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Early Adolescence

Parent discussion

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There are three stages of adolescence, each with its own special qualities: Early (11 to 14 years old), mid (15 to 19 years old), and late (20 to as late as 30 years old).

In early adolescence:

Young teens can seem very different animals from adults. They change day to day in radical and unpredictable ways. Some psychologists believe that teens at this stage of development function as 'multiple selves' that are psychologically separate sub-personalities which are very loosely connected to each other. The radical changes of adolescent moods or actions can be a result of their movement between these different personalities. (Adults also move between sub-personalities within our 'psyches', but the changes are less radical and we have a more consistent sense of 'self' to hold them all together.)

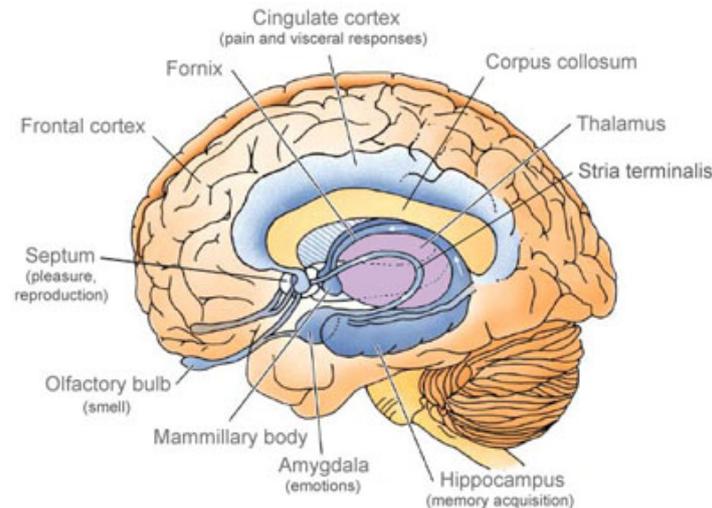
Surprisingly, at this stage of development teens lose many of the empathy skills they developed during pre-adolescence, and therefore find it difficult, if not impossible, to put themselves in other people's shoes.

But the most problematic characteristic of early adolescence, and the trait that has the most far-reaching consequences, is a teen's inability to self-soothe or calm themselves when they are feeling angry, sad, confused or upset.

Brain changes:

The neural constellations of teenagers are changing from 'analogue' to 'quantum' computers and they sometimes find it very difficult to think as a result. Adolescent brains are busy building and destroying connections between structures that deal with 'knowing' and parts of the brain that deal with 'feeling' or 'sensing', and this eventually alters the way older adolescents function.

Their limbic systems (areas of the brain that process emotions) are naturally hyperactive during this stage and their day to day experiences can easily trigger cascades of enormous feelings that overwhelm their logical processes. (See figure below)



They are also entering puberty, a stage of development which results in enormous hormonal fluctuations. These hormones not only trigger rapid body growth but effect the nature of all thinking and feeling processes.

Cultural considerations:

Gender rules can be very rigid in young teenagers which contributes to them being much more conservative than they want to be. Cultural rules that shape stereotypical 'boy' and 'girl' identities are strongly internalised at this stage and this results in very strong gender specific actions and beliefs. It is arguable that biology has considerable influence on the extremes of behaviour at this stage of development, but no one really knows what directs this stereotypical behaviour.

The media have an enormous influence on the daily rhythms and self-esteem of teenagers, and provide them with opportunities for precocious adult experiences. Sex, drugs, and Rock- n-Roll are everywhere.

Insidious consumerism has influenced this present generation to an enormous extent and, as a result, they are efficient consumers who judge their own worth by how much stuff they own.

Technology has changed life immeasurably, for good and for bad, and parents struggle with knowing whether to support or limit their child's tech exposure.

The world is getting more competitive. While moderate levels of competitive verve can focus and motivate a teen, excessive competition creates unbearable pressure.

The need for teens to learn sophisticated organisational skills and to commit wholeheartedly to their academic studies can overwhelm their more 'messy' needs to be

children who are 'works in progress' and not finished articles. Childhood includes many stages of development that are definitely not tidy!

Social development:

All teenagers want desperately to be 'grownups' and will break adult rules in an attempt to feel strong and self-directed. Of course, some of the rule breaking is also an angry reaction to adult laws that restrict, control or judge them.

