Adolescence

A period of physical and psychological development beginning at 11 to 13 years of age and extending into the early twenties. Changes in build and body structure are prominent during this period. Initiated by a short period of puberty, it continues for many years after the arrival of sexual maturity. (jw)

Summary Article: Adolescence
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Historically, adolescent development has been described as tumultuous, which is sometimes attributed to increased emotions and an undeveloped prefrontal cortex. Research has shown that adolescence is not characterized by the degree of ‘storm and stress’ that was once believed. Nonetheless, adolescence is a period in which there is a tremendous amount of growth and change in adolescents. The purpose of this article is to provide an accurate account of adolescent development. This article will review the primary changes that occur within an adolescent as well as the contextual factors that influence and facilitate those changes.

Primary Changes in Adolescence

During adolescence, youth experience a multitude of changes. These changes affect their physical appearance, cognitive development, and emotional development. Moreover, they not only affect the individual, but also the relationships and networks built with others. The first part of this article examines the primary changes that take place in adolescence, and the possible effects of those changes. It is important to note that although these changes apply to all adolescents, the rate and
pattern of changes varies between individuals.

**Biological Foundations**

The transition from childhood to adolescence is clearly identified by the biological changes occurring on the inside and outside of a child's body. These hormonal and bodily changes make up the developmental stage called puberty, which typically occurs during early adolescence. The onset of puberty is predominantly determined by genetic patterns, but can also be affected by environmental factors. Historically, the onset of puberty has been known to begin between 9 and 16 years of age. Most commonly, puberty begins at age 11 for females and at age 12 for males. The onset of puberty has decreased markedly over the past decades but has recently leveled off.

Puberty is characterized by a fluctuation in hormones, which are chemicals secreted by the endocrine glands. The endocrine system controls the hormonal changes associated with puberty using a negative feedback system. When hormonal levels fall too low, the endocrine system reacts to the low level of hormones by causing the release of more hormones into the bloodstream. Specifically, the hypothalamus, located in the brain, responds to the decreased level of hormones in the blood system by releasing substances that stimulate the pituitary gland, which is also located in the brain. The pituitary gland then stimulates the gonads (the ovaries in females and the testes in males) to release more sex hormones. When the level of sex hormones falls too low, the hypothalamus and pituitary gland stop stimulating the gonads and they stop producing sex hormones. With the onset of puberty, the levels of sex hormones in the body increase substantially. At puberty, the hypothalamus becomes desensitized to sex hormones and requires a significantly higher level of hormones in the body before the hypothalamus and pituitary gland stop stimulating the gonads to release more hormones.

There are two types of hormones that are known to affect puberty differently in males and females: androgens and estrogens. Androgens are male sex hormones and estrogens are female sex hormones. Testosterone, an androgen, plays a major role in male pubertal development; while, estradiol, an estrogen, plays a major role in female pubertal development. Nonetheless, both males and females have androgens and estrogens.

Weight, body fat, and a hormone called leptin are correlated with the onset of puberty. Higher weight and a higher percentage of body fat have been linked to early pubertal development, especially in females. Adolescents living in developing countries without enough food for adequate nutrition begin puberty earlier than adolescents in developed nations. Leptin is also thought to signal the beginning and the progression of puberty. Levels of leptin, which are higher in females than males, are linked to the amount of body fat in females and the amount of the hormone androgen in males. An increase in leptin is thought to signal an adequate amount of body fat for reproduction.

There are some sociocultural and environmental factors that have been linked to the onset of puberty. Researchers have found that cultural differences and early experiences may be correlated with the early onset of puberty. Empirical findings suggest that the absence of a father, geographic distance between family members, child mistreatment, and low socioeconomic status (SES) have also been linked to early onset of puberty.

**Cognitive Development**

The transition from childhood to adolescence is also marked by changes in cognitive development. There are distinct structural changes in the brain that occur during adolescence. These changes are
seen in the corpus callosum, prefrontal cortex, and amygdala. The corpus callosum connects the right and left hemispheres. During adolescence, the corpus callosum thickens, which improves the adolescent’s ability to process information. An adolescent’s prefrontal cortex, which houses reasoning, decision-making ability, and self-control, continues to develop during adolescence. Responsible for emotion regulation, the amygdala matures earlier than the prefrontal cortex. Empirical evidence has shown that although adolescents experience a vast array of emotions, the prefrontal cortex continues to develop well into adulthood; therefore, adolescents may not have as much control over their emotions as they will when their prefrontal cortex is fully mature.

In the past, researchers thought that brain cells could not be generated after early childhood, but recent research has discovered that people produce new brain cells throughout their lives. Factors such as exercise can aid the brain in producing new cells. The adolescent brain also has some plasticity. In childhood as well as adolescence, the brain is able to repair itself. However, the earlier a brain injury occurs, the more likely that recovery will be successful.

