

## **Towards a better understanding of adolescence**

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*“Adolescence is a voyage through rough seas; on this voyage a young man has to navigate carefully avoiding the rocks and other dangers and know how to get pleasure by overcoming these hurdles” - Anonymous*

The term adolescence is derived from a Latin word that means to grow into maturity. Adolescence can be defined as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. In other words, an adolescent is neither a child nor an adult. It covers individuals from 12 to 18 years of age. At the end of adolescence the individual is expected to take on self responsibility. The span of adolescence has two phases; in the first phase, the changes in body take place. At this time, the adolescents become aware of the physical changes they are going through. This phase spans from 12 to 15 years and forms the early adolescent period. During adolescence, one starts demanding independence because of their physical maturity. The second phase covers the period from 15 to 18 years and is generally referred to as late adolescence. There is a considerable

variation in development patterns among adolescents. The only way to provide a definite frame of reference for understanding various stages of life is to use arbitrary age designation since neither biological nor psychological maturity is achieved so precisely or all at once.

### **Cognition and the adolescent**

Cognitive development refers to the development of thinking and organizing systems of the brain. It involves language, thinking, reasoning, and problem solving and memory development. Cognitive development among adolescents brings out marked changes in them. They become very critical. Adolescents develop analytical ways of perceiving the world around them; this affects their personal, social and emotional status. Because of the

resultant critical ability, they start noticing the drawbacks of parents and all authority figures. This often leads to parent child conflicts. Indian parents do not tolerate criticism by growing adolescents and this further causes more friction in their relationship. Idealistic rebellion sets in towards the later part of adolescent period. Adolescents do not like subordination to adults. They want to be considered as their equal. Because of their developing critical abilities and idealism, they visualize themselves as major reformers or the trend setters of the world around them. Adolescents often feel adults are not fair to them. Consequently, they become idealistic rebellions. As cognition proceeds and adolescent is exposed to life and the people around them, the rebellion in him/her vanishes.

Adolescents are self conscious of their looks. Due to their limited understanding, they feel, they are being watched by all. This makes them stand in front of the mirror for long time. Adolescents perceive that all people are watching them. As the cognition

improves, self consciousness gets replaced by more mature reality.

Most adolescents have unique ability to do things differently as they are creative. They should be encouraged to develop their creative potential. Creativity improves with cognition and experience. The environment should be flexible and amiable for creativity to improve and develop. Often children lose their originality when they are prevented from exploiting their talent. With passage of time, long-term values are established, ego declines and reasoning, values and attitudes develop.

### Emotional changes during adolescence

Central nervous system controls the changes that take place in the body from childhood to adolescence. It regulates growth by influencing the endocrine glands to secrete hormones. As the child reaches puberty, these glands become active and release hormones. These hormones are responsible not only for physical and sexual growth but also behavioral changes that occur during adolescence. The hormones affect the emotional status of young ones. As a

result, adolescents experience frequent swings in the mood. Sometimes on a small issue they become angry, while on the other, they may have an outburst of laughter for no apparent reason. Sometimes, they get excited or depressed for reason they can't understand. These mood swings are very common to all adolescents. During this period, adolescents also experience "crushes" i.e. intense feeling of love towards a particular person. Feelings of rebellion against adults are also very common during adolescence. They feel that parents and other adults do not understand their feelings. Adolescents are idealistic in their thinking. On the whole, adolescents do not master full control over emotions. They get influenced by people very easily. It is because they accept people on the basis of what they say instead of their motives.

### Peers and adolescents

The adolescents spend a lot of time together with the members of their peer group. They discuss about politics, sports, music, academic, art, family and even global problem. They communicate with each other and thus have a good



understanding. The peer group activities are well protected and almost impossible to infiltrate. An intelligent teenager is expected to choose friends tactfully. The structure of peer group changes gradually over the course of adolescence. In early teens the groups consists of teenagers from same sex (unisex group), e.g. boys group and girls group. As the time passes, some members of one group may also start interacting with some members of the other group. Later this interaction results in "mixed sex group". By late adolescence, the peer group unity weakens. Boys and girls having acquired initial security from their unisex groups move cautiously and anxiously, into contact with the opposite sex. Having been grilled and surviving through the pressures of family and peers, the adolescent now start emerging

with an identity of her/his own. Thus, in due course, the adolescent is ready to launch herself/himself as an independent and capable member in the world of adults.



### Achieving identity

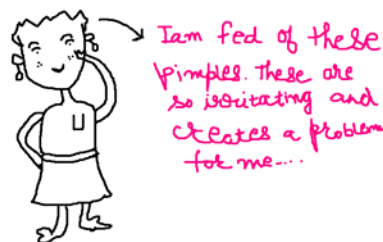
According to Erikson (Swiss psychologist), “identity is feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of knowing where one is going and an inner assurance of anticipated recognition from those who matter”. Seeking identity involves searching for continuity and sameness in oneself—trying to get a clear sense of what one’s skills and personal attributes are, to discover where one is headed in life, and to believe that one can count on recognition from significant others. The adolescent who forms a sense of identity gains two key benefits: a feeling of being at home in one’s body and a sense of psychological well being. Adolescents who fail to achieve a sense of identity

may face confusion over what roles they can or should be playing in life. They may delay any commitment to adult roles. By blending abstract ideals in real life, the adolescent can generate a broad array of possible roles.

