Understanding Adolescence

The Tasks

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This is the final bulletin of a three-part series entitled Understanding Adolescence. This series explores adolescence and provides useful information for parents. In the previous two bulletins, we have explored the definition of adolescence; the biological and physical changes that take place during adolescence; and the four major questions encountered by adolescents.

This bulletin presents the eight developmental tasks that adolescents face. A developmental task represents our culture’s definition of “normal” development at different points in the life span. By understanding the developmental tasks that adolescents face, parents and adults become better equipped to support adolescents as they strive to accomplish these tasks.

**What Are the Developmental Tasks Facing Adolescents?**

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

The changes that adolescents experience during puberty bring them new awareness of self and influence 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. As adults, we need to be aware of their needs and provide them with opportunities to grow into adult roles.

There are eight main developmental tasks that adolescents must complete in order to establish an identity.
1. Achieving new and more mature relations with others, both boys and girls, in one's age group.

Adolescents learn through interacting 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. For early-maturing girls (girls whose bodies are fully developed at a young age), entering into a peer group of similar physical maturity can mean a greater likelihood of early sexual activity. Parental monitoring can be a useful boundary-setting tool during the accomplishment of this developmental task because it allows parents to place limits on adolescents' outside activities.

2. Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.

Each adolescent develops his or her own definition of what it means to be male or female. Most adolescents conform to the sex roles of our cultural view of male (assertive) and female (passive) characteristics. Yet these roles have become more relaxed in the last 30 years. As adults, we need to provide opportunities for adolescents 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.

3. Accepting one's physique.

The time of the onset of puberty and the rate of body changes for adolescents vary greatly. How easily adolescents deal with these changes will partly depend on how closely their bodies match the well-defined stereotypes of the “perfect” body for young women and young men. Adolescents whose bodies do not match the stereotypes may need extra support from adults to improve their feelings of comfort and self-worth regarding their physiques.

4. 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 adolescents and parents can agree on some level of independence that increases over time. For example, parents and adolescents should set a curfew time. That curfew should be extended as the adolescent matures.

5. 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 young adulthood. Until that time comes, the best way for parents to help is to set aside time to talk to their early and middle adolescents about sex and relationships.
6. Preparing for an economic career.

In American society, adolescents reach adult status when they are able to financially support themselves. This task has become more difficult now 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 young adulthood, after the individual completes his/her education and gains some entry-level work experience.

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

Adolescents gain the ability to think abstractly and to visualize possible situations. With these changes in thinking, the adolescent is able to develop his or her own set of values and beliefs. Discussing these newly forming ethical systems with parents and other adults can be a great help to adolescents in accomplishing this developmental task. In addition, parents may want to provide adolescents with hypothetical situations that challenge their emerging values, to help the adolescents evaluate the strength and appropriateness of those values.

8. Desiring and achieving socially responsible behavior.

The family is where children learn to define themselves and their world. Adolescents must learn to define themselves and their world in the context of 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 financial and emotional independence from parents, which in turn teaches them the value of socially responsible behavior.

Conclusion

The many developmental tasks facing adolescents are challenging, but they are achievable. Adolescents are getting their first taste of independence, yet they are not, and do not want to be, totally independent. Parents and adults need to provide a supportive environment in which adolescents may discover and explore their identities.

Parents and other adults who work with adolescents walk a tightrope. Adolescents need them to play an active role in their lives. However, adults also need to provide adolescents some room to make their own decisions and to be accountable for the consequences of those decisions.
When adolescents make the wrong decisions, they need the support and guidance of parents and adults to help them learn from these experiences. By understanding the developmental tasks of adolescents, parents and adults can help turn mistakes made by adolescents into educational 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 adolescents. Parents and adults have an important role to play in, 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 as they begin their second decade of life. Indeed, adolescence is marked by a multitude of changes—biological, physical, intellectual, and emotional. The information presented in this series serves as a “road map” of what to expect from adolescents. Using this road map, parents and other adults can support adolescents on their journey toward becoming competent and productive adults.

**Resources**


http://agexted.cas.psu.edu/fcs/dp/fyrep.html
This site provides resources and materials about family and youth resiliency.

http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/wondhome.htm
The WonderWise Parent contains information on parenting and parent-child relationships.

http://www.parentingresources.ncjrs.org
This site provides information about parenting and family issues (e.g., health and safety).

http://parentingteens.about.com/parenting/parentingteens
About.com offers articles for parents of adolescents (e.g., violence, money management).

http://www.parenting.org
This site offers advice on topics facing youth (e.g., eating disorders, making friends).

http://www.search-institute.org/
Search Institute provides articles and program information about youth development.

**References**


