



# A Critical Assessment of Adolescence, the Characteristics and Developmental Tasks of Adolescent in the Contemporary World

**Bassey S. Udom**

*Ph.D., Sociology and Anthropology Social Sciences University of Uyo Akwa Ibom State*

**Grace Effiong Udongwo**

*Department of Educational Foundations Akwa Ibom State College of Education, Afaha Nsit*

**Abstract:** This paper carefully discussed adolescence and adolescence psychology in the contemporary world. Adolescents are a distinct group, no longer children but not yet adults, and, as such, have unique needs. It was discovered in this paper that the rate at which adolescents experience changes varies depending on gender, genetics, environmental factors, and health. Adolescence can be broken into three stages: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Each stage has its own characteristics. Early adolescence is the first stage and occurs from age 10 to 14. This stage usually begins with puberty. The middle adolescence is the second stage and occurs from age 15 to 17. Teenagers at this stage are extremely concerned with how they look. Late adolescents generally have completed physical development and have grown to their full adult height. This paper concluded that biological changes that take place during puberty have a tremendous effect on an adolescent psychologically. One of the changes, for example, is menarche. One of the recommendations made was that since strong and loving relationships can have a direct and positive influence on adolescents, it is therefore advisable that adolescents avoid alcohol intake and other drugs, get enough regular sleep, develop and maintain good eating habits, and stay physically active. This can directly promote their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Adolescence and Adolescence psychology.

*Date of Submission: 5-4-2022*

*Date of Acceptance: 7-5-2022*

## Introduction

A thorough understanding of adolescence in society depends on information from various perspectives, including psychology, biology, history, sociology, education, and anthropology. Within all of these perspectives, adolescence is viewed as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, whose cultural purpose is the preparation of children for adult roles (Larson, R., & Wilson, S. 2004). It is a period of multiple transitions involving education, training, employment, and unemployment, as well as transitions from one living circumstance to another. According to Dorn Biro (2011), adolescence is usually associated with the teenage years, but its physical, psychological, or cultural expressions may begin earlier and end later. Puberty now typically begins during preadolescence, particularly in females.

Arnett (2007) asserted that in studying adolescent development, adolescence can be defined biologically as the physical transition marked by the onset of puberty and the termination of physical growth; cognitively, as changes in the ability to think abstractly and multi-dimensionally; or socially, as a period of preparation for adult roles. Major pubertal and biological changes include changes to the sex organs, height, weight, and muscle mass, as well as major changes in brain structure and organization. Cognitive advances encompass both increments in knowledge and the ability to think abstractly and to reason more effectively.

### **Concept of Adolescence**

Adolescence is the period of time when one physically and emotionally grows from childhood to adulthood. Basically, it's when you're old enough to want to be an adult but young enough that no one takes you seriously! Adolescence comes from the Latin word "adolescere", which means "to ripen" or "to grow up." So, it makes sense that we use it to describe that unique age when kids start growing into something closer to grown-ups. Adolescence can also refer specifically to puberty. Adolescence can be broken into three stages: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Each stage has its own characteristics.

### **Stages in Adolescence**

**Early Adolescence:** Early adolescence is the first stage and occurs from age 10 to 14. Puberty usually begins during this stage. It is quite obvious that people at this stage become aware of their rapidly changing bodies and start to worry about their physical appearance. These types of people experience shyness, blushing, modesty, and a greater interest in privacy. Early adolescents may feel invincible and start to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking and alcohol use. This period is also characterized by sexual curiosity, which is usually expressed through admiration of celebrities, teen idols, and musicians. Relationships with close friends become more important than family ones. Early adolescents start to realize that their parents are not infallible and begin to identify their own faults. It is also common for early adolescents to show act-out behaviors.

**Middle Adolescence:** Middle adolescence is the second stage and occurs from ages 15 to 17. By this time, puberty has passed. Teenagers at this stage are extremely concerned with how they look. They spend a large amount of time grooming, exercising, and modifying their physical appearance. Relationships often change during middle adolescence. There is also the worry about sexual attractiveness. Middle adolescents complain about their parents' preventing them from becoming independent, and they withdraw from them. They may try to assert their independence by refusing to bathe, not cleaning their rooms, and picking up annoying habits. There is an intense focus on peer groups during middle adolescence, and teens at this stage tend to confide in each other more than they do their parents. As with early adolescence, teens in middle adolescence may feel invincible. Risk-taking behaviors are significantly increased during this stage. On the other hand, acting-out behaviors begin to decrease since teens at this stage have a better grasp on how to use words as a means of expression.