Several theories have been used to explain brain development from childhood through adolescence. One of the most prominent theories, articulated and investigated by Jean Piaget, proposed that adolescents work to understand their world because the making of meaning is hardwired and serves a biological purpose. Adolescents construct their world using schemas, defined as mental concepts or frameworks that help organize and understand information. Adolescents use assimilation (incorporation of new information) and accommodation (the adjustment to new information) to organize their schemas.

Piaget articulated four stages that describe cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. The formal operation stage is typically reached during adolescence. This stage consists of reasoning in abstract, idealistic, and logical ways and is characterized by the development of problem-solving skills and formation of hypotheses.

Lev Vygotsky introduced a theory that views knowledge as situated and collaborative. Specifically, Vygotsky believed that knowledge is distributed among people and their environments and knowledge can best be attained through interaction with others through cooperative activities. Vygotsky emphasized the social contexts of learning. One of his most important concepts is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD describes a range of tasks that require assistance from adults or mature peers.

In later years, other theories were developed that spoke of the use of information processing and psychometric testing to assess adolescents’ cognitive development. However, Piaget and Vygotsky’s theories are still commonly used to explain adolescent cognitive development. All of these views take into account the genetic as well as the environmental influence on adolescent cognitive development.

Identity
As puberty occurs and cognitive processes are developing, adolescents are also forming a sense of self. An adolescent's sense of self consists of his or her identity. Identity incorporates self-understanding, self-esteem, and self-concept. Self-understanding is an individual's cognitive representation of the self. The development of an adolescent's self-understanding is complex and can be affected by many internal and external factors. Adolescents, unlike children, describe themselves within various contexts. Research on adolescence has shown that an adolescent's sense of self can

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fluctuate. This sense of self can also be contradictory, because of the multiple roles adolescents play in different relationship contexts. One explanation for this contradiction can be found in the real versus ideal theory. This theory states that adolescents have an ideal or imagined self and this ideal view of themselves contradict their actual view of themselves. Some theorists believe that this contradiction is maladaptive, while other theorists believe that this contradiction can provide motivation and drive toward future goals.

Adolescents, unlike children, often compare themselves to their peers, are more self-conscious, and more preoccupied with their self-understanding. Even though most adolescents employ introspection, they also look to their friends and other peers for self-clarification and self-definitions. In Eastern countries, adolescents may also tend to look to family members to aid with this process as their cultural norms place a high value on family relationships and social categories. This search for self-clarification and self-definition can affect the adolescent's self-esteem and self-concept. There is evidence to suggest that adolescents have a lowered sense of self-esteem when compared to children, and this decline usually occurs in middle school. Male adolescents usually report higher self-esteem than female adolescents, but this gender-gap typically decreases as adolescents move into adulthood.

Erik Erikson proposed a theory of human development that consists of eight stages. Most adolescents, he believed, fall within his fifth stage: identify versus identity confusion. Erikson proposed that during this stage, adolescents have to decide their identity, their goals and causes, and the direction of their life. Erikson believed that adolescents experiment with many different roles and identities while they are trying to ‘find themselves’. He labeled this exploratory period as a moratorium period. If adolescents use adaptive methods to explore their identity, they will achieve identity formation. If adolescents use maladaptive methods to explore their identity or they do not explore their identity at all, they will experience identity confusion.

James Marcia empirically investigated Erikson's ideas and identified four statuses, which help to simplify Erikson's theory. The four statuses, identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement, capture the adolescents’ exploration of alternatives and commitments toward a direction in life. This construct of identity is biased toward the Western, masculine ideals of individualism, as opposed to relatedness. Adolescents from Western countries may conceptualize identity achievement as a self-directed objective in which individualization and independence is highly valued. However, adolescents from Eastern countries may conceptualize identity achievement as more relational and interdependent. Some research has shown that individual characteristics are valued in Eastern countries; however, these characteristics tend to be more collectivistic in nature and place higher values on attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interactions.

Although different cultures place differing values on an individual’s characteristics, the function of self-definition in regard to identity development can be seen across cultures. Recent views of identity development propose that it is a gradual process that continues into adulthood. It is important to study adolescent identity development because during adolescence, youth begin to integrate the physical, cognitive, and emotional development, forming a better understanding of their sense of self.