On the one hand, they try to please parents/teachers and, on the other, they attempt to follow the sometimes subversive social rules of their peer group. These two worlds are inevitably at odds with each other and moving back and forth between them is extremely difficult for a young person to manage.

Socially, teens only have eyes for each other. They are highly critical themselves and one other but are also highly sensitive to, and swayed by, the opinions of their friends. In this social world, parents and teachers hardly count... at all. Teens are egocentric and close minded. They do not evaluate themselves realistically or see themselves as they see everyone else. They are unaware of their own double standards and can easily criticise someone else for the very things they do or think.

Teens are 'emotion junkies' and love a good drama, especially if it doesn't include them as the main protagonist. Gossip is wonderful and rumors spread quickly.

They are hard-wired to be impulsive, but they are also enormously flexible and enthusiastic (and teachable?). They take big risks, but also learn everything at an accelerated rate.

Teens find it hard to maintain consistent relationships because they have very few mature relationship skills to rely on as they are exploring more adult forms of physical and emotional attachment. Psychologists call this 'psychosocial dynamism', and it is one of the defining characteristics of early adolescence.

Most of all, they are black and white about everything. They find it very hard to tolerate any form of ambivalence (opposite feelings) in themselves and they think in concrete ways instead of using abstract concepts. This 'concrete cognition' is one of the core traits of this stage. At any one moment in time, they either love or hate with all of their hearts and have strong opinions based on little information. But they also change their minds regularly!

Family life:

Teenagers need to break away from close family ties and assert themselves as independent agents in the world, but this is often at odds with their parents' natural need to keep them close and safe, and to control their lives for as long as possible. Our world is becoming generally a less secure place for both young people and their parents. The lack of clear social rules that point to what is acceptable and what is not, the petrification of the job market, rampant individualism, the proliferation of technology and changing ideas around sexuality all contribute to making a young person's emotional and relational life

much harder than in years past. Inevitably, these changing social mores also take their toll on family relationships.

Parents are generally more fearful for their children than in the past, and life to a teenager can seem much more serious, even dangerous, as a result. 'Helicopter parents' who over-control their child's life and who value performance above personal development and happiness are becoming very familiar to teachers. The parental fears that fuel this behavior are a result of the belief that academic success is individually and directly determined by parental investment. This has dire consequences for a child, who can often feel enormously pressured and unsupported in the rest of their personal development. Sometimes, children are not allowed to fail, which denies them the experience of learning from their mistakes and makes it more difficult to feel their own internally motivating impulses.

Many parents are themselves insecure about their parenting skills and are quick to react to perceived criticism. They tend to catastrophize their child's problems and seek immediate solutions to what are often unsolvable human dilemmas, particularly if their children are not natural 'high flyers'. Many parents have suffered their own emotional trials in childhood but believe their present wealth, power, or career status is evidence that they have found the one and only path to success, if only their child would follow them.

And any serious parental mental health problems, or significant problems with siblings, can also add considerably to the emotional turmoil of teenagers. Teens pick up so much of what is happening under the surface in their family systems, even when things are hidden. Family secrets are incredibly powerful destabilisers of emotions and have consequences within and between many generations of family members.

The school environment

Everything just mentioned about family life can be said again about the school environment. The underlying values and goals of school administrators and teachers also have a profound effect on teens. The way the school day is structured, the activities that are rewarded or punished and the relationships that teens build with significant adults are all enormously influential in shaping a teenager's sense of identity and safety. Schools generally reflect the predominant values of our society at any one time in history and therefore are powerful socialisation tools for the prevailing social constructs of our time.

Teens are full of big feelings which they can't process.

Their emotional systems are overwhelmed easily and this can result in chronic anxiety states (phobias and panic attacks) and depression. Most psychological experts agree that the level of anxiety in the adolescent population is increasing radically and, although it is not a popular thought among adults who are charged with their safety and education, teens as a group are showing signs of great emotional distress.