### ROLE confusion in adolescents



### Problems in making adjustments during adolescence



Adolescents find it difficult at one point or the other to make adjustments. One of the major problems in adolescence is

“drug abuse”. A drug is known to be abused or misused when it is consumed by the person not needing it. The ability to tolerate the drug increases with continued use. In case the adolescent is anxious and agitated there is a strong psychological need for the individual to feel better. If the necessary help and support to relieve tension and anxiety is not available, the individual may resort to drug abuse. Innocent adolescents succumb to drugs and become addicted because of their failure to accept their physical, mental, emotional and sexual growth. It is important for them to learn the right values for proper social behavior. Adolescents resort to antisocial behavior when they are unable to handle their problems. In fact, this act of theirs is a loud cry for help. Unfortunately, if help does not reach in time from adults around her/him the adolescent becomes a victim of the failures she/he experiences. The beginning of adolescence can mean facing up to some very adult psychological problems. One of these is “depression”, which is characterized by feelings of guilt, a loss of interest in

activities, sleep problems and even suicidal thoughts. Another life threatening disorder which is prevalent in adolescence is “anorexia nervosa”, a form of self starvation. Still other adolescents have an escalating sense of confusion about things around them; they feel that things are not real or that they are not actually outside of themselves. Distortions in thinking may develop into irrational beliefs systems (delusions) or into experience that seem to be, but are not real (hallucinations).

Adolescents may resort to the consumption of alcohol because they want to “mask” their inadequacies to cope with the day to day challenges of life. Though, initially alcohol can calm and relax an individual, it may lead to a slow and painful death in a young age. Adolescents often start drinking because of increased anxiety. Since society does not approve drinking by adolescents, a feeling of guilt develops. Consumption of alcohol reduces social inhibitions. Adolescents, who are not capable of normal social interaction, may use alcohol as a tool to socialize.

Tobacco use is also common during adolescence. The adolescents view smoking and betel chewing as a sign of masculinity. Smoking is injurious to health and is addicting. A knowledgeable and intelligent adolescent ensures that he does not succumb to the peer pressure of smoking and betel chewing. If smoking and tobacco consumption is a problem with the adolescent, he/she should be encouraged and convinced to give it up at the earliest or at least limit it to minimum possible level.

Ways to make adolescence a beautiful journey

(A) Parenting during adolescence

*“The hand that links your true family is not one of the blood but of respect and joy in each other’s life”- Sir Richard Bach*

Adolescence is the most crucial and an important period of an individual’s life. The foundation of a sincere, honest, responsible, understanding, sensible and a true person is laid by the parents during this period. Parents play an important role in moulding the adolescent in the desired shape. Being

authoritative, adamant, strict, unfriendly will surely result in a ruined relationship between parents and the adolescent. Adolescence is a phase of an individual’s life which needs to be supported by the parents. It can be said that adolescence is a phase which needs to be handled patiently without creating a mess. Parents can help their children to understand the limitations, responsibilities and duties by providing a platform for the adolescent to express her/his views and advising the adolescent accordingly. Another aspect of parenting during adolescence is that parents are expected to come to the level of their adolescent and understand the dreams, goals, expectations and help her/him in an appropriate manner. In order to make adolescence a beautiful memory, it is extremely important that the parents consider and give importance to the view points of their adolescent children. Guiding the adolescent in an appropriate way and providing liberty to express his/her views, helps in building a strong and stable relationship between adolescent and the parents. Giving the adolescents space to expand their wings

and discover the different aspects of life within the limits helps the adolescents to explore the world in a right manner and provides the parents with a sense of satisfaction that adolescence is a beautiful journey for their ward and not a stressful event.

(B) How teachers can help the adolescents?

Teachers at school, play an important and appropriate role in the life of their students. When the child is in the junior section of her/his school, she/he has extreme faith, belief and confidence in her/his teachers. What the teacher says is considered as good as the 'gospel truth'. As the child approaches puberty, she/he starts feeling differently, similar to the one experienced with the parents. When there is absence of a friend, guide and philosopher, the adolescents are unable to seek authentic information to all the questions, queries and curiosities. The teachers and parents should be an excellent and inspiring role model for the adolescents. She/he should feel free to approach the teachers and relate their anxieties and find satisfactory, appropriate and convincing answers and

explanations. It is the responsibility of the schools and the teachers to impart correct knowledge that will enable the adolescent to go through the period of adolescence with least turbulence and disturbance.

(C) How adolescents can make adolescence a special experience?

Adolescence is a good period to socialize with significant others and extract important and appropriate information, advice and suggestions from them. It is a truth that adolescence is a period of stress and storm but if adolescents themselves take the responsibility to make this period of their life more beautiful and meaningful then it will really do wonders and will bring sure results. Adolescent analyze almost each and everything they come across in a critical manner because of the beginning of the mature cognition process. If adolescents face any sort of problem, they should not hesitate in asking and sharing it with their parents, teachers and other members of the family. Adolescents should always keep in mind that it is not necessary that what they say, do or think is always right and

appropriate and they should not deny the fact that their parents would never guide them wrong. If an adolescent is confused about a particular thing then she/he should at once consult the most resourceful individual who can guide her/him in an appropriate way. It is the responsibility of the adolescent that she/he chooses or selects those friends with whom she/he is most compatible and who would always make her/him see and follow the right path rather than to misguide her/him. Adolescents are extremely curious about many things, and if their curiosity is not met with appropriate explanations it might be possible that they may get puzzled and may end up on baseless and inappropriate information. Honesty, helpfulness, being considerate and humane are some of the desired values which an adolescent should be equipped with so that she/he develops a good and long lasting relationship with all the members of the society irrespective of caste, age, social and economical status.

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