**Late Adolescents (18-21... and beyond!):** Late adolescents generally have completed physical development and have grown to their full adult height. They usually have more impulse control by now and may be better able to gauge risks and rewards accurately. In comparison to middle adolescents, youth in late adolescence might find themselves thinking: "While I do love Paul Rudd movies, I need to study for my final." Even though marijuana is legal, I'm worried about how it might affect my mood and my work or school performance. Teenagers entering early adulthood have a stronger sense of their own individuality now and can identify their own values. They may become more focused on the future and base decisions on their hopes and ideals. Friendships and romantic relationships become more stable. They become more emotionally and physically separated from their families. However, many reestablish an "adult" relationship with their parents, considering them more of an equal with whom to ask advice and discuss mature topics with, rather than an authority figure.

## **Characteristics of Adolescence**

Adolescence is a time characterized by rapid change and development, as it is the transition between childhood and young adulthood. Changes can be inconsistent and also uncomfortable. Adolescents experience physical, social, as well as personal and emotional changes. Cognitive processes will also begin to differ. The rate at which an adolescent experiences changes will vary depending on gender, genetics, environmental factors, and health.

### ***Physical Changes***

Physical change is a primary characteristic of adolescents. Preteens will experience growth spurts, changes in skeletal structure, muscle and brain development, as well as sexual and hormonal development. Gender differences play a role in when these changes occur. For girls, physical changes begin to happen at about age 12, while boys typically begin to see changes at about age 14. Eating disorders, drug use, and sexual activity can pose serious health risks if teens engage in these behaviors during these rapid physical changes.

### ***Social- interpersonal***

Socialization is another characteristic of adolescence, as they begin to socialize more with their peers and separate themselves from their family. During childhood, kids have a loyalty to their adult role models, such as parents or teachers. However, during adolescence, this loyalty shifts, making preteens more loyal to their friends and peers. For adolescents, self-esteem is largely dependent on their social lives. Girls tend to stick to small groups of close friends, while boys build larger social networks. Adolescents are highly aware of others and how they are perceived during this stage. Common characteristics under social-interpersonal include:

- Display a more developed social consequence
- Are more aware of relationships and have a strong need to belong
- Exhibit desire for independence and autonomy
- Experience a shift from dependence on family to dependence on peers
- Able to critically compare parents with others
- Seek deeper friendship based on shared interests' loyalty
- Experience increased interest in opposite sex, though may often feel uncomfortable and awkward with the other sex

### ***Cognitive- Intellectual Development***

Changes in cognitive processes are characteristic during adolescence. Preteens experience higher thinking, reasoning, and abstract thought. Preteens develop more advanced language skills and verbalization, allowing for more advanced communication. Abstract thought allows adolescents to develop a sense of purpose, fairness, and social consciousness. Adolescents also decide how moral and ethical choices will guide their behaviors during this time. Cognitive processes are affected by overall socialization, meaning that adolescents will develop differently during this stage based on individual factors such as:

- Develop ability to think abstractly, but may still think in literal terms
- Develop critical thinking skills and become more self-aware, self-critical
- Exhibit increased communication skills
- Becomes argumentative and demonstrate an intense need to be 'right'
- Develop decision making skills and wants a voice in their choices
- Show intense focus on a new interest but lack discipline to sustain it

### ***Personal and Emotional Characteristics***

Adolescence is a time when emotions begin to run high. Parents and teachers may begin to notice argumentative and aggressive behaviors due to sudden and intense emotions. Adolescents are also characteristically self-absorbed. They are preoccupied with themselves because they are beginning to develop a sense of self, but they are also scrutinizing their own thought processes and personalities. Possibilities begin to look endless during adolescence, leading some teens to become overly idealistic. They also believe that their thoughts and feelings are unique, doubting that others could possibly understand what they are experiencing.

