

**Critically respond to the characteristics of adolescents and examine the implications both personally and professionally.**

Adolescence, the period of life between childhood and maturity, may be regarded as one of the most crucial stages through which the human individual passes in his journey from conception to death. For many, it is seen as the key stage in development. Changes in physique and the maturation of the reproductive system bring with them associated changes in emotions and the whole pattern of psychological characteristics is restructured as the individual strives to attain a sense of identity. Development in intellectual functioning provides the adolescent with the ability to question himself, his family, his world, and his values (Garrod, Smulyan, Powers, and Kilkenny, 1992).

Adolescents begin to develop principles- not necessarily those that adults would like to have them develop- but nevertheless principles of conduct. They are deeply influenced by “what is done” among their peers or among people slightly older than themselves, whom they respect. Adolescents tend to revolt against whatever code of morals may be in vogue in their corner of the world, and they can become completely obsessed by almost any moral problem. They are normally prejudiced and uncompromising in whatever attitude they adopt. This stage of growth is a difficult one for them and for everyone else, but perhaps it is necessary as a step from the unthinking acceptance of childhood to the independent thinking of an adult. During this period, the adolescent is an unreasonable creature. He does a good deal of hard thinking, accompanied by endless hours of talking with his peers, about his philosophy of life. Intellectual, like physical maturity is almost certain to arrive sooner or later. Provided a child is not a mental defective, he will eventually achieve at least the minimal level of adult intelligence (Buisse, 1997).

While a child can and does learn a multitude of facts about an enormous number of things, he only has a limited range of interests. The adolescent also acquires facts, but he wants to know the reasons behind them. He has an intellectual capacity far above that of the child, and he can grasp general principles, theories, and implications. He can see through some of the surface responses of people to their real feelings. He is no

longer content with the active, unorganised games of childhood. He wants socialisation and organization in his activities. If the adolescent is male, he usually has two abiding interests: sports and girls. A girl's main interests are boys and social activities: dances, parties, outings, clothes, and interminable conversations on the telephone. Members of both sexes turn to music, romances, and comedies on television. They overhaul their ideas about life and plan for a future that they now see is rushing upon them. It is probable that an adolescent of eighteen or twenty years of age has enough mental capacity for adult activities and adult thinking, but he lacks experience of life and therefore often gallops off in pursuit of foolish and unreachable goals (Tatar, 1995).

Adolescents are chronically insecure and tend to take everything personally. Because an adolescent has not yet developed an accurate self-image, he is likely to hide his shortcomings even from himself (Adamson and Lyxell, 1996). The typical causes of emotional behaviour among adolescents are social in nature and precipitate feelings of uncertainty and embarrassment. Adolescent boys and girls have not yet learned to use the various methods of escape for the resolution of minor conflicts, and therefore they tend to be excessively upset over very little. Because of their great sensitivity to social stimuli and their lack of readiness to deal with the results of stimulation, adolescents are inclined to be overemotional in their reactions.

During childhood, children basically accept parental authority (Smentana, 1989) and an equilibrium is established in which parents largely determine and control relationships with their children within a context of acceptance and availability (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). However, in the state of approaching adolescence and especially during puberty, parent-child relationships are transformed in a number of ways (Collins, 1990). These changes entail increased assertiveness by both parents and children, decreased perceptions of acceptance, inhibited communication, increased incidence of conflictive exchanges, decreased expressions of physical affection and positive feelings among family members, and adjustments in the amount and kind of influence that children exert in family decision making. Difficulties with communication derive in part from sensitivities and embarrassment associated with pubertal changes and this, combined with the adolescent's socio-cognitive development and querying of the inequalities in the parent child relationship, often

result in tensions and heated exchange (Hill, 1988). Most families, while they sustain close bonds during children's teenage years, experience such an escalation of conflict, particularly during the early stages of adolescence. Although much of the conflict has been described as "mild bickering, disagreements and conflicts over everyday issues and emotional stress during early adolescence" (Smetana, 1988), its effects can be debilitating.

The role of parents is made more difficult by the legal and status ambiguity of the adolescent period. In today's society, adolescence is an indeterminate period of transition with no rite of passage to mark the distinction between childhood and adulthood. It has been suggested that this has detracted from the capacity of some young people to function as successful adults (Campbell and Moyers, 1988). There is a lack of clarity in the status and legal rights of adolescents which sends confusing messages to parents and teenagers in their relationships with each other. However, several writers have suggested that these apparent perturbations in relationships may serve the positive function of facilitating adolescents' independence and diminishing dependence on parents. Via conflicts, family members allow themselves to express distinctive and separate views (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986).

