

Adolescence is the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood; it generally refers to a period ranging from age 12 or 13 through age 19 or 21. Although its beginning is often balanced with the beginning of puberty, adolescence is characterized by psychological and social stages as well as by biological changes.

Adolescence can be prolonged, brief, or virtually nonexistent, depending on the type of culture in which it occurs. In societies that are simple, for example, the transition from childhood to adulthood tends to occur rather rapidly, and is marked by traditionally prescribed passage rites. To contrast this, American and European societies the transition period for young people has been steadily lengthening over the past 100 years, giving rise to an adolescent subculture. As a result of this prolonged transitional stage a variety of problems and concerns specifically associated with this age group have developed. Psychologists single out four areas that especially touch upon adolescent behavior and development: physiological change and growth; cognitive, or mental development; identity, or personality formation; and parent-adolescent relations.

#### Physiological Change:

Between the ages of 9 and 15, almost all young people undergo a rapid series of physiological changes, known as the adolescent growth spurt. These hormonal changes include an acceleration in the body's growth rate; the development of pubic hair; the appearance of axillary, or armpit, hair about two years later. There are changes in the structure and functioning of the reproductive organs; the mammary glands in girls; and development of the sweat glands, which often leads to an outbreak of acne. In both sexes, these physiological changes occur at different times. This period of change can prove to be very stressful for a pre-teen. For during this stage of life appearance is very important. An adolescent child who develops very early or extremely late can take a lot of ridicule from his or her peers. However, the time at which a girl goes through this stage and a male goes through it are different.

Girls typically begin their growth spurt shortly after age 10. They tend to reach their peak around the age 12, and tend to finish by age 14. This spurt occurs almost two years later in boys. Therefore boys go through a troubling period where girls are taller and heavier than them. This awkward period occurs from ages ten and one-half to thirteen. Time is not the only difference in the pubescent period for boys and girls.

In girls, the enlargement of the breasts is usually the first physical sign of puberty. Actual puberty is marked by the beginning of menstruation, or menarche. In the United States, 80 percent of all girls reach menarche between the ages of eleven and one-half and fourteen and one-half, 50 percent between 12 and 14, and 33 percent at or before age 11. The average age at which menstruation begins for American girls has been dropping about six months every decade, and today contrasts greatly with the average age of a century ago, which is between 15 and 17.

Boys typically begin their rapid increase in growth when they reach about twelve and one-half years of age. They reach their peak slightly after 14, and slow down by age 16. This period is marked by the enlargement of the testes, scrotum, and penis; the development of the prostate gland; darkening of the scrotal skin. The growth of pubic hair and pigmented hair on the legs, arms, and chest takes place during this period. The enlargement of the larynx, containing the vocal cords, which leads to a deepening of the voice causes much stress for a pubescent boy. In this transitional period in his voice tends to "crack."

#### Cognitive Development:

Current views on the mental changes that take place during adolescence have been affected heavily by the work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who sees the intellectual capability of adolescents as both "qualitatively and quantitatively superior to that of younger children." According to Piaget and the developmentalist school of psychology, the thinking capacity of young people

automatically increases in complexity as a function of age. Developmentalists find distinct differences between younger and older adolescents in ability to generalize, to handle abstract ideas, to infer appropriate connections between cause and effect, and to reason logically and consistently.

Whether these changes in cognitive ability are a result of the developmental stage, as Piaget suggests, or should be considered the result of accumulating knowledge that allows for new mental and moral perspectives, an enlarged capacity for making distinctions, and a greater awareness of and sensitivity to others, is a question that psychologists continually debate. Behaviorists such as Harvard's B. F. Skinner did not believe intellectual development could be divided into distinct stages. He preferred to emphasize the influence of conditioning experiences on behavior as a result of continuous punishments and rewards. Trying to prove that intellectual ability in adolescence differs from that of earlier years, as a result of learning, or acquiring more appropriate responses through conditioning. Other investigators have found a strong tie between certain socioeconomic characteristics and adolescent intellectual achievement. Statistics suggest that well-educated, economically secure, small-sized families provide the kind of environment which intellectual development among adolescents is most apt to flourish. This environment should also include parental encouragement, individual attention, and an extended vocabulary use. Test scores, however, seem to be more related to the verbal ability than to the performance aspects of adolescents' intelligence.