- ✓ They are unpredictable emotionally, are sensitive and prone to outbursts
- ✓ Are vulnerable to emotional pleas and can be easily manipulated
- ✓ Exhibit an increasing capacity for empathy
- ✓ Experience increasing sexual feeling, may engage in sexual behavior without realizing the consequences

### **Moral**

Moral development is defined as an individual's ability to make principled choices and how to treat one another. Many of the attitudes, beliefs, and values that young adolescents develop during early adolescence remain with them for life (Brighton, 2007). They move away from blanket acceptance of adult moral judgment to the development of their own personal values. However, they usually embrace the values of parents or key adults (Scales, 2010). As noted, the increased capacity of young adolescents for analytical thought, reflection, and introspection characterizes the connection between their intellectual and moral development. Young adolescents also tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness (Kellough & Kellough, 2008; Scales, 2010). As they progress into the interpersonal conformity stage of moral development, young adolescents begin to reconcile their understanding of people who care about them with their own egocentricity (Roney, 2005). They transition from a self-centered perspective to considering the rights and feelings of others (Scales, 2010). Gender affects how adolescents approach moral dilemmas. Males view moral issues through a justice lens, and females use an interpersonal care lens.

Young adolescents often pose broad, unanswerable questions about life and refuse to accept trivial responses from adults (Kellough & Kellough, 2008). They also begin to view moral issues in shades of gray rather than only in black and white. While young adolescents start to consider complex moral and ethical questions, they tend to be unprepared to cope with them. Consequently, young adolescents struggle with making sound moral and ethical choices (Kellough & Kellough, 2008). Adolescents:

- ✓ Tend to be legalistic, focusing on rules and fairness
- ✓ Refrain moral belief of parents but begin to test rules of childhood
- ✓ Are influenced by the values of peers
- ✓ Form a more personal conscience, seek moral criteria that make senses to them

### **Developmental Tasks of Adolescent**

According to Arnett (2010), the term "developmental task" was introduced by Robert Havighurst in the 1950's. Havighurst (1953) has stated that a developmental task is a task that arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, the successful completion of which leads to the individual's happiness and success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness and difficulty with later tasks. Adolescents do not progress through these multiple developmental tasks separately. At any given time, adolescents may be dealing with several. Further, the centrality of specific developmental tasks varies across the early, middle, and late periods of the transition. During the early adolescent years, young people make their first attempts to leave the dependent, secure role of

a child and to establish themselves as unique individuals, independent of their parents. Early adolescence is marked by rapid physical growth and maturation. The focus of adolescents' self-concepts is thus often on their physical self and their evaluation of their physical acceptability. Early adolescence is also a period of intense conformity to peers. "Getting along," "not being different," and "being accepted" appear to be important issues for the early adolescent. From the view of the early adolescent, the worst possibility is to be seen by peers as "different."

Havighurst (1972) outlined nine major tasks during the adolescent period.

1. *Accepting one's physique and using the body effectively:* Adolescents need to accept their physique and learn to care for their body and to use the body effectively in sports and athletics etc.
2. *Achieving new and more mature relations with age mates of both sexes:* Adolescents should move from the same sex interests and playmates of middle childhood to establish hetero-sexual friendships. Becoming an adult means learning social skills and behavior required in group life.
3. *Achieving a masculine or feminine social sex-role:* Psycho sexual social roles are established by each culture hence, adolescents should examine the sex roles of their culture and decide what aspects they must adopt.
4. *Achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults:* Adolescents must develop understanding, affection and respect without emotional dependence. Adolescents who are rebellious and in conflict with their parents and other adults need to develop a greater understanding of themselves and adults.
5. *Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior:* developing an ideology.
6. *Desiring and achieving socially responsible behavior:* this goal includes the development of a social ideology that takes into account of societal values.
7. *Preparing for an economic career:* one of the primary goals of adolescents is to decide what they want to become vocationally, to prepare for the career.
8. Developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence.
9. *Preparing for marriage and family life:* any individual desires a happy marriage and parenthood as one important goal in life and need to develop positive attitudes, social skills, emotional maturity to make marriage work.

Among these, the two primary developmental tasks during adolescence are:

- i. To establish independence from adults, in self-identification and emotional independence also called as emotional autonomy.
- ii. To develop social, intellectual, language and motor skills that are essential for individual and group participation in heterosexual activities.

