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The Young Adolescent

Ages Twelve through Fifteen



“When I found out that my parents were getting a divorce, I picked up the phone and called my three best friends. I had to let them know; they are the ones who are really important.”

Physical Development

Early adolescence is a peak time of growth and physical development. Marked by the onset of puberty, the adolescent's body changes dramatically. Hormonal changes usher in physical, sexual, and psychological growth. This period is characterized by an increased need for food and sleep. The early-rising child now sleeps late. By age fourteen many girls have reached full physical maturity, while most boys are still growing rapidly. Caring for an evolving body and body image are critical tasks of early adolescence. Self-conscious, the early adolescent routinely compares herself to others. She is sensitive to media images of strength and beauty and can be at risk for eating disorders. While bulimia (binging and purging) and anorexia (severe appetite loss) are most often diagnosed in female youth, their prevalence in males is increasing.

Sometimes moody, the adolescent negotiates dramatic changes in his physical appearance, strength, coordination, and athletic

abilities. At times it can be difficult to determine if adolescent moodiness is typical or indicative of any developing mental illness. Dramatic, sustained depression can indeed be cause for concern. If a youth withdraws from family and friends, he may benefit from intervention to bolster and support his developing sense of self. Early adolescence can also be a time when youth are exposed to drugs and alcohol. Honest conversation and guidance about addictive substances support youth in current and future decision making. Research demonstrates that youth want to talk with their caregivers about these issues.

Young adolescents engaged in extracurricular activities are less likely to engage in early risk behaviors. All adolescents have the capacity to meet challenges and passionately engage in a multifaceted life; providing opportunities to do so is the task of supporting adults.

The early adolescent also needs support for his physical development and provisions for his developing body. He needs privacy and sustained, enduring love, despite any difficult or oppositional behavior. Food, regular exercise, involvement in various activities, and social belonging bolster his self-esteem. Like everyone, he needs respect and care.

Cognitive Development

The early adolescent's thinking is no longer tied only to the concrete world; she is beginning to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget calls this the start of *formal operations*, marked by an ability to think about thinking. With logical reasoning skills in place, the young adolescent can now ponder cause and effect. She enjoys mental problems that involve balancing more than one idea. With mental operations ready to help her classify, store, and remember information, the early adolescent is a facile learner who can both take in and make her own sense of large amounts of information. Practicing thinking skills, she engages in argument, even sarcasm, based on deductive reasoning.

New intellectual acuity combines with preoccupation with the self, resulting in increased adolescent concern about what others might be thinking about him. According to psychologist David Elkind, the adolescent lives as if he has an imaginary audience. He is highly conscious of himself and feels like no one could ever quite understand him. He uses his intellectual skills to challenge assumptions he notices in the adult world; he can be brazen in these challenges.

During these years particular intellectual strengths, or intelligences, may become evident. Psychologist Howard Gardner argues that there are nine intelligences: linguistic (word-smart), logical-mathematical (number-smart), spatial (design-smart), bodily kinesthetic (body/movement-smart), musical (music-smart), interpersonal (people-smart), intrapersonal (self-smart), naturalist (nature-smart), and existential (“big questions”-smart). Adolescents are ready to understand their own and others’ intellectual strengths, and multiple intelligence theory often affirms what they already know. “That girl is a biology whiz, but she totally blew that oral report because she’s so bad at talking about it,” comments an adolescent.

Social and Affective Development

During early adolescence, social relationships with peers are of great importance. The adolescent spends increased time with her friends and begins to build her identity through what she shares with them. Interested in sports or music or skateboarding, the young adolescent actively engages with others; this becomes a currency of friendship. Mutual self-disclosure, reflecting, and sharing thoughts creates new intimacy for friends. In his psychological research, Henry Stack Sullivan found that the close same-sex “chumships” of early adolescence provide foundational skills for later intimate friendships. During early adolescence, girls’ social networks of friendship usually increase in size, while boys’ networks decrease.

According to psychologist Willard Hartup, the amount of time spent with friends is greatest during middle childhood and early adolescence. He estimates that teens spend almost a third of their time with friends. Friendships and peers provide both support and stress for the young adolescent. Able to observe and critically evaluate, he constantly compares himself with others. While he has a much deeper capacity for compassion than he did when he was younger, he also has the capacity to use social information for both inclusion and exclusion. Peer pressures emerge. In the pursuit of acceptance, the early adolescent may change his appearance or engage in new behaviors. He may work hard to reconcile his inner self with his outer, social self. He needs role models to nurture his ethic of care, for himself and for others. He needs to learn how to engage in responsible social decision making.