It is true that during adolescence, a boy or girl must break, or at least loosen, the ties that bind him or her to home and parents. However, one should not assume that the complete break with, or indifference towards parents or open conflicts with them are a sign of maturity. Quite the contrary is true. Release from home authority is necessary, but revolt is probably not, although a proportion of each adolescent generation leaves home completely as a result of familial conflicts (Henricson and Roker, 2000).

For the majority of youth, while once dependent upon their parents, adolescents begin to substitute their friends as the centre of their lives.

The centrality of friends and friendship in the life of adolescents has been frequently stressed. It has been claimed that friendships are the most prominent features of the social landscape during adolescence and acceptance by peers generally, and especially having one or more close friends, may be of crucial importance in a young person's life (Coleman and Hardy, 1990). Friendship among adolescents fulfils important tasks, such as providing much of the social context that allows proper performance of actions which will be accepted and rewarded by the peer group, strengthening the self and reaffirming its worth and value. Adolescents use the peer group to express their

divided feelings and incoherent images in accordance with their emotional needs and to reinforce their behaviour as they conform to peer norms and behaviour styles (Tatar, 1995). Adolescents perceive popularity and attainment of social status among peers as beneficial and positive, reflecting their desirability as a friend. Adolescents also form larger, more loosely organised groups called crowds. Unlike the more intimate clique, membership into the crowd is based on reputation and stereotype. Whereas the clique serves as the main context for direct interaction, the crowd grants the adolescent an identity within the larger social structure. Adolescents are very aware of the differential social status conferred upon different groups, and this knowledge can affect self-evaluation: categorisation of the self as a member of an unpopular or lower status group can be detrimental to feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Denholm, Horniblow, and Smalley, 1992).

Susceptibility to peer pressure is reported to peak between the ages of twelve to sixteen years (Tarrant, North, Edridge, Kirk, Smith, and Turner, 2001). Peer conformity is a complex process that varies with the adolescent's age and need for social approval and with the situation. Adolescents reported that they felt greatest pressure to conform to the most obvious aspects of peer culture, such as, dressing and grooming like everyone else and participating in social activities. Although peer pressure toward misconduct peaked in early adolescence, it was relatively low compared with other areas (Brown, Lohr, & McClenahan, 1986). Due to their greater concern with what their peers think of them, early adolescents are more likely than younger or older individuals to give in to peer pressure. Although, when parents and peers disagree, even young adolescents will not consistently rebel against their families. Instead, parents and peers differ in their spheres of greatest influence. Parents have more impact on adolescents' basic life values and educational plans, while peers are more influential in short-term, day-to-day matters, such as type of dress, taste in music, and choice of friends (Berk, 2000).

Developmental tasks of adolescence centre on individuation, autonomy, and identity formation (Hill and Holmbeck, 1986). The exploration and independence seeking that are characteristic of adolescence also increase young persons' vulnerability to risk. Adolescence is marked by increased rates of drug and alcohol experimentation, sexual activity, delinquency, and suicide attempts (Takanishi, 1993). For example, a study

of 680 high school students revealed that over four-fifths had consumed alcohol, over two-thirds had used marijuana, nearly one-half had engaged in sexual intercourse, and over one-third reported engaging in unprotected sexual relations (Irwin, 1993).

Antisocial activities are also prevalent among adolescents; nearly one-third of a sample of 2411 14- and 15-year-old adolescents sampled from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth reported shoplifting and nearly one-half reported being involved in a physical confrontation with other adolescents (Windle, 1990).

Adolescent risk behaviour may affect adjustment and well-being. Longitudinal studies have shown that adolescent substance use predicts increased physical health problems, higher levels of emotional distress, increased family problems, as well as increased problems with interpersonal relationships and decreases in social relations.(Newcomb, 1994). Several theories have been proposed as to why some adolescents engage in risk taking behaviours.

The adolescent fable that “it cannot happen to me: is the basis of the risk-taking behaviour common to adolescents and is a viable explanation for sexual experimentation and other risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol and drug use. As such, this sense of egocentric invulnerability maintains risk-taking behaviour, which is seen as a normative part of adolescent development.