The following activities are used by teens to soothe these feelings, even though they sometimes look like self-destructive behavior to adults:

Internal soothers:

These are brain and body processes by which teens can calm themselves. They include self talk, mental imagery and meditative techniques that slow down neural messages between different areas of the brain as well as body relaxation techniques. Most teens cannot achieve these forms of soothing on their own. They need others to guide them and practice with them. Eventually, as their bodies mature and they have good experiences in life, especially if they have been actively nurtured in these capacities, they are able to develop their own internal methods for calming their emotions and focusing their minds to process available emotional and body information.

Unfortunately, while they are learning these healthy strategies, they also inevitably practice some more destructive ones:

Psychological 'Projection':

Teenagers are experts at dumping their feelings into others, particularly their parents. As well as being a very effective way of communicating their distress to their parents, it is an easy way to get rid of those problem feelings. If they can force an 'other' to feel exactly like they do, they are able to feel better and can get on with life. Teens who are capable of temporarily holding on to their feelings, or containing them, often choose one specific person to pass the feelings to. This person becomes a scapegoat for the teen's unwanted and unprocessed feelings. (We all do this to a certain extent, but teens are absolute experts.) This mechanism is the basis of a lot of bullying, of their rapid chopping and changing of friendships and of difficult relationships with parents. It pretty much causes havoc.

External soothers:

These are substances or activities that soothe teens from outside, rather than being internal psychological reactions that soothe from within. Again, we all use these substances or activities, but because teens have so few internal strategies, they are very needy of these external soothers and don't have many alternatives. It is easy to see how, if effective psychological strategies are not developed, teens are in danger of becoming addicted to external soothers.

Here are a few (but not all) typical external soothers:

Food:

Foods are experienced in a very 'primal' way in that they affect the deepest pleasure centres of the brain. Feeding of any kind, no matter how nutritious, also revisits our earliest feelings of sensual pleasure at being provided for and soothed by our primary caretakers throughout our infancy and young life. Add to this the actual addictive nature of substances like sugar, fat, salt, or caffeine and you have a potent mix of emotional and physical soothers that are very hard for a teen to resist. Healthy diets (and not so healthy diets) are promoted everywhere, but teens naturally gravitate to the foods that most affect their pleasure centers.

Television:

TV is an entirely passive experience and it is this part of the experience that feels soothing. TV is done to us. Most people turn off their critical faculties when they watch, and are swept along on whichever wave the actors throw at them. Some waves are positive and portray healthy, funny or loving relationships, but often the events depicted on TV are

negative, exposing teens to precociously adult themes and rigid behavioural, gender or body norms.

Teens say they can turn off when slumped in front of the glowing box, but research says they are anything but relaxed and they are definitely not 'off'. TV is experienced by the brain as real. It gives them a good emotional workout and, as teens are particularly good 'emotion junkies', they inevitably want more.

Music (usually loud and emotional):

Music is experienced in our core emotional centres of the brain without being evaluated by higher cognitive processes. It has a direct link to our pleasure centres and affects us all deeply. Teens use music to regulate their emotions and to express themselves. It is a brilliant self-soother and they can become very reliant on it.

Sports and exercise:

There are many reasons why exercise is soothing. Physical activity uses up nervous energy and wears us out while also giving us longterm strength and stamina. Physical exercise also induces our bodies to produce endorphins which give us a natural high, and it is this experience that can become addictive. Some teens naturally love moving their bodies and seek out sports of any kind. The positive benefits of this form of soothing are self evident and to be encouraged. Only occasionally do some teens become overly reliant on exercise, particularly when it is in combination with low calorie diets. (See 'Eating disorders').

Returning to activities of childhood:

It can be distressing for parents and teachers to witness a return to childhood in a teen. We worry that the adult abilities we have worked so hard to teach them are being somehow lost. A return to thumb sucking, teddy bears or the like are signs that all is not well and some extra soothing is required.

Most people regress to an earlier stage of development when under stress. This is a natural attempt to recreate some earlier forms of soothing and, most often, the experience is transient and is an effective way of dealing with life's many woes. Occasionally, regressive behaviours are used by a teen to arrest their own psychological or physical development, and this is a sign that they are experiencing extreme stress. If the behavior persists, they may need professional psychological help.

Video games:

Sometimes video games soothe and sometimes they make matters worse for any teen who loves blowing up a few aliens at the end of a hard day. Although the games can help a teen to take out their frustrations on the virtual characters, this only works if they win! Games manufacturers are experts at developing games that only allow victory once in a while, but this is just enough to keep a teenager hooked on the experience. There are even gaming systems being developed that will sense when a player is becoming too frustrated and will lower the level of skill needed to win.