The young adolescent is continually exploring his identities. Gender identity and the beginnings of sexual attractions are central, as are racial and ethnic identities. Youth learn to express emotions in ways congruent with their identities, sometimes resulting in differences between what they feel and what they express. Psychologist Stephanie Shields notes that by adolescence, boys and girls know there are expectations for them to show and hide anger, respectively. Expressing emotions is part of expressing identity.

Scripts for socially correct emotional expression are also embedded in race and ethnicity. This can be a particularly sensitive time for transracially adopted, multiracial, or multiethnic adolescents. Navigating multiple identities, they may feel the need to choose with whom they will identify. They are often called on to be much more intentional than monoracial or monoethnic peers, for whom the choice of role models seems preset.

Youth learn social scripts—embedded in contexts of race, ethnicity, and class—about what it means to be a sexual person. Two youth of the same ethnicity may be socialized with very different cultural messages about maleness, femaleness, and sexuality, based on where they are raised (urban, suburban, or rural environments), their caregivers' backgrounds, their economic context, and other

variables. The young adolescent negotiates messages about how to express sexuality from family, peers, culture, and the community.

Sexuality is linked with power in much of the media that surrounds American youth. Sexuality researcher Deborah Tolman asserts that girls often get the mixed message that it is powerful to be a sexual object but unacceptable to have their own sexual desires. Such messages don't serve any gender well. Additionally, most dominant sexual scripts assume heterosexuality. Youth may feel pressured to claim heterosexuality before they have sexual stirrings or in opposition to their bodily impulses. Alternative social messages from family and church communities can affirm broader, more accepting perspectives on sexuality. Parental support, communication, and monitoring are consistently correlated with reduced at-risk sexual behavior in youth. As adolescents search for their identities, family members remain primary influences.

Racial and ethnic identity development are similarly influenced by the many contexts in which youth move and function. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum explains that youth of color think about themselves in terms of race because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. They may even enact racial stereotypes in the process of coming to racial identity. All youth absorb racist messages. Although such messages do not support healthy identity development, they may influence behaviors. Early adolescence is the time when youth seek to be with others who seem like themselves, a challenge for youth who are under-represented in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. Identifying with others is critical, and the process may seem frenetic in youth. This is part of the path to later, more individuated identity.

Researcher Donna Jackson Nakazawa finds that in the process of identifying who they are, multiethnic and multiracial adolescents are likely to reject all that they are not. Multiracial youth often report feeling that they must choose one racial identity in order to fit in somewhere. Sometimes this puts adolescents at odds with their siblings or families. When multiracial and multiethnic youth actively discuss racial and ethnic identities with their fami-

lies, they are better equipped to negotiate these complexities with peers. They develop descriptive language that can counteract the limited labeling that dominates discussions of race and ethnicity. In addition, multiracial and multiethnic youth benefit deeply from communities rich in a diversity of races and ethnicities.

White adolescents who have not lived with racial diversity may enter adolescence without even considering their racial identity or white privilege. They may need to learn that “seeing color” is a step toward claiming their racial identity and becoming antiracist. Youth need to have white privilege named and explored. Reflecting with white adolescents about what their racial identity means (for example, “When I go to the mall, I am not followed by clerks or security guards, though my peers of color are”) is an essential task. They need to encounter their whiteness as new. By exploring ethnic backgrounds, white youth learn more deeply about individual differences that are not always apparent.

All adolescents are best supported in their racial identity development by knowing diverse people in multiple contexts and engaging in sustained friendships and alliances across races and ethnicities, in addition to having strong role models to whom they can relate. Youth construct their identities based on their experiences. Although racial and ethnic identity may be a central organizing force in defining who the adolescent is at the moment, adolescence is a time of increasing complexity. Meaningful engagement with others nurtures appreciation of our inherent human diversity.

Engaging in multiple activities (sports teams, clubs, church activities, etc.) with different groups of peers serves as a buffer to stress associated with the adolescent’s emerging identity. Having several realms in which he can achieve broadens the adolescent’s self-critical lens. With increased cognitive capabilities, he develops an evaluative eye as well as a sense of humor and sarcasm. He finds his parents embarrassing and goofy as he imagines outsiders’ perspectives. Recent research has shown that adolescents still wish for parental attention and appreciation; they need to feel valued and

taken seriously. Their emotions are fluid; they first say, “I can’t stand my family,” and then ask their families for advice or reassurance. The older adolescent works at reconciling conflicting feelings and identities.

