them with non-traditional behavior or dress. Or they may think that their child's new-found sense of responsibility will make them feel older and less needed. Adolescents also experience uncertainty about their newly-discovered independence. When either parents or teen are unclear as to the degree of independence appropriate, conflict often arises and the teen may become rebellious. Research consistently shows, however, that when encouraged to make their own decisions, adolescents tend to resolve the majority of issues, especially those concerning moral standards, in the directions of their parents.

Diminishing parental influence is in part replaced by the emergence of the "peer group." Teens have a strong need to be accepted, liked, and even loved by their peers. Such peer relationships are important in that they have a certain liberal quality generally not found with parents. Peer relationships encourage experimentation with new identities; typically the family does not. Also, the family will frequently not recognize that a daughter's first bra or a son's first razor signifies the emergence of a budding new adult.

Mature sexual interest is usually aroused during adolescence, and sexual preoccupation and experimentation is common. Sexual identity questions may also arise at this time, with teens not infrequently questioning societal gender roles and wondering if they are heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or gay. Teens often become overly concerned with their appearance and behavior, and come to believe that everyone else is just as aware of the blemish or out-of-place hair as they. Consequently, they tend to anticipate and imagine others' reactions to them, and may even rehearse possible responses.

Adolescents commonly assume that their feelings and life situations are unique and entirely different from anyone else's. They may create "personal fables" in the form of diaries or journals, where they reflect upon the felt importance and intensity of their individual experience.

Central to the task of becoming an adult is the development of a sense of one's identity, or self-definition. During adolescence, the question of "who and I?" comes to the forefront, often creating turmoil, confusion, anxiety. Initially, young teens have no stable answers to this question, and appear fickle and easily changeable on a day-to-day basis. The need for consistency and stability to offset such confusion and decrease such anxiety often moves the teen to seek attachment to a charismatic individual or group. Music idols, movie stars, athletes, teenage gangs, political groups, social clubs, and religious organizations can therefore help provide guidelines and stability. However, if adolescents rely too heavily on others in attempting to formulate their sense of self, they will fuse a group identity instead of an individual one, and merely postpone resolution of the "who am I?" question.

If, on the other hand, adolescents are given support in the context of being encouraged to ask -- and answer, their own questions, they will move toward establishing a stable sense of individual identity. Experimentation is the key. By trying things out, accepting what fits and discarding what doesn't, the emerging adult begins to find activities, attitudes, values, and people that fit her or his unique sense of self. This leads to the resolution of adolescence: the consistent answering of the "who am I?" question and the development of confidence in oneself and one's way of life.