
CHAPTER 11

Understanding Teen Behaviors in the Context of Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a time of transition characterized by significant changes in physical, intellectual, psychosocial, and moral development. It is a time when young people move from the simple, structured world of childhood to the complex and often ambiguous adult society. While most adolescents manage this transition successfully, some youth have problems negotiating the changes from childhood to adolescence and/or from adolescence to adulthood.

Over the past twenty years, social scientists have been searching for factors that differentiate youth who are at greater risk for developing problems from those who are not. In many ways, the nature of adolescence places all young people at risk because it is by definition a time of great change. Despite adolescence being a turbulent time for all youth, some individuals are more likely to develop problematic behaviors than others.

Risk and Protective Factors

An ecological model of adolescent development looks at both environmental and contextual influences on youth (Schiamberg, Paulson & Zawacki, 1998). Each of the five levels of the model address a different system in an adolescent's life. These systems include all types of influences, such as family, peers, schools, neighbors, spiritual community, media, and cultural norms.

Although there are factors that make contemporary adolescence a risky period for the onset of substance abuse and other problematic behaviors, there are vast differences within the adolescent population in vulnerability to these risks. There are some factors which seem to increase an individual's susceptibility to dangerous or problem behaviors; while other factors offer some protection or enhance the youth's ability to resist the problem behaviors. Risk factors are factors that put an adolescent in danger of engaging in health-compromising behavior. Protective factors are factors that lessen the likelihood that adolescents will participate in activities that have negative health and social outcomes (Resnick et al., 1997).

Risk and protective factors exist at all levels of the ecological model. Some of these risk and protective factors involve the biological, cognitive or psychosocial changes experienced by the young person during the adolescent years. Other factors are directly related to the adolescent's changing social relationships, particularly those with family members and peers that can make involvement in problem behaviors more or less likely. At another level, transitions in adolescents' relationships with school, work, and society at large can influence their decisions and behaviors. Understanding the transitions that occur during adolescence can help to minimize the risk factors and enhance the protective factors to help support the healthy development of our young people.

Cognitive Development

One area of special significance is understanding the cognitive changes that occur during adolescence. As adolescents mature, their thinking becomes more sophisticated and more adult-like in many respects. However, as they become more introspective, young teens often go through periods of extreme self absorption which Elkind (1978) calls “*adolescent egocentrism*.” This phenomenon results in the adolescents focusing on themselves to the point they exclude others (Berger, 1998). Adolescent egocentrism results in limitations in thinking that can make some teens more vulnerable to negative influences and potentially dangerous behavior.

One such limitation is the “*personal fable*.” It revolves around the adolescent’s erroneous belief that his or her experiences, perspectives and values are unique and specific only to him or her, and these factors will lead them to fame, fortune, honor, glory or great accomplishments (Berger, 1998).

Another limitation is the “*invincibility fable*.” Adolescents believe they are invincible and can never be hurt. Teens believe they are not susceptible to the risks which affect everyone else (Berger, 1998). For example, young people who can recite the statistics about alcohol and fatal automobile accidents may still drink and drive because they believe it can’t happen to them.

A final limitation of adolescent egocentrism is the “*imaginary audience*” or a heightened self-consciousness that emerges in early adolescence. Adolescents believe others are as wrapped up in the details of their own appearance and behavior as they are. When they create this imaginary audience, adolescents tend to overestimate the number of other teens involved in particular behaviors. Also, they tend to overestimate the degree to which their behavior will lead to social acceptance or social rejection. This kind of thinking makes the adolescent more vulnerable to the pressures of others.

Peers

A second important developmental consideration is the increased influence of peers, sometimes referred to as “*peer pressure*.” During childhood, males and females are highly oriented toward their parents and far less so toward their peers. As they approach adolescence, young people become less susceptible to parental influence, and more to peer influence.. There is little net gain in self-reliance; only the source of influence has shifted from parents to peers. While peer pressure is often discussed in a negative context, it is important to remember that it can also be positive. Teens may feel as much pressure to smoke cigarettes from their friends as they do to get good grades (Berger, 1998). As adolescents mature, they develop a greater sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency which allow them to establish more independent relations with both parents and peers.

Parents

A third consideration is the role of parents. During adolescence, teens frequently question previously accepted values of their parents and other adult authorities before arriving at their own personal set of principles which govern their behavior. During this time, teens may test out some socially disruptive and sometimes health-endangering behavior. Most of the time this experimentation does not escalate to more serious levels (Baumrind, 1987). Researchers have found that adolescents do best in families where they feel accepted and supported, and where differentiation and expression of ideas and opinions are encouraged (Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996).

In Conclusion

Most youth manage the transition through adolescence successfully. The majority of young people emerge with a healthy sense of self, warm relationships with their parents, the capacity to make intelligent and responsible decisions, and with one or more close relationships with other teens. However, some teens do encounter serious psychological and behavioral problems that disrupt not only their lives but the lives of those around them (Steinberg, 1989). Consequently, it's exceedingly important to understand influences on the adolescent's self-concept, social relations, and activity patterns.

The young person who approaches adulthood with a sense of confidence and purpose, well-developed social and instrumental competencies, and protective factors at every level of influence in the ecological model has a good chance of negotiating adolescence successfully. In contrast, the young person who has few protective factors and many risk factors runs a greater chance of developing problem behaviors. Therefore, it is important that we examine the risk and protective factors in the lives of youth in order to promote those factors which positively influence their lives.