

Characteristics of adolescent emotional development

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Abstract

Especially in the media, but also in scientific studies, adolescents are all too frequently presented with an emphasis on problems and negative situations, such as risks, violence, accidents, alcohol and drug abuse, making teenage years look like a predominantly negative period of life.

While the physical and behavioral changes which mark adolescence may be the most visible, they are accompanied by similarly striking developments regarding brain development, acquiring new and enhanced cognitive skills, and emotional development, with focus on the sense of who they are and who they want to become.

Actually, most adolescents have rather balanced lives, attending and graduating school, being close to their families and friends, coming out as young adults without experiencing serious problems such as substance abuse or involvement with violence.

And behind all the protest they may display, adolescents need adults around them and want to receive their teachings, guidance and protection on the journey to adulthood. In this sense, we believe there is a crucial role to be played in the lives of adolescents to support their emotional development and well-being.

Of course, emotional development needs to be understood in conjunction with changes in other areas, and we need to regard it by always taking into consideration the wider context, including family, school, friends and community, together with factors as gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or chronic illness, and religious beliefs (Gootman, & Eccles, 2002; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998).

Keywords: *adolescent development, identity, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, social relationship, adolescents' emotional skills*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The main task of adolescent emotional development is forming a realistic and coherent sense of identity (Erikson, 1968), although it is now widely recognized that identity formation neither begins nor ends during adolescence. Yet this period of life is the first in which people have the cognitive capacity to consciously sort through who they are and what makes them unique (Kroger, 2004).

Identity consists of two concepts:

- The self-concept: the set of beliefs one has about oneself, about one's attributes (e.g., tall, intelligent), roles and goals (e.g., desired career), interests, values, and beliefs (e.g., religious, political).
- The self-esteem or evaluating how one feels about one's self-concept. Again, here we need to make a distinction between "global" self-esteem, how we feel about our perceived selves as a whole, and "specific" self-esteem, or how much we like certain parts of ourselves (e.g., our appearance).

Self-esteem develops in a unique way for each adolescent and can take different trajectories in time – it may appear relatively stable during adolescence or may steadily decline or improve, suggesting the need for a differentiated approach (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997).

There are many factors influencing self-esteem, including the specific changes taking place in the other developmental areas, cognitive and physical. Some adolescents are particularly susceptible to influences coming from parents and peers, directly incorporating their appraisals into their own identity and feelings about themselves (Robinson, 1995).

In order to develop a realistic sense of identity, adolescents also need to try out and experiment with different images and behaviors, values and attitudes. They have many questions to ask and many answers to find, and having available adults around to discuss identity issues can help them develop their new abstract reasoning skills and moral reasoning abilities (APA, 2002).

Adolescents need to learn the emotional skills necessary to manage stress and be sensitive and effective in relating to others, skills grouped under the term "emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1994). It involves both intra- and interpersonal skills, from self-awareness and self-management to relationship skills - getting along with others and making friends. Goleman's analysis underlines the tremendous impact of emotional intelligence on a successful adult life, both personal and professional.

According to Daniel Goleman (1994), the five components of emotional intelligence are as follows:

- Self-awareness: The ability to accurately assess one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths and to maintain a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- Self-management: The ability to regulate one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; to set and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals and to express emotions appropriately.
- Empathy and social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures; to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- Relationship skills: The ability to build strong relationships with diverse individuals and groups - communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior - taking into consideration ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Adolescents must learn to pay conscious attention to their feelings, learning to go beyond simplistic labels such as “fine” or “okay”. By being able to recognize feeling anxious before a test or feeling sad and missing a dear friend, they can better understand their source and possibly find more options, like asking for help in studying for the test or talking about their feelings with a friend (Goleman, 1994).

As reported by Rosenblum & Lewis (Adams, 2003), several studies using the “experience sampling method” or ESM show that adolescent emotional experience differs in intensity, frequency and persistence from that of both older and younger individuals.