Moral Development
Moral development can be defined as thoughts, behaviors, and feelings regarding standards of right and wrong. There have been numerous theories of adolescent moral development, but one of the most influential theories was created by Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg's theory of moral development
emphasizes adolescents’ reasoning about moral issues. He proposed that the way in which an individual reasons changes throughout life and his model includes six sequential stages of moral development. Kohlberg studied the moral reasoning of fifty males over the course of 20 years and there was clear evidence that each participant followed the same developmental sequence through the stages of moral development. His participants did not skip any of the developmental stages and there was no regression. Empirical evidence also suggests that the stages are culturally universal, especially the first four stages. This research also suggests that the rate of development and the final stages that people achieve vary between individuals and groups.

Kohlberg’s model consists of three levels of reasoning about moral issues: preconventional reasoning, conventional reasoning, and postconventional reasoning. Within each level are two stages. In the preconventional reasoning level, moral reasoning is controlled by external, concrete consequences. People functioning at this level of development make moral decisions based on whether they will be rewarded or punished by their decisions. Youth, in the beginning stages of adolescence, are usually at this preconventional level of reasoning. In the conventional reasoning level, moral reasoning is controlled by internal and external factors. Moral decisions at the conventional level are based on conforming to and upholding the rules, expectations, laws, and conventions of society. Most adolescents are said to be at this level of reasoning. The third level of reasoning, postconventional reasoning, is thought to be achieved at or after the age of 20. This level is characterized by moral principles that are internalized. Moral decisions at the postconventional level are based on understanding society's rules, then formulating and internalizing a personal moral code that emphasizes principles of justice: individual rights, equality, and human dignity and a concern for the welfare of the larger community.

Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg’s orientation toward justice represents a male perspective that is more commonly found in Western cultures. Gilligan proposed that moral development is built on a concept of care. This type of morality focuses on responsibility to others, values relationships, and seeks to help. The concept of care also emphasizes sensitivity to social context, whereas justice emphasizes the application of rules and principles. Gilligan believes that conceptualizations of morality as care based represents a more female perspective, as well as the perspectives of societies that value collectivism.

Other theories of moral development emphasize moral behavior instead of moral reasoning. The social cognitive theory of moral development assesses the difference between the adolescent’s ability to produce moral behavior (moral competence) and his or her ability to implement moral behaviors in specific situations (moral performance). Social cognitive theorists believe that the adolescent’s moral performance is not guided by abstract thinking, but by rewards, punishments, and motivation.

Behaviorists also emphasize moral behavior. These theorists use imitation, rewards, and punishment to explain why adolescents display different moral behaviors. When adolescents are positively reinforced (rewarded) for a behavior that is considered moral, they are more likely to repeat that behavior. When adolescents are punished for a morally unacceptable behavior, they are more likely to decrease that behavior. There are other factors and situations that mediate these processes. Empirical research has found that adolescents will not display the same moral behavior when put in diverse social settings. For example, an adolescent is more likely to cheat if being pressured by a peer. Even though other factors may affect the outcome, overall adolescent moral behavior can be predicted by reinforcement.

Moral development, like so many other areas, does not begin in adolescence and will not end in
adolescence. It is important to study moral development during adolescence because cognition, identity, and other parts of the adolescent are actively developing during this stage as well. Adolescence is an important developmental stage because there are so many internal and external influences that are at work during this period of life.

**Contextual Areas of Interest Regarding Adolescent Development**

Adolescent development can be affected by numerous contextual factors. The context in which an adolescent grows up, the experiences they face, and the situations they encounter will frame their development as they approach adulthood. Because adolescents will experience different contextual factors under different situations, it is important that each of these factors be explored. The remainder of this article highlights contextual factors regarding family, peers, romantic relationships, school, work, and cultural concerns.

**Family**

One of the most important contextual factors that can affect adolescent development is family dynamics. Research has shown that parents have a significant effect on the ways in which adolescents develop. Previously, adolescent relationships with parents were conceptualized as tumultuous and generally full of conflict. However, research over the past several decades has revealed that relationships are more positive and less tumultuous than previously considered. Although adolescence is a time of self-exploration and emerging autonomy, parents who respond in an understanding manner to the changes adolescents face generally experience less turmoil in the home. In addition, parents who expect that adolescence will be a tumultuous experience are more likely to have adolescents who experience more conflictual family relationships. The guidance provided by parents during this time period is crucial in helping the adolescent transition into becoming a responsible adult. Parents aid in this transition by helping the adolescent form his/her own moral standards, in addition to supporting, encouraging, and providing learning opportunities for them.

