

Adolescence: Developmental Tasks¹

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This is the final bulletin of a three-part series that explores adolescence. In the previous two bulletins we have explored the definition of adolescence; the biological and physical changes in adolescence; and the four major questions encountered by adolescents.

This bulletin presents the eight developmental tasks facing adolescents. By understanding these developmental tasks, parents and adults can provide support and opportunities that enable adolescents to accomplish these tasks.

What are the Developmental Tasks Facing Adolescents?

The major task facing adolescents is to create a stable identity and become complete and productive adults. Over time, adolescents develop a sense of themselves that transcends the many changes in their experiences and roles. They find their role in society through active searching which leads to discoveries about themselves.

The changes experienced during puberty bring new awareness of self and others' reactions to them. For example, sometimes adults perceive adolescents to be adults because they physically appear to be adults. However, adolescents are not adults. They need room to explore themselves and their world. Thus, as adults, we need to be aware of their needs and provide them with opportunities to grow into adult roles.

A developmental task represents our culture's definition of "normal" development at different points in the life span. There are a total of eight developmental tasks that enable adolescents to create an identity.

Achieving new and more mature relations with others, both boys and girls, in their age group.

Adolescents learn through experimentation to interact with others in more adult ways. Physical maturity plays an important role in peer relations. Adolescents who mature at a slower or faster rate than others will be dropped from one peer group and generally will enter a peer group of similar maturity.

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For early-maturing girls, entering into a peer group of similar physical maturity can mean a greater likelihood of early sexual activity. Monitoring by parents can be a useful boundary setting tool because it allows parents to place limits on the adolescent's outside activities.

Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.

Adolescents develop their own definition of what it means to be male or female. However, most adolescents conform to the sex roles of our cultural view of male (assertive & strong) and female (passive & weak) characteristics. Yet, these roles have become more relaxed in the last twenty years. As adults, we need to provide adolescents with chances to test and develop their masculine and feminine social roles. For example, we need to encourage males to express their feelings and encourage females to assert themselves more than they have in the past.

Accepting one's physique.

The beginning of puberty and the rate of body changes for adolescents varies tremendously. How easily adolescents deal with those changes will partly reflect how closely their bodies match the well-defined stereotypes of the "perfect" body for young women and young men. Adolescents who do not match the stereotype may need extra support from adults to improve their feelings of comfort and self-worth regarding their physique.

Achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults.

Children derive strength from internalizing their parents' values and attitudes. Adolescents, however, must redefine their sources of personal strength and move toward self-reliance. This change is smoother if the adolescent and parents can agree on some level of independence that increases over time. For example, parents and adolescents should set a curfew time. That time should be increased as the adolescent matures.

Preparing for marriage and family life.

Sexual maturation is the basis for this developmental task. Achievement of this

developmental task is difficult because adolescents often confuse sexual feelings with genuine intimacy. Indeed, this developmental task is usually not achieved until late adolescence or early adulthood.

Preparing for an economic career.

In our society, an adolescent reaches adult status when he or she is able to financially support himself or herself. This task has become more difficult than in the past because the job market demands increased education and skills. Today, this developmental task is generally not achieved until late adolescence or early adulthood, after the individual completes her/his education and gains some entry level work experience.

Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior — developing an ideology.

Adolescents can think abstractly and about possible situations. With these changes in thinking, the adolescent is able to develop his or her own set of values and beliefs.

Desiring and achieving socially responsible behavior.

The family is where children define themselves and their world. Adolescents define themselves and their world from their new social roles. Status within the community, beyond that of family, is an important achievement for older adolescents and young adults. Adolescents and young adults become members of the larger community through employment (financial independence) and emotional independence from parents.

Conclusion

The many developmental tasks facing adolescents are challenging, but they are not insurmountable. Adolescents are testing independence; yet they are not, and do not want to be, totally independent. Parents and adults need to provide a supportive environment for adolescents to search and explore their identity.

Parents and adults walk a tightrope. Adolescents need them to play an active role in their lives. However, adults need to provide adolescents some room to be responsible for their own decisions and be accountable for the consequences of those decisions.

When adolescents make the wrong decision, they need the support and guidance of parents and adults to help them learn from these experiences. By knowing the developmental tasks of adolescents, parents and adults can help turn mistakes made by adolescents into opportunities that enhance adolescents' mastery of life skills.

At times the interaction between parents/adults and adolescents will be challenging and uncertain, but it is essential that parents and adults remain steadfast in their commitment to the adolescent. Parents and adults have an important role to play and can have a positive impact on the lives of adolescents.

This series of three bulletins has shown the complexity of the changes that confront individuals beginning their second decade of life. Indeed, adolescence is marked by a multitude of changes — biological, physical, intellectual and emotional.

The information from this series operates as a "road map" of what to anticipate from adolescents. Using this road map, parents and other adults can support adolescents on their journey toward reaching their destinations — becoming competent and productive adults.

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