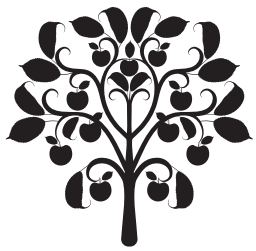

CHAPTER ONE

Adolescence

I feel that adolescence has served its purpose when a person arrives at adulthood with a strong sense of self-esteem, the ability to relate intimately, to communicate congruently, to take responsibility, and to take risks. The end of adolescence is the beginning of adulthood. What hasn't been finished then will have to be finished later.

—Virginia Satir,
The New Peoplemaking

Adolescents, teenagers, tweens—these very words create stress in most adults. The primary message that adolescents wish to send to adults is this: "I'm not a child anymore!" The developmental period of adolescence is one of the most difficult life stages, for parents and teens alike. It is a slow, complicated, often stressful transition from child to adult, occurring between the ages of 11 and 21. Some children begin puberty as young as 11, and many adolescents continue to change and grow through their early 20s. The transitions that occur within the individual and in the family are fundamental and monumental. Adolescence has been written about extensively; however, this chapter endeavors to give only a brief and basic overview of the important changes and developmental tasks that occur during this time.

Changes

Biological, physical, emotional, cognitive, legal, social, interpersonal, and cultural changes occur during adolescence. Although there are significant differences in the way that different societies and cultures handle this transitional period, the basic individual changes that occur are universal.

Physical and Biological Changes

During adolescence, there is a significant growth spurt during which height, weight, and even organ structure change significantly. The most well-known and obvious

change is the development of secondary sex characteristics. For girls, this includes the development of breasts, the addition of pubic and underarm hair, the onset of menstruation, and changes in body shape. For boys, it includes development of the sexual organs, growth of facial and body hair, and changes in the vocal cords that result in a deepening of the voice, a transition that can result briefly in uncomfortable voice intonation patterns.

Adolescence is also marked by a rapid gain in height, weight, body fat, and muscle mass. Changes in the respiratory system result in increased strength and stamina. These changes usually result in increased appetite, increased need for sleep, physical awkwardness, and increased physical endurance. When my son was in middle school, his friends would come over and head upstairs to play video games, leaving their shoes at the bottom of the stairs. I remember watching the shoe sizes grow dramatically within a very short time. During adolescence, such changes occur erratically and vary significantly from person to person, which can be a source of great concern and discomfort for teenagers. Girls also tend to mature earlier than boys, and in middle school many girls tend to develop in height before boys do, making both boys and girls self-conscious. During this time, teenage girls may become overly sensitive about their weight and body shape, whereas boys may become self-conscious about their physical size and facial hair.

Cognitive Changes

For years it was believed that changes between childhood and adolescence were primarily due to hormonal changes, but we now know that the cognitive changes that take place during this time are even more significant. Recent research has shown that there is continued brain development during the adolescent years. There is also a monumental shift in thinking abilities and patterns. The most significant recent scientific discovery is that the prefrontal cortex continues changing into the mid-20s. This area of the brain is responsible for impulse control, planning, problem solving, and making complex judgments. Research indicates that adolescents use their brains differently than adults do and that this results in more instinctive and impulsive thinking and reactions. Teenagers often misunderstand social cues and overreact to stressful or uncertain situations. They are more impulsive and less likely to think twice, change their minds, or stop and consider the consequences of their actions (Juskalian, 2010; Kever, 2006; Strauch, 2003).

During adolescence, there is a shift from concrete to abstract thinking. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development postulated that there are specific and sequential changes in thinking patterns over the course of a lifetime (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Piaget referred to the adolescent stage as the period of formal operations—the development of abstract and hypothetical thought and the ability to reason through situations in a more complex manner. What this means is that sometime during adolescence, the teenager becomes more able to think about things and concepts that cannot be seen or felt. During this time, teens develop more advanced

reasoning skills; they become able to consider situations in hypothetical or imaginary terms and to consider multiple options and possibilities. They also become more thoughtful overall.