The other developmental tasks are:

- i. Accepting changes that takes place in one's own body, physical appearance, and learning good grooming practices
- ii. Achieving appropriate relationships with age mates of both sexes.
- iii. Accepting masculine and feminine role that is appropriate to their age level
- iv. Acquiring moral concepts values, attitudes.

### **Interest and Problems of Adolescence**

An individual's interests and problems influence his development to a great extent. Adolescence is a crucial period in the life of an individual, with its characteristic needs and problems of adjustment.



Every adolescent has certain needs, the satisfaction of which is essential to their continued physical and other aspects of development. An interest is a tension within an organism which must be satisfied for the wellbeing of the organism. When an interest is satisfied, the tension is released and the individual experiences satisfaction. There are certain basic needs and interests that every individual has. They are broadly classified into physiological needs and psychological needs.

**Primary or Physiological Needs:** The fulfillment of physiological needs is inevitable because they are concerned with the very existence of the individual. The need for oxygen, need for water and food, need for rest and sleep, need for sex gratification etc. are the important physiological needs.

**Secondary or Socio-Psychological Needs:** Needs that are associated with the socio-cultural environment of an individual are called "secondary needs." They are acquired through social learning, and their satisfaction is necessary for the psychological wellbeing of the individual. The important socio-psychological needs are as follows: security needs, love needs, approval needs, freedom and independence needs, self-expression and achievement needs. The adolescent is a problem-individual. There are many problems around him, and he needs help and guidance for their solution at every step. The following problems are the most significant at this stage.

**Excessive Energy:** Adolescence is a stage of excessive energy. In-take of food is increased at this stage, and general health is also improved. The result is excessive energy. Adolescents need more activity for catharsis of excessive energy. Our traditional schools do not provide such physical activity. Consequently, the adolescent is restless. Various activities act as sublimations for the adolescents, and they feel relieved.

**Misunderstandings Concerning Sex:** With the advent of adolescence, the gonads come into activity for the first time. The appearance of secondary sexual characteristics is due to the same. They cause adolescent emotional upheaval. The first appearance of a menstrual cycle or nocturnal emission perplexes and shocks the adolescent, who is completely unaware of it. Due to ignorance about sex, many promising personalities are doomed.

**Aggressiveness or Withdrawal:** When an adolescent cannot adjust to the world, he grows to be aggressive or withdraws from the field, and his personality is arrested. If the conflict is too serious, he regresses. The school should provide ample opportunities for the children to express themselves properly. Co-curricular activities, scouting for student self-government and different methods of instruction can all help the adolescent adjust to life in the real world.

**Rebellious Attitude:** Adolescents are no longer children. They should be recognized as young men and women in school as well as in the home. Their craving for independence should be satisfied to some extent. They should be given some responsibility. They can turn out to be very obedient if they are trusted. But things do not work so smoothly in ordinary schools and homes. Their sense of independence and responsibility is seldom recognized. The result is a rebellion against authority.

**Physical Awkwardness:** Most adolescents have a feeling of physical clumsiness. Consequently, their movements are awkward and unbalanced. They may be corrected in the playground and on the stage. Games and dancing will give them harmonious and balanced movements. Social service on the occasion of festivals, etc., and practical work can help the children in this respect.

**Excessive Day-Dreaming:** Day-dreaming is normal at this stage, but when it grows excessive, it may be injurious as far as the development of personality is concerned. The teacher should note that the adolescents are active and busy in their studies and other aspects of school life. Children indulging in excessive day-dreaming should be encouraged to be constructive and creative.

**Emancipation:** It is the ambition for freedom from parental sovereign. The individual hates control of the parents. He seeks identity to himself.

**Economic independence:** This is another problem of economic independence. Money from parents for personal expense is a major problem.

**Emotional tension:** Emotional development is at maximum and unstable. Self-respect and personal pride make the individual emotionally bad. He expects the things to be done as he aspires.

**Personal appearance:** This is a significant problem. The adolescent is much worried about the appearance with modern and latest life style at any cost.