**Parenting styles**

Different parenting styles may be an important contextual factor in terms of adolescent development. Parenting styles have been conceptualized into four different categories (authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent/permissive, neglectful) that range on levels of responsiveness and control. Authoritarian parents tend to take a more unresponsive, or parent-centered role, and are generally demanding while exerting a high level of control over their children. Their adolescent children tend to be dependent, submissive, and overly conforming in the presence of their parents and other authorities. However, when out of the presence of authorities, these adolescents tend to be rebellious, defiant, hostile, and resentful. In contrast to authoritarian parents, indulgent/permissive parents tend to take a more responsive, or child-centered role, and are generally undemanding while exerting a very low level of control over their children. Adolescent children of indulgent/permission parents tend to lack self-regulation skills, and often disregard rules and regulations. Because they are used to getting their way, they generally are not as socially adept as other adolescents. Neglectful parents are generally unresponsive to their children, while also being undemanding and showing little control. Adolescents who grow up in these families tend to suffer the most as they may get into a lot of trouble and engage in more risky behavior. These adolescents also tend to be self-rejecting and may feel inferior to others. In contrast to neglectful parents, authoritative parents are responsive, accepting, and child-centered,
while also setting clear limits for their children. This authoritative parenting style has been found to be associated with more positive adolescent developmental outcomes. Adolescents from these families tend to be more socially and academically competent. They also exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and demonstrate more person control than other adolescents. It is important to note that these parenting styles are not always completely independent of one another. Parents may mesh different styles together and/or use different styles with different children. Interestingly, even within the same family unit, parents may be utilizing completely different parenting styles. For example, an indulgent/permissive mother, paired with an authoritarian father, may cause an adolescent to experience a great deal of uncertainty and confusion.

**Attachment styles**

During adolescence, early attachment styles begin to shift in accompaniment to adolescents’ need for autonomy. Although, it is normal for adolescents to feel a desire to remain close to their parents, their emerging adolescent attachment style does not require as much dependency on their caretaker. However, having a secure base in which to return is key as adolescents make the journey toward becoming more autonomous, or independent. Early attachment theorists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth put forth that developing a secure attachment to caregivers as an infant serves as a foundation that adolescents use for healthy psychological development. The development of a secure attachment allows children to feel safe while exploring their environment. Insecurely attached adolescents avoid or distance themselves from their parents, show an unusual amount of fear toward their parents, or show ambivalence or resistance toward their parents. However, it is important to note that normal adolescent attachment functioning can falsely resemble this insecure attachment style (which has developed from infancy and early childhood). Adolescent attachment theorists highlight that adolescence is a period in which attachment styles transform from hierarchical parent–child attachments to codependent peer–peer attachments (in which both persons offer and receive support). In adolescence, with the goal of autonomy and self-other differentiation in mind, attachments with peers become a main focus. Even under distressing situations, adolescents may purposefully resist seeking comfort from parents as they are striving for autonomy. This purposeful distancing may be experienced as uncomfortable by both parents and adolescents at times and represents a transforming shift in attachment style from infancy and early childhood. Because adolescents are in a transition period, this shift in attachment needs can be conflicting and confusing. As adolescents distance themselves from adult caregivers, they are able to explore more of their emotional interior and problem-solving techniques on their own. Knowing that adult attachment figures are readily available when necessary helps facilitate this process. Early attachment styles and adolescent attachment experiences with peers can color the way in which adolescents experience the world around them and typically guide adolescents’ expectations regarding future relationships with other people. Adolescents who developed a secure attachment to their parents from early childhood show more self-confidence, have better peer and romantic relationships, and are less likely to engage in behavior problems such as juvenile delinquency and drug abuse compared with insecurely attached adolescents.

**Siblings and birth order**

Having siblings can greatly impact the development and experiences of an adolescent. In American households, about 80% of adolescents have siblings. Research has shown that siblings are often utilized as a source of support for adolescents. Communication between siblings usually occurs more naturally, and the exchange of information is more direct than with parents. Adolescents may confide in a sibling.
in order to discuss difficult or taboo topics, relying on the experience and/or opinions of a sibling. However, although siblings may serve as sources of support for each other, sibling conflict is not uncommon. Chronic conflict among siblings can have a negative effect on adolescent development, especially when the parent's relationship with the adolescent is also tumultuous. Studies have found that depression among adolescents is higher when sibling conflict is reported at greater frequencies. Sibling conflict tends to be higher when parents treat siblings very differently and favor one sibling over another. Sibling conflict tends to decrease in adolescence compared with childhood probably because siblings spend less time together during adolescence than in childhood. As adolescents begin to emerge into adulthood, conflictual relationships with siblings tend to further decrease, and the intensity of tension between siblings may diminish.