This growth in mental abilities, often referred to as *meta-cognition*, is what allows individuals to consider what they're thinking, how they feel about those thoughts, and how they are perceived by others. Simply put, adolescents began to think more about themselves and how they view the world around them, often becoming somewhat awed by their own ability to develop opinions and views independently of the adults in their lives.

This combination of changes often leads an adolescent to feel that he or she is the only person who has ever experienced certain thoughts and feelings. This also accounts for the intensity of emotion seen during this time. Teens have become able to react emotionally, acknowledge their feelings, and ascribe significance to them. This self-awareness and intensity often look to others like self-absorption.

Social Changes

The most obvious social change during adolescence is the shift from a focus on the family to identification with peer groups. Identifying with peers is extremely important during this time, in that it helps teens to separate their identity from that of their parents. Social changes are important in the development of identity, independence, moral beliefs, healthy interpersonal relationships, and confidence in one's self. This social transition is often filled with emotional struggles for teens and their families.

Families continue to play an important role during this time. As a matter of fact, some of the necessary social changes are also occurring within the family system. During this time, teens become more independent, more responsible, more opinionated, and more secretive as they strive to establish their own identity. Social interactions within the family, and parental reactions to teen changes, are of primary importance to an adolescent's success in moving through this time period.

The other social change that takes place during this time is the development of close friendships and eventually intimate partnerships. Often called "puppy love," the relationships developed during this time set the stage for the development of healthy relationships later in life. The development of romantic and sexual interests is an unstoppable phenomenon. Many adults have found it difficult or impossible to keep adolescents apart when they are emotionally drawn to each other. This force is the reason Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* continues to be one of the most beloved stories ever written and one whose theme has been reworked in numerous formats.

Developmental Tasks of Adolescence

Several developmental tasks need to take place during adolescence in order for a teenager to become a healthy and responsible adult. Parenting style affects how a child carries out these tasks.

Individuation

In 1950, Erik Erikson (1950/1993) formulated his theory of the eight stages of development, beginning in infancy and continuing through adult maturity. These stages have long been accepted as essential to understanding the important changes that occur throughout one's life, allowing for the development of one's full potential. Erikson designated two stages of concern to individuals between the ages of 12 and 21. The adolescent stage is concerned with "identity versus identity diffusion," whereas the young adult stage is concerned with "intimacy versus isolation." In essence, the goal is for the teen to develop a stable sense of self, whereas the goal of intimacy is to have the ability to connect with peers or a life partner. Discussing Erikson's developmental stage of identity versus identity diffusion, L. Steinberg (2002) stated that

> the maturational and social forces that converge at adolescence force young people to reflect on their place in society, on the ways that others view them, and on their options for the future. Achieving a balanced and coherent sense of identity is an intellectually and emotionally taxing process. According to Erikson, it is not until adolescence that one even has the mental or psychological capacity to tackle this task. (p. 272)

This time is one of self-discovery, with the goal being a clear and stable picture of oneself. The process is anything but easy and takes several years, with many false starts and stops. This is why so many adolescents try different clothing styles, haircuts, music genres, and friendships. They may try on several identities, associate with different groups, and support different causes, trying to find those that feel most comfortable.

Teenagers are not predisposed to simply take on a role or identity established for them by someone else; they often actively resist the expectations of their parents and other adults. Identity is something you must establish for yourself; it cannot be handed to you or forced on you by another person. This does not mean that teenagers will not incorporate the opinions, likes, dislikes, and values of others, including parents, into their own identity, but they need to feel that they are making such decisions themselves. The process of individuation involves healthy separation from parents and development of a clear sense of self.

Achieving Autonomy

A related task facing the adolescent is to achieve autonomy, which involves becoming emotionally, cognitively, and socially independent. The terms "individuation" and "autonomy" are often used interchangeably but actually refer to separate, albeit interconnected, aspects of the transition from child to adult. During this time, teenagers spend more time alone, sequestered in their room, on the Internet, or out with friends. The need for autonomy results in teens wanting to make their own decisions about a variety of issues, including clothing, music, movies, friendships, and activities. In addition, autonomy involves being able to make reasonable choices and

decisions for oneself, to plan and to follow through on plans, and to develop a strong sense of right and wrong. Teens need to accomplish these tasks in order become independent, self-sufficient, emotionally healthy adults.

