

The Challenges of Adolescence

Lisa Ferentz, LCSW-C, DAPA

TheferentzInstitute.com

lisa@lisaferentz.com

understanding adolescence

- 10-26 years old
- tremendous turbulence and change
- biological, psychological, inter-personal
- intense preoccupation with self
- complex and confusing developmental processes and milestones

the adolescent journey

(Dorothy Corkille Briggs, Erik Erikson)

- identity vs. role confusion (identity crisis)
- major developmental task: re-evaluation of self
- earlier self-statements no longer apply
- “in limbo” between childhood dependence and the demands of adulthood
- challenge of re-defining self adds to insecurities
- as teenagers attempt to form an identity, they increase their risk taking behaviors
- “risk taking” can either be appropriate or inappropriate

the adolescent journey

- goals: healthy relationships with opposite and same sex, plan for a life of work, and build a meaningful set of life values
- striving for success in love, work, and school
- requires peer recognition and support
- requires conforming to peer group demands and social groups with clearly defined roles
- navigating their own “evolving selves”

the different “selves” of adolescence

(Mary Pipher, Ph.D)

- Thinking self
- Physical self
- Emotional self
- Academic self
- Social self
- Spiritual self

the thinking self

- a profound shift in thinking occurs in adolescence
- they view the world and themselves differently than in childhood
- begin to challenge outcomes
- may lie more often as a way to “solve problems”
- cognitive development may be shaped by both brain chemistry and external influences (family, friends and environment)

The adolescent brain

- difficult to reason with others
- feels like people can't understand their thoughts
- want to analyze, attach deep meaning to things
- concrete, black/white thinking
- over-generalize
- “If I feel it, it must be true”
- downplay big things/exaggerate little things
- thoughts often revolve around self

The adolescent brain

- The adolescent brain is wired for aggression, pleasure seeking, impulsivity, and risk taking
- The adolescent brain responds to emotionally loaded imagery and situations with an intensity far greater than that of young children or adults
- Responds differently to alcohol increasing the likelihood of binge drinking

Although the brain is built, the myelin that is needed to insulate it and enable it to fully function grows from the back of the brain to the front- most primitive to most evolved.

So the insulation needed for the pre-frontal cortex (which controls decision making, impulse control and risk taking) to be online and process quickly is not in place until we are in our twenties or even later.

risk taking and the brain

- some aspects of decision making and risk taking change with puberty
- brain chemistry, including hormones (testosterone) and neurotransmitters (Dopamine: which controls the pleasure-reward circuits in the brain) may increase risk taking behaviors.
- teens need guidance and boundaries as they balance the need for risk and independence with safety

The impact of digital technology on the developing brain

- “ Recent brain-imaging studies conclusively show that excessive screen exposure can neurologically damage a young person’s developing brain in the same way that cocaine addiction can.”
- Addiction to screens creates anxiety, sleep disturbance and insomnia, depression, social isolation, impulsivity and increased aggression.

The developing brain and digital technology

“Glow Kids” by Dr. Nicholas Kardaras, 2016

- “Exposure to violence in media, including television, movies, music, and video games represents a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents”
- “Over 1000 studies from the Surgeon General and NIMH point to an overwhelmingly causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in children”

Digital technology and developing brains

- “Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviors later in life than children who are not exposed”
- “Boys in particular love their video games and have developed an expectation for instant gratification that makes schoolwork and other chores seem too much”

Strengths of the adolescent brain

- It's imprintable and impressionable so they learn faster, absorb and retain information better than adults
- It allows for creativity, social engagement, and emotional intensity including joy and humor
- The novelty seeking drive creates opportunities for healthy risk taking, out of the box thinking and doing, and creative growth

the physical self

- puberty is the biological process of change
- body changes in shape, size, hormonal structure
- body betrayal
- acceptance, esteem, and confidence connect to body traits/development
- cultural pressures to look a certain way

The vulnerability for an eating disorder

- eating or not eating feels like the only thing I can control-and there's so much out of my control
- I will get more acceptance and attention if I look perfect- so I restrict my eating/over-exercise
- I will get a boyfriend/girlfriend if my body is “just right”
- I can avoid sexual pressure if I'm overweight