Birth order has also been noted by many for its impact on adolescent development. Although there is some inconsistency in the findings regarding the effects of birth order, a few trends are noteworthy. Typically, firstborns are held to a higher standard of social, academic, and professional accomplishments than their younger siblings. This is commonly felt and expressed by firstborns as a theme of their childhood and adolescent years. Conversely, lastborns tend to be perceived as the perpetual 'baby' of the family. Some siblings may complain about the lastborns' ability to become self-sufficient and independent, especially when parents are indulgent toward their lastborn. In general, middle children are characterized as being the negotiators of the family. Additionally, middle children are generally noted to have problems gaining equal attention from their parents; thus, they may engage in more problematic or attention-seeking behavior. These trends in birth order are not always representative of all families, and many exceptions can be found across siblings.

**Family structures: Divorce and stepfamilies**

With the divorce rate being over 50%, many adolescents are reared in single-family homes, blended homes, or other nontraditional living situations. One study estimated that nearly 40% of children born into intact families will eventually become children of divorced families. Divorce can disrupt the connection between adolescents and parents, causing a rift during key adolescent developmental phases in which parent connection is desirable. Most research regarding adolescent development in the context of divorce has shown negative outcomes for adolescents, especially when compared to adolescents from intact homes. Although most adolescents go through a difficult period, in which their functioning is impaired immediately after the divorce, most return to normal functioning after a brief period of disruption. The majority of adolescents from divorced families are functioning and developing normally after adjusting to the family transition. However, small subsets of adolescents continue to experience prolonged distress. Research suggests that high continued parental conflict following divorce is associated with poorer adolescent functioning.

**School**

Adolescents spend a very large percentage of time at school with teachers and peers. The type of school an adolescent attends, and the experiences he or she derives from that school will have an effect on their development and future transition into adulthood. Specifically, school size, teachers, and peers are factors that may contribute to an adolescent's school experience. Previously, educational psychologists focused heavily on classroom climate and how students fit with their classmates. Now, researchers study the social climate of the school, in addition to individual factors that may affect students. For example, smaller schools have been linked to increased amounts of prosocial behavior. Arguably, smaller classrooms also provide an environment that encourages a higher standard of teaching

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and learning. Many students may feel lost in the crowd at very large middle and high schools. This feeling may overwhelm many students, discouraging them from finding their niche, or becoming involved in activities. Isolated students may be left behind educationally and socially, which leaves these students more susceptible to joining antisocial peer groups or cliques.

Teachers not only serve as persons who provide formal education for adolescents, but many times these individuals also serve as additional role models and mentors for students. Their classroom management strategies help students learn time management skills and self-monitoring techniques, in addition to learning actual classroom material. Skilled teachers plan classroom activities in a manner that challenges students, and generally prevents academic and emotional problems. Adolescents who are in well-managed classrooms may show greater levels of autonomy, self-confidence, and academic achievement.

Peers make up a large amount of an adolescent’s school experience. While it is not uncommon for adolescents to occasionally report feeling ostracized at school, or feeling isolated, it is of concern if these negative experiences become common. Peers may engage in teasing or other antisocial behaviors, especially in larger schools with less monitoring capabilities. Bullying is the act of physically or emotionally hurting another peer, generally at school. A national survey showed that approximately one-third of adolescents were either being bullied, or were themselves bullies. The most common form of bullying is disparaging comments about looks or speech. Almost equal to that, adolescent girls report being the subject of sexual comments and gestures. The effects of bullying can be harsh for some adolescents. A few studies have found that common consequences of continued bullying involved depression, lack of interest in school, suicidal ideation, somatic complaints, and/or avoidance techniques. Research has also found that a large number of boys who bully others in middle school are likely to be convicted of a criminal offense in early adulthood.

Although school can be a negative experience for many adolescents, these experiences may be altered with individual attention and focus on academic and social competence. This is especially true for adolescents from lower SES backgrounds. Because these adolescents may have underlying barriers to academic achievement, additional tutoring and social integration is required. Some students may find school difficult due to learning difficulties, or problems with attention disorders. While larger schools tend to be less desirable due to subsequent large classroom and less individualized programs, some larger schools may be able to provide more resources to students with these types of learning difficulties. In addition to the formal education process, schools are an important contextual factor regarding adolescence because they provide a platform for career exploration, friendship development, and extracurricular activities.

Work

Most late adolescents have a part-time job in addition to attending school. Working can allow adolescents to develop professional skills, a strong work ethic, and can help with money management. The money earned from a part-time job also can also provide adolescents the freedom to purchase personal consumer items (e.g., trendy clothes, music, etc.). Depending on the place of employment, working may also serve as another source of social integration. Many adolescents work in establishments that also employ many of their peers. Thus, work may allow adolescents the opportunity to socialize with peers who are not in their network of friends.