Moral Development

The adolescent’s ability to take the perspective of others deeply influences her moral and ethical perspectives. She is able to consider multiple perspectives on a situation, and she makes decisions accordingly. She navigates what she thinks based partly on her perception of what she imagines others will think. Her personal concern about social approval provides a basis for respecting social order. The early adolescent can often have a law-and-order perspective that lends itself to the development of great respect for systems and agreements between people. In her personal realm, she may challenge authority, particularly her parents’. Yet when thinking through moral issues, the early adolescent can be enormously generous.

Through experiences of mutuality and increased connection to others, the early adolescent develops a large capacity for care and altruism. The adolescent is able to put his thinking about fairness into action. Encouraging (and even mandating) his community participation will help him create and hold the identity of a moral thinker and doer. He develops a sense of purpose to further his sense of being a part of community. This paves the way for commitment to moral and ethical ideals in later adolescence and complements his emerging interest in issues of justice in the wider world.

Faith Development

Valuing connection to others and understanding multiple perspectives, the young adolescent may find new meaning in religious and faith communities. A sense of belonging is critical to the adolescent, and she now has the cognitive abilities to understand the

moral underpinnings of a faith community. She may be drawn to the authority of a religion, particularly if it embodies her values. The creed, or lack of creed, of a religion may comfort or challenge the early adolescent who enjoys the neatness of moral order.

Faith researcher James Fowler believes the adolescent is ready to accept conventional notions of faith. The young adolescent wants to synthesize his values and faith can provide a framework for doing so. According to Fowler, adolescents yearn for coherence amid the complexity of their lives. Faith can offer a philosophical organizing rubric. In the Fowler's *synthetic-conventional* stage of faith development, the adolescent's spiritual growth may be nurtured by sustained involvement in a faith community that allows him to wrestle with religious questions and ideas. Working within a faith community deepens his spirituality and helps him find a larger narrative for his life. If the community allows for questioning, the adolescent will have the opportunity to move toward his own reasoning about faith and spirituality. Seeking love, understanding, loyalty, and support, the developing adolescent can both serve and be served by a faith community.

Characteristics of This Age

- Transitions to an adult body
- Eats and sleeps more
- May demonstrate behaviors indicating risk of eating disorders or depression
- Seeks support for self-esteem and body image
- Engages in formal operational thinking, including abstract and hypothetical thinking
- Concentrates on the self and other's perceptions of the self
- Engages an imaginary audience, a mental representation of others watching
- Develops domain-specific intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, naturalist, and existential

- Engages actively with peers and social relationships
- Participates in same-sex friendships, which are a foundation for later intimate relationships
- Takes on others' perspectives and understands that sharing perspectives doesn't necessarily mean agreement
- Demonstrates altruism and compassion
- Tries to reconcile the inner self with the outer self
- Explores gender, racial, and ethnic identities through affiliations
- Negotiates messages about sexuality from peers, communities, and family
- Achieves in several realms as a way to buffer stress
- Expresses criticism of self and others
- Shows concern with social approval
- Respects social order but sometimes challenges it as well
- Demonstrates interest in ethics of care and justice
- Seeks belonging and membership
- Expresses interest in religion that embodies values
- Enjoys presence or absence of religious creed
- Wants to develop a personal, although perhaps temporary, credo
- Sustains faith development by engaging with a community that allows questioning
- Enters Fowler's synthetic-conventional stage of faith development
- Seeks love, understanding, loyalty, and support

Ways to Offer Support

- Provide for physical needs, including nutrition, body-care products, privacy, and affection.
- Support a critical perspective on media images of beauty and adulthood.
- Carefully monitor signs of depression or eating disorders.
- Promote healthy body image and self-esteem.

- Affirm and support the adolescent's many physical, emotional, and cognitive changes.
- Be flexible and responsive.
- Model respect.
- Provide opportunities for complex thinking and the pondering of big questions.
- Respect and take seriously the adolescent's self-consciousness.
- Recognize that challenging authority provides an outlet for new cognitive skills for the adolescent.
- Respect the adolescent's interest in peers.
- Maintain clear expectations so adolescents can make independent decisions.
- Afford autonomy within limits of safety.
- Be a sounding board for youth's exploration of ideas.
- Keep some routines or rituals that provide continuity from childhood to adulthood.
- Encourage involvement in multiple settings.
- Actively support the adolescent's exploration of racial and ethnic identity.
- Provide repeated, sustained opportunities for engagement with ethnically and racially diverse peers.
- Engage in honest, supportive talk about sexuality.
- Provide information and resources about healthy sexuality that affirm a range of sexualities and gender identities.
- Encourage participation in a faith or religious community.
- Provide outlets for questioning faith, religion, and creed.
- Facilitate youth's work in community.
- Celebrate the adolescent's change and continuity.
- Understand that vulnerabilities may be displayed in multiple ways, including anger and resistance.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Welcome each adolescent.