Research has established without a doubt that, in playing computer games, teen brains are experiencing the events as real. These games hone their strategic abilities but they also shamelessly manipulate their emotions. Even though most computer games are found to increase anxiety dramatically, the 'flow' state of consciousness teens feel when

hyper-focused, and the adrenalin and cortisol which flush through their bodies as a result, are often experienced as soothing.

Drugs and alcohol:

For many thousands of years, we humans have developed a myriad of ways to alter our consciousness, and we will inevitably continue to develop new ways in the future. Drugs and alcohol (admittedly also a drug) are wonderful substances for regulating both our emotions and energy levels. They are fantastic methods of self soothing. They are easy to use and, even more important, they can be obtained almost everywhere. Teenagers see us doing them, and they want in.

Developing brains are hyper-sensitive to the effects of these substances and teen brains change in the presence of even small amounts. Although with occasional use, the effects are usually short-term and minimal, the potential for long-term damage is increased with the strength and purity of the substance, the frequency of use, individual sensitivity thresholds, and the physically addictive nature of the substance. Peer pressure, the need to take risks and the need to approximate adult behavior all add to a teen's temptation to use these powerful forms of soothing.

Excessive risk taking and adrenaline rushes:

As with computer games, adrenaline is a self soother. Teenage brains tend to love adrenalin and many risks they take are developmentally normal for adolescence. One could argue that teens actually need the ability to take risks in order to propel themselves out into the adult world.

Sex:

Sex is another one of those 'primal' activities that is experienced in the core pleasure centres in our brains.

During adolescence, teens are compelled to pair off with each other. It is easy to see how having a special love is soothing when it includes close emotional ties and physical cuddling, particularly as adolescent needs for autonomy increase family tensions. The excitement of sexual exploration is something we can all remember. Our present norms for sexual behavior are ambivalent and confusing, but the experience of sexual climax and post coital bliss are hard to resist for teens, once they have known them. A powerful soother.

Eating disorders:

Eating disorders of all kinds are an attempt to control and deny problematic feelings. There are different types of eating disorders and they all look unrelated initially, but they have in common the obsessive use or denial of food as an intensely soothing activity. The main types of eating disorders are Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating. They are usually very difficult to treat and usually involve intensive individual and family therapy. Whereas many teens experiment with controlling their food as a way of dieting, this can easily escalate into more serious forms of eating disorders. It doesn't help that our world gives teens very mixed messages about food that make it very difficult for them to feel good about their natural hunger or their bodies. This in turn means they need more soothing, they 'use' food even more, and the cycle escalates.

Rituals (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder):

Extreme order can seem absolutely necessary when life seems too chaotic and a teen can't cope. Under some circumstances, repetitive behaviors (rituals) and obsessive thoughts (obsessions) are experienced as soothing. Whereas most of us aspire to being somewhat organised and we may have our daily routines, individuals who rely on the soothing nature of rituals can become trapped in a rigid cycle of required behavior and can feel out of control when not allowed to complete them. Rituals become a problem when they get in the way of living life freely and creatively. If they start to seriously limit normal daily activity, or demand much more time than is easily achievable, what was initially meant to soothe then becomes a terrible burden.

Deliberate self-harm:

Self harm is a psychological defence against depression, anger and anxiety. It is an attempt to either **calm** an individual when life becomes too chaotic to process (a feeling of being overwhelmed), or an attempt by a person to **enliven** him or herself when feeling dead or shut down inside (also a result of being overwhelmed). It is also a method of acting out rage that cannot be directed at it's real source. If it is somehow dangerous to have a go at a parent or friend, a teens will often act against themselves to relieve the painful emotion.

When a teen's self-harm is discovered, it is tempting to get angry and require that they stop their deliberately destructive behavior, but this is, unfortunately, very unproductive. Instead, a teen must be helped to understand why they are using self-harm and must explore other more productive ways of self soothing. To a teen, self-harm is the 'solution', not the 'problem', and understanding is crucial. If the self-harm is taken away before other coping strategies are in place, the teen is in danger of descending into deep depression or anxiety states.