Despite the fact that numerous benefits to working exist, several negative factors are also associated
with working. In general, for most adolescents, as the number of hours spent working increases, school grades suffer. This is especially true for adolescents working more than 20 h per week. Typically, adolescents who must balance school and work often must sacrifice one for another. A homework assignment may go unfinished in order to work a shift; or conversely, a work shift may be skipped in order to pull an all-nighter on a homework assignment. Although having a balance between work and school can be beneficial, it starts to become problematic when ongoing sacrifices must be made in either domain. Adolescents who work may not be able to participate in extracurricular activities or sports that require a large time commitment.

**Peer Relationships**

**Friendships**

Peer relationships, including close friends and romantic partners, are an extremely important contextual factor for adolescents. Different from childhood, adolescents spend a much greater amount of time interacting with their peers. One study found that adolescents were spending about 2 times as much time with their peers than their parents, even over weekends, outside of formal school time. Adolescents have the most contact with their peers during school hours; however, they also spend time with friends after school, and may develop friendships through church, work, or extracurricular activities.

Peers relationships serve numerous purposes for adolescents. A basic purpose of peer interaction is social integration. It is important for adolescents to feel wanted and included in social groups. Persons who are socially integrated show fewer psychological signs of distress, including depression. Peer relationships also provide a context for developing social skills. Adolescents learn how to interact with others by learning how to maintain their own friendships. Peer relationships allow adolescents to navigate through conflict management, listening, empathy, and intimacy skill building.

The importance of friendship can be summarized within six basic domains: companionship, stimulation, physical support, ego support, social comparison, and intimacy. The variety of these domains demonstrates the importance of close friendships for adolescents. Contributing more heavily to the developmental goals for adolescence, ego support, social comparison, and intimacy are particularly noteworthy. Friends provide reassurance, support, and encouragement during times of uncertainty for many adolescents. This ego support allows adolescents to maintain a reasonable level of self-esteem. Friends also provide a source of social comparison, such that adolescents can gauge themselves against friends. Adolescents engage in social comparisons for a variety of reasons, including identity development, and may be interested in how their academic achievement, body image, popularity, and romantic involvement compares to others. Lastly, adolescents are starting to develop intimate, close relationships with their peers. These intimate relationships allow adolescents the ability to explore self-disclosure and trust.

Because adolescent peer relationships serve so many important functions, it is also important to understand why many adolescents do not achieve close friendships. Sociometric status refers to the degree to which adolescents are liked or disliked by their peers. This concept is gauged by asking participants to rank order and nominate other peers for ‘most-liked’ and ‘least-liked’ roles. Five different categorizations of peers have been established: popular, rejected, and neglected. Popular individuals are often nominated as someone’s best friend, and typically do not receive many ‘least-liked’ votes. They tend to be good communicators, enthusiastic, confident, and happy. Their internal states

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and external behaviors both contribute to their ease in developing close friendships. Conversely, rejected individuals receive many ‘least-liked’ votes and few best friend votes and tend to be characterized as aggressive, arrogant, tactless, and annoying. Neglected adolescents do not receive either ‘best friend’ or ‘least-liked’ votes and tend to be overly timid, shy, or lacking in enthusiasm. Rejected adolescents tend to be lonelier than neglected adolescents and are more likely to develop psychological problems. As loneliness is a rather subjective experience, some research suggests that there are cultural differences regarding how isolation is experienced. However, adolescents do universally demonstrate a need for belonging and acceptance.

Groups, crowds, and cliques can develop as a means of inclusion, and exclusion, for many adolescents. Groups tend to form around a similar purpose, activity, or special interest. For example, athletic teams, religious groups, and clubs can all make up a group. These groups have social norms and roles that members follow in order to be included. Groups can infuse a sense of companionship, purpose, and accomplishment among adolescents. Group membership may provide a certain level of intrinsic satisfaction, in addition to extrinsic rewards for participation. Groups comprising different clubs, organizations, and teams are typically associated with positive psychosocial developmental outcomes.

Crowds are entities that tend to form based on reputation, and membership may be involuntary. These classifications make up terms such as the, ‘jocks,’ ‘goths,’ ‘preppies,’ etc. Adolescents may belong to a crowd based on the type of behaviors they engage in (e.g., ‘druggies’), their SES standing (e.g., ‘preppies’), or their level of social integration (e.g., ‘nobodies’). These large collections of individuals may not interact and/or socialize together, although smaller branches of friendships (groups or cliques) may develop within the crowd.

Cliques are smaller, more intimate, sets of friends that may have formed based on inclusion in a larger group or crowd. Cliques tend to involve no more than 12 people (typically about 5 or 6 people), and mostly comprise adolescents who attend school together. Both positive and negative outcomes can be associated with the development of cliques. Because of the in-group and out-group processes, some adolescents may feel socially isolated if they are not members of a social clique. Cliques may also encourage antisocial behavior, such as teasing, toward others who are not members of a particular clique. However, cliques do allow small groups of friends to become closer, which can serve as an additional support system for many adolescents.