Defining Social and Gender Roles

Whereas Erikson's "identity versus identity diffusion" is the most well-known developmental task facing adolescents, there are other important tasks adolescents need to accomplish. One, mentioned earlier, is to be accepted and validated by one's peer group. Connecting to a peer group includes developing and clarifying one's masculine or feminine social role. A few hours at the mall on a Saturday will illustrate this. From almost any food court, one can observe groups of teenage boys joking and swaggering and groups of teenage girls chatting, giggling, and observing their male counterparts.

Clothing and hairstyles, although personalized to some extent, also convey a sense of similarity that defines teens as a part of a particular social clique. Years ago, while I was working with adolescents in a psychiatric hospital, my small group decided to try an experiment. The teenagers took bandanas and tied them casually around their thighs on the outside of their jeans. Within one week, most adolescents on the unit were copying the style.

Social connection also involves the ability to socialize with and enjoy the company of others. This occurs in a variety of contexts: between classes, during lunch, at the mall, in neighborhood parks, at friends' houses, and in movie theaters. The modes of interaction have changed significantly over the years, with cell phones, texting, and the Internet now the primary methods of interaction. Texting during class has taken the place of passing notes. Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube are other primary sources of socialization. However, there is also still a need for face-to-face socialization practice.

During this period, social skills are practiced, conflict styles are tested, and social confidence is developed. Interactions with peers prepare adolescents for adult social interactions and obligations.

Becoming comfortable with one's sexuality and being able to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships are two of the important tasks of adolescence. This corresponds to Erikson's "intimacy versus isolation" developmental stage, which he considered a task of young adulthood. However, the practice relationships that develop the ability to successfully engage in intimate and romantic relationships take place during the adolescent years. During this period romantic interests are established, social skills are developed and practiced, conflict styles are developed, and sexual confidence is established. Same-sex friendships usually predate intimate love relationships and, eventually, committed sexual relationships.

Although young teens (ages 11 to 14) do develop close connections to peers, it is in later adolescence that the more intense and serious romantic relationships and friendships develop. During this transition, teens move from group activities to more individual encounters. As with other aspects of these developmental stages, the

development of close interpersonal relationships is a process, with the earlier stages being somewhat immature and short-lived. Older adolescents often have developed the capacity to maintain complex, committed relationships. However, a tremendous amount of personality change continues to occur during the young adult years.

Productivity and Achievement

During the adolescent years, many teens are drawn to certain activities and interests, which may eventually develop into career interests. Discovering areas of interest requires a considerable amount of experimentation. Most teens gravitate toward certain activities and then align their identity and social relationships with these activities. Examples of these role identities are high school band members, athletes, drama students, and school nerds.

Although adolescent activities are not necessarily a precursor to adult career choices, there are often aspects of these activities that merge into later career interests. Band members may go on to major in music, drama students may become actors, and football players may become Monday morning quarterbacks. These activities, as well as schoolwork, provide adolescents with a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Ownership of one's grades, activities, and accomplishments is extremely important during this time. Although it is not unusual in many societies, or even in families, for career choices to be established for the teenager, the task of developing a sense of achievement is important to becoming self-sufficient.

Many adolescents take part-time jobs, which provide not only spending money but also a sense of independence and accomplishment. Part-time jobs and extracurricular activities help many teenagers learn organization, negotiation, and money management. Some teenagers find themselves juggling school, work, and activities, and caution should be exercised so that they do not become overscheduled and exhausted.

Acquiring Values

Another key developmental task is the acquisition of values, ethics, and a sense of social responsibility. This task actually occurs in tandem with the other tasks outlined previously. During this time, many teenagers develop a heightened sense of social consciousness and can be quite rigid in their beliefs. These beliefs may be religious, political, environmental, and personal, such as vegetarianism. When adolescents have an opportunity to explore a variety of values and beliefs, they will eventually be able to accept or reject them and incorporate these choices into their sense of self.

