

IMPORTANCE OF ADOLESCENCE PERIOD

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Abstract

Each and every individual passes through various stages of life. Adolescence is one of the crucial periods one must pass through in life. The way every individual passes through it with the help of people around him/her determines how better the person's youth and adult periods will look like. Adolescence, a vital stage of growth and development, marks the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is characterized by rapid physiological changes and psychosocial maturation. It is also the stage when young people extend their relationships beyond parents and family; they are intensely influenced by their peers and the outside world in general. Adolescence period is very important in one's life. Early life experiences form the foundation for personality development, experiences during the adolescent years and contribute significantly to the unique characteristics and maturation of the young adult.

Key Words: Adolescence, early, middle, late, importance.

1. Introduction

Development is a continuous process and all human beings pass through specific stages or phases of development (Baron, 2008). According to Faloye (1998), a developmental psychologist, human development occurs in stages and each of the stages has its distinctive features or characteristics. These stages are;

- Infancy
- Childhood
- Adolescence

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- Adulthood
- Aged or old age

Out of all these five stages of human development the stage or the period of adolescence is the most confusing and the most poorly understood stage. This is because the adolescent is now acquiring physical attributes of adulthood but less emotionally developed as an adult (Olukunle, 2007). Adolescence is one of the stages of human development where everyone has to pass through. Through the adolescent door, everyone meander out of childhood into adult. Some adolescents go through it relatively easily into responsible adulthood, while most stumble going over the threshold (Sylvester, 2006).

1.1 Meaning and definition of adolescence

The word adolescence is derived from the Latin verb ‘adolescere’, which means “to grow into adulthood”. Adolescence is a time of moving from the immaturity of childhood into the maturity of adulthood (Hashmi, 2013). There are no hard and fast answers of when does childhood end and adulthood start. In fact, every culture decides for itself just when the dividing line falls and some mark this passage with special ceremonies. However, it is during the period of adolescence that the transition from child to adult takes place more gradually. Adolescence has traditionally been viewed as beginning with the onset of puberty, a rapid spurt in physical growth accompanied by sexual maturation, and as ending when individuals assume the responsibilities associated with adult life-marriage, entry into the workplace, and so on (Baron, 2008).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as those people between 10 and 19 years of age.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) also defines adolescents as being between the ages of 10 and 19, which is similar to the definition to which the World Health Organization adheres.

The World Programme of Action for Youth, The World Bank and The International Labor Organization (ILO) refers to adolescents as “youth” who are between the ages of 15 and 24. Countries and regions often define adolescence differently, according to cultural beliefs and practices. For instance, if adolescence is viewed as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, from dependence on family to autonomy, adolescence could terminate in one’s late twenties or even early thirties in some regions (as cited in UNICEF, 2006).

1.2 Stages of adolescence

This age sometimes referred to as teenage years, youth or puberty, occurring roughly between the ages of 10 and 20 can be broadly categorized into three stages:

i) Early (10-13 years of age): Dramatic physical changes are the hallmark of early adolescence. Typically, girls show signs of puberty 2 years earlier than boys and most girls experience a rapid growth spurt, changes in fat distribution, and development of secondary sexual characteristics such as pubic hair and breasts. For most boys, the early adolescent period

marks the beginning of the biological changes of puberty, including testicular growth, voice changes, and development of acne, pubic hair, and nocturnal emissions. Young adolescents have increasing potential for abstract, complex thinking, although their cognition still focuses primarily on the concrete and the present—the “here and now.” Their sense of morality is governed by conventional standards or rules and they have not developed an understanding of complex interrelationships or long-term consequences. Young adolescents may display erratic or moody behavior, especially with the stresses of academic achievement, sports performance, peer pressure, and changing family relationships.

ii) Middle (14-16 years of age): Middle adolescence is filled with challenging new experiences such as dating and driving, and, for most teens, it is a time of unparalleled potential and creative energy. They begin to probe more deeply to discover their individual identity. By the age of 15, most girls have completed the physiologic changes associated with puberty, and most boys are still in the process of maturing, rapidly gaining muscle mass, strength, and height, and completing development of secondary sexual characteristics. Most middle adolescents are increasingly comfortable with their sexual identity. Friends become very important and they are extremely sensitive to the social norms of the peer group. Youth in middle adolescence are better able to understand complex interrelationships and appreciate the perspectives of others. Teens begin to identify with and internalize societal values. As adolescents broaden and deepen their perspective, they often become concerned about community and societal issues such as homelessness, crime, or preserving the environment.

iii) Late (17-19 years of age): Having reached “the age of majority,” older adolescents are now legally responsible for themselves. Key developmental tasks include focusing on achieving independence, creating an adult sense of self, and developing a capacity for mature emotional intimacy, while maintaining emotional ties to their family. Most older adolescents have developed the potential for formal operational thinking, although they may not use it consistently in their daily life. They can draw upon broader life experiences to evaluate options and make decisions. Many— though not all—older adolescents have sophisticated moral reasoning and can formulate and follow abstract ethical principle (Cohen, n.d).