Compared to their parents, adolescents experienced greater extremes of emotion, with a wider range between higher and lower moods, which was particularly true for negative emotions (Larson, & Richards, 1994). Adolescents also reported experiencing negative moods more frequently than adults (Arnett, 1999; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Mac Iver, 1993).

II. EMOTIONS AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

While they can benefit from understanding and managing own emotions, it is crucial for adolescents to also recognize and consider the feelings of others (Allen, & Land, 1999). There are different possibilities to teach empathy and cooperation, for example by getting students involved through the jigsaw method and helping them gain the emotional perspective of other groups. This

method requires students to rely upon one another to learn any subject, reducing the competition between them and promoting more equal positions for all students. This is achieved by making each student part of a small expert group, dividing the class in an informational puzzle which must then be assembled to fully understand a subject. This approach has been successful not only in helping adolescents learn how to work cooperatively toward a group goal, but also in improving their academic performance (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997).

A longitudinal research published in 1996 has shown that, particularly in early adolescence, feelings of self-esteem tend to decrease somewhat with girls, and some studies have shown that boys tend to have higher global self-esteem than girls (Bolognini, Plancherel, Bettschart, & Halfon, 1996). As there are differences in how boys and girls are raised in our society, they may also differ in their specific needs for promoting identity formation: some adolescent girls may need to learn to become more assertive or in expressing anger, while some adolescent boys may need to be encouraged towards more cooperation and expression of emotions (Goleman, 1994).

The ground in which adolescents develop and practice all these emotional and social skills is created by their network of relationships (Muuss, Velder, & Porton, 1988). Here, one of the trademarks of adolescence is the shift in focus and importance from family grounds to the peer group. Still, it is important to underline that family closeness and attachment has been confirmed as the most important factor associated with not smoking, less use of alcohol and other drugs, later initiation of sexual intercourse, and fewer suicide attempts among adolescents (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones,... & Ireland, 1997). Thus, increased peer contact is simply a stage in development and does not mean that parents are less important to them.

At the same time, having positive peer relations in adolescence has been linked to positive psychosocial adjustment, such as having better self-images during adolescence and better school performance (Hansen, Giacoletti, & Nangle, 1995). On the other hand, it appears that having interpersonal problems during adolescence puts later adults at much greater risk for psychosocial difficulties (Campbell, Hansen, & Nangle, 2010).

Positive family relationships, a sense of closeness and attachment to family have been found to be associated with better emotional development, better school performance, and engagement in fewer high-risk activities, such as drug use (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones,... & Ireland, 1997; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Among the characteristics of effective adolescent parenting, studies show that parents need to be warm and involved, to provide firm limits and explain rules, to use reasoning and persuasion, to have appropriate expectations, to discuss issues, listen with respect and encourage the teenager to develop his or her own opinions (Nicolson, & Ayers, 2012). This style of parenting tends to foster adolescents with better academic achievement, less depression and anxiety (Kirkcaldy, Shephard,

& Siefen, 2002), higher self-reliance and self-esteem, and less likely to get involved in delinquent behaviors and drug abuse (Steinberg, 2001).

III. CONCLUSIONS

Parent–adolescent conflicts tend to increase during this period of life, especially two types of conflict: spontaneous conflict over day-to-day matters, such as appearance or home chores, and conflict over important issues, such as academic performance (Coleman, & Hendry, 1999). As findings show that the day-to-day conflict seems more distressing to parents than to the adolescents, these seem to represent ways of expressing individuality or just too emotionally unload. Therefore, parents should consider that minor conflicts are normal and appear to be a necessary part of gaining independence while learning new ways of staying connected (Steinberg, 2001).

Problems or lacks in developing adolescents emotional and social skills need to be considered high priorities and be addressed by the adults around them (Luthar, 1991). It can be very helpful simply to discuss about how to initiate conversations with colleagues, how to be better, how to share information and feelings etc.

Part of the challenge of emotional development is for adolescents to understand the strong influence that emotions can have on subjective experience, in perception and judgment (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). The developmental task for adolescents includes learning to distinguish these types of distortions, but at the same time learning to recognize the positive functions that emotions can serve.

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