Helping a teen to feel better about themselves and cope better with life can take a long time and usually requires the help of a therapist or someone who is familiar with the underlying psychology of self-harm. Unfortunately, self harm is being used by teens considerably more often in recent years and is a sign that their stress levels are rising. It is unfortunate that teens sometimes teach each other to self harm as a way of helping each other cope and, although this may seem a horrible skill to pass on, they do it because it works.

What can parents do to help?

Be aware of the tumult that young teenagers are experiencing and be sympathetic, whenever possible. They definitely need your help.

Be aware of their natural loss of empathy skills and use every opportunity to spell things out to them about the feelings and needs of others. If circumstances allow, get them to focus on serving others through working with younger children or older people. Any effort to counter their naturally egocentric and selfish self focus will help to put their wider lives in perspective.

Create a realistic set of core rules for behavior according to what is most important to you as a person and work with your school as a community so teens can see, as clearly as possible, what is expected of them (and you will know what is expected of you). Defend these rules, or boundaries, in a consistent, non-emotional and nonjudgmental way. It is very important not to get caught up in the minutia and that you carry out any discipline kindly but firmly. Teens must come to understand that boundaries, and the discipline that results if they break boundaries, is not revenge or punishment, but just a way of life.

Don't embarrass them! Know when to speak to them about their lives and when to stay quiet. A careless word or comment can shame them and destroy any further chance to approach or help them. Teens don't forgive easily and they sometimes won't give you a second chance.

Give the kids your realistic (but tactful) assessment of their abilities and achievements. Although they need encouragement, support and direction, they ultimately need to find their own internal motivation to achieve. Their core self-esteem depends on your truthfulness. They need to know where they stand.

Be aware of giving mixed messages to your child in differing circumstances and what this tells you about your own goals and values. Changing the rules that contain a young person's behavior is normal and necessary in certain situations, but mixed messages can be confusing for a teen who wants concrete and unchanging rules. Recognise when you do it and explain to your child the subtle differences.

Examples:

"You can't do that because you're only 13 years old."(when you want to protect)

"Come on...You're 13 years old! You should do this yourself." (When you want him/her to be independent)

Example:

"I don't want you to feel stressed about your schoolwork. I only want you to be happy in life."

"Why didn't you get a better grade on this test? If you don't buckle down and get good grades, you won't get into a good university and you won't get a good job."

What you say to your child may not be what they actually hear. Young people have great difficulty in making sense of life in all its fullness. There can be big gaps in their understanding, even with relatively simple concepts, and they sometimes fill in these gaps with spectacularly erroneous beliefs. They **act** like they understand, but make sure to check regularly with them. Ask them what they know, don't just tell them things.

Be open to your own emotional or relational dilemmas and the things that push your buttons about dealing with your child. If you know what your own sore spots are, you are better placed to keep things in perspective yourself. Use your spouse or friend as a sounding board, and speak to a school counselor (Luchy Harrold) or psychotherapy professional if you need to.

Help teens with the little trials and tribulations of adolescent life but, if things look serious, refer them for professional help. Even if you are not sure, find someone who can give you a second opinion. There is no downside. Every teen can use an opportunity to talk with someone who understands their special psychological needs, even if it is just for a few minutes. Helping a teen to learn to talk about their feelings and overcome their problems

can save a lifetime of pain, and skills learned now can have a huge effect on all their future development.

Recommended further reading:

Clark, C. (2004) *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Daniel, B., and Wassell, S. (2002) *Adolescence: Assessing and Promoting Resilience in Vulnerable Children 3*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Faber, A., and Mazlish, E. (2006) *How To Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk*, London: Piccadilly.

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Levine, M. (2006) *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, New York: HarperCollins.

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Other books by Nick Luxmore:

Feeling Like Crap: Young People and the Meaning of Self-Esteem

Working With Anger and Young People

Listening to Young People in School, Youth Work and Counselling

Perry, a. (Ed.) (2009) *Teenagers and Attachment: Helping Adolescents Engage with Life and Learning*, London: Worth Publishing.

Pipher, M. (1994) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, New York: Riverhead Books.

Twenge, J. M. (2006) *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled... And More Miserable Than Ever Before*, New York: Free Press.

Wiseman, R. (2002) *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, London: Piatkus Books.