2. Importance of Adolescence

2.1 Adolescence in the international arena

Widespread acceptance of the importance of adolescence is relatively recent. Today, it is widely acknowledged that adolescence is a phase separate from both early childhood and adulthood, a period that requires special attention and protection. Even though, the term ‘adolescents’ is not mentioned in international conventions, declarations or treaties, all adolescents have rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other major human rights covenants and treaties. Most of them are also covered under the Convention on the

Rights of the Child, and adolescent girls are also protected under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and regional instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. It was after the Second World War, that the burgeoning movement for children's rights focused its attention on gaining special recognition for children and adolescents within the newly formed United Nations. This was achieved in 1959 with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Two decades later, the UN declared 1979 to be the International Year of the Child, and this was swiftly followed by the first International Youth Year, in 1985. And finally, The Convention on the Rights of the Child, was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989. The rights of all young children and adolescents under age 18 were expressed in such a way as to not only protect their welfare but also give them a central place as rights holders, providing an ethical basis for their active participation in all aspects of their lives (UNICEF, 2011).

2.2 Adolescents need explicit attention

The way every individual passes through adolescence with the help of people around him/her determines how better the person's youth and adult periods will look like. And family is one which exert a significant and stabilizing influence on adolescents in the formation of attitudes and values that will have a lasting impact on the quality of their lives. Family's love, affection, and support have a major impact in helping older adolescents become healthy young adults by providing a stable and supportive home environment and by maintaining a trusting and open relationship in which the young person feels cared for and comfortable in sharing new challenges and concerns. Parents exert significant influence on the well-being of older adolescents by consistently modeling preventive and health-promoting practices such as driving safely, avoiding or moderating the use of alcohol, and scheduling regular health visits. Communities need to provide safe, supervised recreational programs and facilities for adolescents, opportunities for adolescents to pursue meaningful work experiences and community service activities, and access to training programs. Communities can provide outreach, promote access to local health and social services through resource centers and innovative programs for youth, and facilitate school-to-work programs and other specialized training and employment opportunities (Cohen, n.d.). Peer groups, teachers also play a great role in shaping the life course of the adolescents.

2.3 Adolescent development has health implications throughout life

Adolescents face high-risk behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, and sexual behaviors that can lead to adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; mental health concerns such as eating disorders and depression. These health issues, most of which are preventable, can lead to significant morbidity and even mortality. Unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide are leading causes of death in adolescence. Adolescents should try to

avoid risks and integrate safe and healthy habits which are critical in making a successful transition to adulthood. In this aspect, families, communities, and health professionals all play key roles in helping adolescents participate in health-promoting services and complete the transition to adulthood successfully. Lack of family and social support systems, coupled with greater personal freedom, can increase risky behaviors, and some high-risk behaviors tend to peak during this time (Cohen, n.d.).

2.4 The way adolescents think and act decide their future

Adolescence is one of the periods when both physical and psychological changes accompanied by rapid mental developments take place. These give rise to the need for mental adjustments and necessity for establishing new attitudes, values and interests. Filled with hopes, the Adolescent is eager to interact with new experiences, to find new relationships, to examine inner strengths and explore the strengths of inner ability. A proper shaping of the personality during adolescence can prepare a valuable human resource for well settled future. Hence this period is very important to plan their future. Many of the youngsters were found regretting of a wrong career choice; lack of proper planning etc., and many research studies on unemployment have proved that wrong career/course choice is one of the causes for unemployment.

3. Conclusion

Adolescence, the transition between childhood and adult life, is one of the most dynamic stages of human development. Adolescence is accompanied by dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that present both opportunities and challenges for adolescents, families, health professionals, educators, and communities. Although early life experiences form the foundation for personality development, experiences during the adolescent years contribute significantly to the unique characteristics and maturation of the young adult.

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