Normal Adolescent Behavior

Social scientists typically divide adolescence into three periods: early adolescence (ages 11 to 13), middle adolescence (ages 14 to 17), and late adolescence (ages 18 to 21).

Another way to conceptualize these age groups is to consider them in terms of school grade levels. Typically, the earliest adolescents, ages 11 and 12, are in fifth and sixth grade. Many consider them preadolescents, and there is often a concern about

protecting them from the influence of older peers. Seventh and eighth graders typically range from 12 to 14 years of age. Ninth graders, typically 14 or 15, are a somewhat distinct category. Teens ages 16 to 18 are typically in 10th through 12th grade.

Many school districts have now recognized the need to separate teenagers into comfortable peer groups to allow for optimal educational and social development. Recently, school districts have started to separate sixth-graders into their own schools or areas within schools, and ninth-graders are also increasingly being segregated into ninth-grade centers within high school campuses. The concerns of the various age groups are different, and the need to protect younger students from the stress and peer pressure of older students is increasingly recognized, most likely on the basis of an awareness of the different developmental changes and stages that occur during the teenage years. Parents, teachers, coaches, the legal system, and the media should be aware of the wide variety of abilities that exist throughout the different stages of adolescence.

The following lists give a general overview of the behaviors, feelings, and conditions considered normal for early adolescence, middle adolescence, late adolescence, and young adulthood.

Early Adolescence (11 to 13):

- Onset of physical and sexual changes
- Thinking primarily in concrete terms
- Increased self-consciousness
- Beginning experimentation with style
- Increased interest in peer friendships
- Less tolerance of parents
- Beginning to develop "attitude" and challenge parental authority
- Boys become more obnoxious; girls become more melodramatic
- Increased intensity of emotions
- Feeling of being unique and misunderstood
- More time spent alone in room
- More complaints of boredom
- Continued dependence on family for social activities

Middle Adolescence (14 to 16):

- Continued but slower physical changes
- Increasing comfort with one's sexuality
- Increasing cognitive abilities, including the ability to think abstractly
- Reversion to more concrete and primitive thinking when stressed
- Increasing importance of social group
- Beginnings of interest in opposite-sex relationships
- Boys: amusement with sexual innuendos and insider jokes with other boys
- Girls: strong cliques and interpersonal drama
- Experimentation with different styles in an effort to define one's identity

- Better ability to handle multiple responsibilities
- Intense self-awareness and self-absorption
- Increasing dependence on friends for social activities
- Socializing with opposite sex, primarily in group activities
- Vulnerability to rejection by peers
- Less time spent with family, more time spent alone or with friends
- Possibly intensifying conflict with parents
- Development of one's own value system

Late Adolescence (16 to 18):

- Increasing cognitive abilities
- Ability to handle higher level cognitive functioning, such as advanced math concepts
- Development of strong preferences for certain activities
- Active involvement in and identification with a specific social group
- Less conflict with parents as comfort with self develops
- Consideration of long-term goals
- Dating and development of more mature or romantic relationships
- Possibly increased experimentation and testing of boundaries
- Possible use of alcohol, tobacco, and even drugs
- Ability to drive a car, hold a job, and take on other adult responsibilities

Young Adulthood (19 to 21):

- Physical maturity
- Well-developed cognitive abilities
- Well-established sexual identity
- Increasing idealism and philosophical approach
- More future orientation
- Development of well-thought-out plans and goals
- Choice of career and beginning moves toward attaining this goal
- Leaving home to attend college or join the military
- Handling one's own money
- Establishing more adult relationships with parents
- Less dependency on peer group for ideas and values
- Development of committed and long-term relationships
- Ability to participate in adult activities such as voting, drinking, gambling, and marriage

These developmental periods overlap and vary on the basis of an individual's physical growth, maturity level, and intellectual development. Teenagers' experiences with family, school, and peers help them develop these much needed characteristics, talents, and abilities. This book highlights how parenting style is instrumental to teens' acquisition of adult characteristics.