
CHAPTER 10

Understanding Teen Behaviors in the Context of Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a time of transitions 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 youngsters 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 those youngsters who are at greater risk for developing problems from those who are not. In some senses, the nature of adolescence today places all young people at risk because the widespread use of alcohol and drugs and level of sexual activity among American adolescents exposes large numbers of young people to these problems. Yet we know that some individuals are more likely to initiate and continue these problem behaviors than others (Steinberg, 1989).

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 risk factors which seem to increase an individual's susceptibility to dangerous or problem behaviors; other factors seem to offer some protection or enhance the youngster's ability to resist the problem behaviors.

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 an adolescent's relation with school, work settings, and society at large can influence decisions and behaviors of teens. 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.

One area of special significance is understanding the cognitive changes of adolescence. As they mature, adolescents' 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 adolescent

egocentrism results in limitations in thinking that can make some teens more vulnerable to negative influence and potentially dangerous behavior.

One such limitation is the "*personal fable*." It revolves around the adolescent's erroneous belief that his or her experiences are unique and specific only to them, and they are not as susceptible to the risks which affect everyone else. 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.

Another limitation in adolescent thinking is the "*imaginary audience*" or a heightened self-consciousness that emerges in early adolescence. Adolescents believe that 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 kids 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.

A third important developmental consideration is the increased influence of peers, sometimes referred to as "*peer pressure*." During childhood, boys and girls 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, but they replace their dependence on parents with dependence on peers. There is little net gain in self-reliance; only the source of influence has shifted from parents to peers. 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.

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. However, most adolescents who experiment with drugs or other health-compromising practices do not escalate their worrisome behavior (Baumrind, 1987).

Most adolescents manage the transitions of adolescence successfully. The majority of young people emerge with a healthy sense of self, warm relationships with their parents, a 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).

The young person who approaches adulthood with a sense of confidence and purpose, well-developed social and instrumental competencies, who associates with peers who value achievement (academic, athletic, artistic, or otherwise) and responsible behavior, and who devalues drug and alcohol use, is at relatively low risk for substance abuse and associated problems. In contrast, the young person who possesses few skills and little hopes for the future, who associates with peers who embrace an antisocial or pro-drug lifestyle, and who spends a large part of his or her day

isolated from adults, runs a greater risk of developing problem behaviors. Consequently, it's exceedingly important to understand influences on the adolescent's self-conceptions, social relations, and activity patterns.