Peer relations are also influenced by gender, SES, and culture. Adolescents tend to select friends who are similar to themselves in age, gender, SES, and ethnicity. Girls tend to focus more on interpersonal interactions within their friendship, striving to maintain high levels of intimacy and self-disclosure; while boys tend to focus more on activities, giving less attention to self-disclosure and intimacy. Adolescents from middle and upper SES groups tend to be more socially integrated and take more leadership roles within friend groups. Those from lower SES groups, or those from minority groups, may seek friendship among themselves. Groups and cliques that form based on minority or cultural status may serve as a source of social integration and to ward off isolation.

**Romantic relationships**

In addition to the development of more intimate and consistent bonds with peers for the purpose of developing friendship, adolescence is a time in which peers can also serve as possible romantic partners. It is not uncommon for adolescents to identify themselves as ‘dating,’ ‘having a boyfriend/girlfriend,’ or ‘going-out with someone.’ One study found that among 17-year-olds, ∼70%
reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship, or had been within the previous year and a half. Thirty-six percent of 13-year-olds, and 53% of 15-year-olds, also reported romantic relationships in that study. Comparisons across studies have been difficult due to differing language usage among researchers. For example, some studies may ask, ‘Are you in a serious relationship,’ while other studies may ask, ‘Are you involved romantically with another person?’ These questions may elicit different responses, thus making the empirical comparison of data difficult. Nevertheless, numerous studies have emphasized the importance of understanding the development of romantic relationships in adolescence.

Adolescent romantic relationships are characterized as having many different functions. In addition to courtship for the purposes of marriage, these relationships can also serve as a platform to further explore the socialization process. Dating may also assist with building intimacy, companionship, identity, and achievement. Further, adolescent romantic relationships provide an arena for sexual experimentation and sexual identity development. Adolescence is a time of exploration within numerous fields, and romantic relationships can aid in that exploration process.

Early adolescents (ages 10–13) tend to spend more time simply thinking about potential romantic interests rather than actually interacting with them. At this time, adolescents are still acquiring basic skills regarding how to interact with potential romantic partners. As they are exploring their initial attractions to romantic partners in general, they are also making social comparisons to their friends’ ‘progress’ in this dimension. Early adolescents who get involved early in dating and sexual relationships are at risk for problematic developmental pathways involving problems with alcohol, drugs, truancy, and educational underachievement. Middle (ages 14–17) and late (ages 18–21) adolescents tend to engage in more formal dating practices and sexual behaviors. Adolescents who begin dating later rather than earlier, and engage in sexual behaviors only in the context of dating relationships, are not more likely to show problematic behaviors than their nondating peers. Findings also have suggested that ‘light’ sexual behaviors (e.g., hugging, kissing, etc.) among adolescents are linked to more committed relationships and healthier relationships with parents. Heavy sexual behaviors (e.g., intercourse) were not linked to any higher levels of psychological distress or behavior problems in late adolescence. Late adolescents may engage in sexual behaviors as a sign of their commitment and intimacy.

Most research regarding adolescent romantic relationships and sexual behaviors focus on mixed-gender relationships. However, although many sexual minority adolescents in same-gender romantic relationships will undergo similar experiences, these adolescents may also experience more difficulties interpreting their feelings and behaviors within the context of societal norms and expectations. Research has shown that many individuals identify their first same-sex experience (i.e., attraction, behavior, self-labeling) during adolescence. Unfortunately, many sexual minorities risk experiencing verbal and physical abuse, which may encourage sexual minority adolescents to feel uncomfortable proclaiming their romantic and sexual orientations.

Culture and Social Trends

From a holistic perspective, the concept of culture encompasses any specific group’s way of thinking and being including their cultural norms, values, and beliefs that are passed on from one generation to the next. Not all individuals who associate with a particular culture will continuously identify with their group’s norms, values, and beliefs. It is not uncommon for individuals to question or reject certain aspects of their cultural background. These rejections, or cultural violations, may not be well received by

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others within their cultural group. However, individuals may develop a strong sense of ethnocentricity especially during adolescence. In other words, they may begin to favor their own cultural group over others.

**SES and ethnicity**

Historically and globally, two groupings that have been commonly used to establish culture are ethnicity and SES. Ethnicity is typically based on an individual's race, religion, heritage, and/or language. An individual's SES, or class, is typically based on an individual's economic, occupational, and/or educational status. Because adolescents often have similar occupational and educational statuses, their SES classification is based upon their parent’s status within these areas. Research has shown that an adolescent's ethnicity and SES may have an effect over their development. One study found that adolescents who come from impoverished families, and who reside in crime-ridden neighborhoods, are at greater risk for negative developmental outcomes, including higher levels of psychological distress and poor academic success. Additionally, research has also shown that parents from higher SES groups are less likely to utilize authoritarian parenting styles and physical punishment. Conversely, lower SES parents were found to utilize more directive parenting strategies and physical punishment.