Influences pertinent to adolescents include the formation of identity, including sexual identity, and interpersonal needs such as acceptance by a peer group. The peer group become increasingly important as role models. Adolescents are more likely to adopt a modelled behaviour if it results in outcomes they value. Additionally, the model needs to have admired status and be similar to the observer, and the behaviour needs to have functional value in the adolescent’s world (Berk, 2000).

As soon as adolescents begin to date, they are subject to new pressures to which their reactions can be unreasonable and excessive. They soon come to into conflict with their parents and often with the mores of the community. Their interest in social relations may become so extreme, that all other phases of life suffer.

Most theoretical views regard adolescent romance as a subset of peer relationships, perhaps because from early to middle adolescence young people spend increasing time within mixed-sex peer groups. Indeed, the formation of dyadic relationships with romantic partners becomes increasingly important during these periods. A romantic relationship between two adolescent partners may assume a variety of forms, ranging

from those which parallel “close relationships” to those typical for “casual dating” or “exclusive dating” relationships (Shulman and Seiffe- Krenke, 2001). Although adolescents’ romantic relationships are often short in duration, they are, nonetheless, characterised as very intimate and intense. Sullivan (1953) and Erikson (1959) both speculated that individuals who do not venture into dating in early and middle adolescence would not be sufficiently prepared for the developmental task of forming intimate relationships during late adolescence and early adulthood. Connolly and Goldberg (1999) suggest that peer relationships and friendships contribute to the development and success of romantic relationships.

Adolescents themselves typically report that romantic partners, like friends, are sources of intimacy, companionship, and support during adolescence. Achieving closeness and autonomy are central processes in the psychological development of adolescent relationships with significant others (Connolly and Goldberg, 1999). Developmental theorists consider the achievement of closeness as a process that underlies interpersonal interactions which are conducted in a warm, friendly, and mutually fulfilling manner (Shulman and Knafo, 1997). As adolescents grow older, romantic relationships are increasingly apt to take the lead over relationships with parents and friends with respect to characteristics that reflect closeness and quality. Sanderson and Cantor (1995) pointed out that adolescents differ with respect to the goals they pursue in romantic relationships. Some adolescents focus on achieving and maintaining intimacy in their heterosexual relationships. For others, romantic relationships serve the goal of establishing identity. However, the fusion of both goals is important, i.e. an independent identity must be developed and this identity must be merged with others in intimate relations.

Although dating and beginning heterosexual relationships are normative, age-typical tasks for adolescents, not all adolescents are able to deal with these tasks easily. In fact, there are great differences with respect to the intensity and developmental speed with which adolescents approach such tasks (Cantor, Acker, and Cook-Flannagan, 1992). Experienced adolescents were more likely to seek the advice of friends, to take risks, and do things to make themselves stand out in the crowd. These findings suggest that being “experienced” may generate both adaptive and non-adaptive responses, which may, in the long run, result in different pathways of romantic development. Over involvement with dating at age sixteen, as defined by dating a large number of people in the past year was associated with more psychological and

behavioural problems, and a significant decline in psychological functioning between early and mid adolescence.

The characteristics of adolescents can create major implications and limitations on the counselling process, due to the extremity of the changes that are occurring in the individual. The adolescent is feeling vulnerable, insecure, unsure of who he is, feeling the need to revolt, prejudiced, uncompromising, and extremely influenced by his peers. Therefore, the normal processes that may occur during therapy have to be altered to better suit the needs of the adolescent.

It has been found that in counselling, young women seem better able to articulate, capture and describe the depth and intensity of their problems and associated feelings they experience, while young men seem to have less ability to describe their feelings and less comfort in talking about what bothers them. Young men are more difficult to engage in discussions about problems that affect them, and less likely to respond on a feeling level than young women.

Being the mother of two children, aged twenty-one and nineteen years of age, I am aware of how a youth's characteristics would impact on our session. I have never had a problem dealing with adolescents, as I am consistently interacting with teenagers on a regular basis. Therefore, I am familiar with the problems that might be addressed during therapy; such as the fear of disclosure, inability to see problem behaviours, and their view that counselling is punitive. As a result, I would use various micro skills that I have acquired over numerous years to make sure the counselling environment was as comfortable for the adolescent as possible, therefore allowing them to discuss their problems.

Word Count: 2544