Identity Formation:

Psychologists also disagree about the causes and significance of the emotional and personality changes that occur during adolescence. Many Freudian psychologists believe that the straightforward sexual awakening of adolescents is an inevitable cause of emotional strain. This strain sometimes leads to neurosis. Psychologists who have different beliefs place less emphasis on the specific sexual aspects of adolescence. These physiologists consider sex as only one of many adjustments young people must make in their search for an identity.

The effects of physical change, the development of sexual impulses, increased intellectual capacity, and social pressure to achieve independence are all contributor to the molding of a new self. The components of identity formation are connected to the adolescent's self-image. This means adolescents are greatly affected by the opinions of people who are important in their lives and interact with them. Gradually, the emotional dependency of childhood transforms into an emotional commitment to meet the expectations of others. An adolescent seeks to please parents, peers, teachers, employers and so on. If adolescents fail to meet the goals set for them by the important people in their lives, they usually feel like they have to reevaluate their motives, attitudes, or activities. The approval that seems necessary at this stage can help determine both their later commitment to responsible behavior and their sense of social competence throughout life.

The peer group of an adolescent also provide a standard in which they can measure themselves during the process of identity formation. Within the peer group, a young person can try out a variety of roles. Whether taking the role of a leader or follower, deviant or conformist, the values and norms of the group allow them to acquire a perspective of their own. A peer group can also help with the transition from reliance on the family to relative independence. There is a common language amongst adolescents, whether it is clothing, music, or gossip, these forms of expression allow them to display their identity. This new form of association helps to ease the anxiety of leaving their past source of reference to their identity.

Parent-Adolescent Relations:

The family has traditionally provided a set of values for young people to observe. Through this observation they can begin to learn adult ways of behavior. In modern industrial societies the nuclear family has come to be relatively unstable, for divorce is growing increasingly common and many children reach adolescence with only one parent. In addition, rapid social changes have weakened the smoothness of life experience. Adolescents a greater difference between the parental-child generations than their parent did. They tend to view their parents

as having little capacity to guide them in their transition from their world to the larger world. The conflict that sometimes results from differing parent-adolescent perceptions is called the "generation gap." Such conflicts are not inevitable, for it is less likely to happen in families in which both adolescents and parents have been exposed to the same new ideas and values.

Other parental characteristics that commonly influence adolescents include social class, the pattern of equality or dominance between mother and father, and the consistency with which parental control is exercised. Young people with parents whose guidance is firm, consistent, and rational tend to possess greater self-confidence than those whose parents are either overly tolerant or strict.

#### Adolescence In Modern Society:

Adolescence is often looked upon as a period of stormy and stressful transition. Anthropologists have noted that in less developed cultures the adolescent years do not always have to exhibit such characteristics, when children can participate fully in the activities of their community. As life in industrialized societies grows more complex, however, adolescents are increasingly cut off from the activities of their elders, leaving most young people with education as their sole occupation. Inevitably, this has isolated many of them from the adult world and has prolonged their adolescence. In advanced industrial societies such as the United States, the adolescent years have become marked by violence to an alarming degree. The phenomenon of teenage suicide has become particularly disturbing, but risk-taking behaviors of many sorts can be observed, including alcohol and drug abuse.

#### Bibliography:

- Conger, John J., *Adolescence: Generation under Pressure* (1980)  
Dacey, J. E., *Adolescents Today*, 3d ed. (1986)  
Fuhrman, B. S., *Adolescence, Adolescents* (1986)  
Hauser, Stuart T., et al., *Adolescents and Their Families* (1991)  
Sanrock, J. W., *Adolescence: An Introduction*, 3d ed. (1987)  
Sprinthall, Norman, and Collins, W. A., *Development in Adolescence*, 2d ed. (1985).

#### Table Of Contents

Introduction.....	Page: 1
Physiological Changes.....	Page: 1-2
Cognitive Development.....	Page: 3-4
Identity Formation.....	Page: 4-5
Parent-Adolescent Relations.....	Page: 5-6
Adolescence Today.....	Page: 6
Bibliography.....	Page: 7

