

## Module #7 Adopted Adolescent and Identity Formation

### Handout #7.1 Stages of Adolescent Development

#### Early Adolescence (ages 11-14)

Early adolescence is a critical phase of development, a period of accelerated growth and change. Generally, this period is considered to range from 11 through 14 but there are variations given in the age range by different sources.

During early adolescence: a child develops in four main areas:

- **Physical development.** Adolescence is a time of change throughout the body. A growth usually occurs near the time of puberty. Girls begin to develop breasts and start their periods. Boys grow facial hair. Both boys and girls grow pubic hair. Boys may lag behind girls in height during these years, but they usually end up taller.
- **Cognitive development.** This is how the brain develops the abilities to think, learn, reason, and remember. Young people this age typically focus on the present, but they are starting to understand that what they do now can have long-term effects. They are also beginning to see that issues are not just clear-cut and that information can be interpreted in different ways.
- **Emotional and social development.** As they start to move from childhood into adulthood, adolescents feel the urge to be more independent from their families. Often, friends replace parents as a source of advice. When at home, adolescents may prefer spending time alone to being part of the family. Still, family support is important to help them build a strong sense of self.
- **Sensory and motor development.** Young people at this age may be a little awkward or clumsy. Their brains need time to adjust to longer limbs and bigger bodies.

#### Middle Adolescence

- Around age 15 to 16, teens enter what is known as middle adolescence. During this phase, adolescents undergo notable cognitive, physical, emotional, and social changes that represent important milestones in the journey to adulthood.
- Teens in middle adolescence are gaining greater self-awareness and sense of identity. As middle adolescents grow into their adult bodies, their heightened self-awareness can lead to greater concerns about how their appearance is perceived by peers. Furthermore, changes in relationships can lead to emotional changes.
- During middle adulthood, adolescents continue to shift away from familial relationships, as peer relationships—both platonic and romantic—take precedence. Teens aged 15 to 16 are increasingly concerned with gaining autonomy, especially in terms of their social choices.
- Teens in middle adolescence often strive enthusiastically for increased independence, while simultaneously withdrawing from family life. That blend of pushing the limits and pulling away can place a strain on a middle adolescent's family life. Middle teens' newly acquired reasoning skills also may lead them to question family rules. It is important that parents provide rational, reasoned

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explanations for rules and decisions. Including the middle adolescent in family decision-making can ease the strain on family relationships.

- At school, the middle adolescent may be more skeptical about authority, questioning teachers and other adults about the logic behind policies, procedures, and guidelines. At the same time, many middle adolescents pursue intellectual interests on their own. They also begin to think more seriously about long-term education and career goals.
- The hallmark of middle adolescence is the firm establishment of independence. Teens in this phase have attained a marked sense of intellectual, moral, and social independence. While this new sense of self means great strides in academic and social development, it also means that middle adolescents remain somewhat uncomfortable with their budding adulthood.

### Late Adolescence

By late adolescence, teens have made significant progress in firmly establishing their identities. The hallmark of late adolescent cognitive growth is the ability to assess long-term impact of ideas and actions. Because adolescents at this stage possess the capacity to assimilate abstract ideas, they usually have the:

- Ability to delay gratification
- Facility to weigh the impact of their ideas and choose among various intellectual options
- Ability to express abstract comments verbally
- Capability to make independent decisions

As hormone levels even out, late adolescents generally grow out of the moodiness and irritability so common among younger teens. With this hormonal plateau, teens in late adolescence usually demonstrate a more consistent emotional state:

- Greater emotional stability, with fewer mood swings
- Increased empathy and concern for others, even outside their immediate circle
- Emphasis on self-esteem and maintaining personal dignity
- Ability to regulate self-esteem independently

Late adolescence is a period of settling into oneself and one's social group. Late adolescents usually display the following social behaviors:

- More stable interests in peer groups and personal interests
- Increased interest in serious relationships, resulting in deeper friendships and more serious romantic attachments
- Acceptance of cultural norms and social institutions

At school and on the job, late adolescents take pride in their work. Their greater self-reliance means that they have more defined, reliable work habits. Late adolescents are generally adept at setting goals and following through with them, which allow them to work with less supervision than younger adolescents.

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Since late adolescents have begun to consider what their role in life will be, they are likely to pursue academic and extracurricular activities that match their long-term goals.

At home, teens in late adolescence tend to be less withdrawn and more willing to participate in family life. Late adolescents' ability to compromise and accept responsibility means that they are prepared to take an active part in running a household. They are generally willing to take on added responsibility, especially if this is balanced with extra freedom or privileges.