The culture of SES can also affect an adolescent’s development by encouraging or discouraging self-efficacy and self-gratification. For example, parents from higher SES groups are more likely to encourage their children to explore, take initiatives, and delay gratification. Self-exploration and delayed gratification expectations are likely to encourage children to stay in school longer, and obtain higher paying jobs that value critical thinking skills, autonomy, and creativity. Conversely, parents from lower SES groups are more likely to be concerned with conformity and discipline. These trends within lower SES communities may stem from concerns regarding employment, safety, and a general ability to care for self and family. Additionally, persons from lower SES communities typically hold jobs in which autonomy and creativity are not valued. Therefore, the ability to conform and be disciplined is highly desirable. It is not uncommon for parents to pass these values and expectations, based out of SES backgrounds, onto their children. Notably, however, parents from lower SES groups who place a high value upon education are more likely to have children who achieve a high level of academic success, which can later provide higher paying careers.

In addition to SES, ethnicity also may play a significant role in adolescents’ lives. Because ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience poverty, many issues surrounding ethnicity tend to be confounding factors that overlap with SES issues. Ethnic minorities may be unjustly categorized as ‘inferior’ in educational or occupational realms as a result of their ethnic makeup. However, it has been commonly found that environmental and economic factors account for a large amount of ethnic minorities’ difficulties within these areas. Nevertheless, ethnicity within itself may also play a significant role in adolescents’ lives. Ethnic minority adolescents are often at risk for experiencing the effects of negative stereotypes and prejudice. These experiences, which may include unwarranted teasing and harassment, can cause ethnic minority adolescents to experience greater levels of psychological distress and feelings of inadequacy.

**Media**

Today's adolescent is likely to be extraordinarily technologically savvy. Adolescents are large consumers of a variety of different media outlets, including television, computers, cell phones, video games consoles, CD/MP3 players, and digital cameras. Nearly a culture within itself, technology has shaped and

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guided the way in which adolescents experience the social world around them. With approximately two-thirds of adolescents having a television in their bedroom, it is not surprising that time spent watching television still takes up the greatest portion of an adolescent’s daily activities outside of school. Increased levels of television consumption are generally associated with lower academic success, more passive learning styles, and less active lifestyles. Generally, late adolescents make a shift from television consumption toward other media outlets, such as computers and CD/MP3 players.Researchers have recently noted a significant increase in the amount of time adolescents spend on the Internet. Many adolescents use the Internet for a variety of reasons, including entertainment, social, and academic purposes. Although Internet use can be extremely beneficial to adolescents, certain concerns regarding exposure to inappropriate material exist. Among adolescents, about 44% have visited a sexually explicit adult website; and about 25% have visited a website containing racially motivated hate material. Many adolescents use the Internet to visit social networking websites, such as Myspace and Facebook. These websites allow adolescents the opportunity to socialize and interact with peers over an electronic format. Although enjoyed by the majority of adolescents, these websites can also facilitate passive–aggressive ‘web-fights,’ or cyber-bullying between peers, and may serve as a source of stress for a portion of adolescents.

Overall, culture and social trends not only have an effect on adolescent development independently, but also can affect how other contextual factors are manifested. Families, friendships, romantic relationships, work, and school can all be affected by an adolescent’s culture and prevailing social trends. For example, an adolescent’s culture may dictate certain expectations regarding romantic relationships and dating scripts to which adolescents must adhere. Social trends, such as the popularity of cell phones, texting, and the use of social networking websites (i.e., Facebook and Myspace) greatly affect the manner in which adolescents communicate with parents and peers.

Summary

Adolescence is a transitory period in which an individual shifts from childhood into adulthood. For most, this period is a time of physical, social, and emotional changes. The development that occurs within adolescence is key in setting the stage for adulthood. The age range when an individual will experience adolescence will vary depending on maturity and cultural norms. However, researchers have recently begun to conceptualize adolescence as spanning more years than previously believed. Because adolescence is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty in many areas, self-exploration and identity development are important goals within this transitory period. Although a portion of adolescents will experience a significant amount of turmoil during this time that may interfere with healthy development, most will make the transition into adulthood successfully.

See also

Addictions and Adolescence; Family Systems; Friendship; Moral Development; Parent–Offspring Conflict; Risk-Taking Behavior (Young Male Syndrome); Social Development (Attachment, Imprinting).
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