The vulnerability for an eating disorder

- eating sweet/salty foods can comfort me
- I'll excel in varsity sports if my body is thinner-stronger
- I can avoid dealing with painful things if I just eat, starve, or purge
- I can use food to avoid the pain of social rejection
- over-eating helps when I feel lonely
- using food feels “safer” than using alcohol, drugs or cutting

the emotional self

- extreme, changeable mood swings, emotions are more intense
- easily triggered by benign experiences
- no clear perspective
- unstable feelings lead to unpredictable, impulsive behaviors
- balancing the need for autonomy with the need for support and comfort
- self-soothing strategies from childhood no longer socially acceptable

understanding the facts

- 8% of teens suffer from depression at some time during any one year period
- average age of onset is 15- but also presents in 10-14 year olds
- after 15 and through age 55, girls are twice as likely to become depressed as boys
- depression is not a “normal phase” of adolescent development
- With the “black box warning” for the use of anti-depressant medication in teenagers, the suicide rate has gone up dramatically

depression: risk factors

- + family history: depressed teens are 5x more likely to have depressed family member
- a teen is 70% more likely to develop depression if both parents are depressed
- familial stressors: divorce, remarriage, economic strife, domestic violence, parental substance abuse, emotional neglect, physical and sexual abuse

depression: risk factors

- interpersonal stressors: peer relationships, bullying, abusive love relationships, school conflicts, illness, death or suicide of friend or loved one
- environmental stressors: neighborhood, terrorism, school shootings, crime, poverty, war, trauma

-In early adolescence teens who don't have good resources can turn to dysfunctional self-soothing and self-destructive behaviors in order to navigate internal and external stressors.

“Coping strategies” can include: eating disorders; addictions; sexual acting out, shoplifting, reckless and high risk behaviors, Internet and video addiction, and acts of self-mutilation

the academic self

- gender-based roles reinforced in school
- boys: more likely to speak up/get called on; praised for academic performance; attribute success to inner ability; used as role models
- girls: praised for obeying rules, good behavior, clothing; less abstract; attribute success to external factors; lose IQ points as they become more feminized (Lois Murphy)

the social self

- individuating from parents/reject parental advice
- balancing need for freedom vs. security
- social pressure to accept peer culture
- influenced by social media/ pop culture
- Impacted by cyber-bullying
- require peer acceptance/ approval
- shifting allegiances
- faced with complex decisions/conflicts
- pressured to be sexually active

The social self

- “A study of more than 400 8th and 11th graders found that only 35% of teens socialize face-to-face, compared to 63% who communicate via an average of 167 texts per day” (Kardaras, 2016)
- “Due to text messaging the parts of the brain responsible for mastering social interaction, empathy, and other interpersonal skills are not fully developing”
- The antidote to screen addiction(which is isolating) is weaning off digital technology and reconnecting to other teenagers face to face

the spiritual self

- a time of great idealism
- dogmatic
- embracing causes
- affiliate with ideologies that support social/group conformity, offer a direction or purpose
- vulnerable to either healthy or sinister ideologies

as adolescents attempt to navigate intense changes and challenges they can often appear to be...

- rude/belligerent
- bullying
- passive/aggressive
- complaining
- a know-it-all
- pessimistic
- inappropriate
- unmotivated/lazy
- manipulative
- uncooperative
- deceitful
- procrastinating
- stubborn/testing
- self-centered
- withdrawn/silent
- seductive
- anti-social

re-framing “difficult adolescent behavior”: the adolescent actually feels.....

- frustrated
- afraid
- threatened
- misunderstood/not heard
- disempowered/loss of control
- unappreciated/over-looked
- trapped/stuck

re-framing “difficult adolescent behavior”

- insecure/incompetent
- unsure about the rules/expectations
- conflicted/ambivalent
- overwhelmed
- unable to negotiate mixed messages
- fearful of rejection and disapproval
- fatigued

“Acting out” is a cry for help.

When these behaviors are viewed as “attention seeking” adults will often minimize, dismiss, or ignore them in an attempt to not “reinforce” them.

However, attention seeking means
attention must be paid.

Re-frame acting out or “difficult” behavior as a form of adolescent communication that needs to be decoded, understood, and addressed.