**Morphological / Developmental Problems:** over growth of hair or undergrowth of hair, over weight and underweight, skin color problems, Facial deformities, pimples, etc. Limb deformities, abnormal growth of genitals and breasts.

**Psychological Problems:** Skin color, beauty, mental ability, and IQ all contribute to an inferiority/superiority complex. Inexplicable perceptions about dress and fashion codes these are wrong and unrealistic ideologies about friendship and courtship. Perceptual, communicational, preconceived complications about their teachers and parents. Attraction towards the opposite sex. unrealistic and illogical curiosity about sex and sex-related issues. Exceptional vulnerability to suicide psychology. Ignorance of many basic facts leads to psychological problems like misconceptions about sexual feelings and sex-related issues, misconceptions about child birth and reproduction, misconceptions about coitus and menstrual cycles, fear of sex and sexual issues and guilt feelings about sex-related issues.

**Social:** Anticipated unemployment and insecurity due to unemployment. Unwarranted and inexplicable hatred towards brothers and sisters, friends. Intense closeness with brothers and sisters, friends. Unpredictable and volatile relationships with friends. Media-influenced unrealistic social perceptions of violence, love, and sex. Unusually vulnerable and volatile relations with relatives. Fear/imagination about married life and life partners.

**Educational:** Tensions of attending the classes, examinations and tests. Low IQ feeling. Fear about failure in examination. Fear about low score. Fear and concern about a future career. Misconceptions about teachers.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a time when emotions begin to run high. Parents and teachers may begin to notice argumentative and aggressive behaviors due to sudden and intense emotions. Adolescents experience physical, social, as well as personal and emotional changes. The rate at which adolescents experience changes varies depending on gender, genetics, environmental factors and health. Adolescence can be broken into three stages: early adolescence, middle adolescence, and late adolescence. Each stage has its own characteristics. Early adolescence is the first stage and occurs from age 10 to 14. This stage usually begins with puberty. The middle adolescence is the second stage and occurs from ages 15 to 17. Teenagers at this stage are extremely concerned with how they look. Late adolescents generally have completed physical development and have grown to their full adult height. Adolescents spend a lot more time with their peers than younger children do and are more heavily influenced by them than younger children are. Also, biological changes that take place during puberty have a tremendous effect on an adolescent psychologically. One of the changes, for example, is menarche in female adolescents.

## Recommendations

1. Strong and loving relationships can have a direct and positive influence on adolescents, it is therefore advisable that adolescents avoid alcohol intake and other drugs, get enough regular sleep, develop and maintain good eating habits, and stay physically active. This can directly promote their psychological and emotional wellbeing.
2. Since adolescents can easily adapt to their biological environment, it is very important for parents and teachers to offer basic education about the physical environment and its phenomenon. E.g. they should be taught on how to connect with other people, pay attention to

the present moment, and keep good relationship for good relationships are important for adolescents' mental wellbeing.

## REFERENCES

1. Arnett J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspectives* 1 (2): 68–73.
2. Arnett, J. J. (2010). *Adolescence and emerging adulthood: A cultural approach* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
3. Baltes, P. B., Reese, H., & Lipsitt, L. in McLeod, S. A. (2017). *Developmental psychology. Simply Psychology*. [www.simplypsychology.org/developmental-psychology.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/developmental-psychology.html)
4. Brighton, K. L. (2007). Coming of age: *The education and development of young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.
5. Burman, E. (2017). *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
6. Darwin, C. (1877). A Biographical Sketch of an Infant. *Mind*, 2, 285-294.
7. Dorn L. D & Biro F. M. (2011). Puberty and Its Measurement: A Decade in Review. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21 (1): 180–195.
8. Havighurst, R. J. (1953). The middle school child in contemporary society. *Theory into Practice*, 7, 120-122.
9. Havighurst, R. J. (1972). *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relation to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion, and education*. New York, NY: Appleton & Company.
10. Kellough, R. D., & Kellough, N. G. (2008). *Teaching young adolescents: Methods and resources for middle grades teaching* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall
11. Larson, R., & Wilson, S. (2004). Adolescence across place and time: Globalization and the changing pathways to adulthood. In R. Lerner and L. Steinberg *Handbook of adolescent psychology*. New York: Wiley.
12. Roney, K. (2005). Young adolescent development. In V. A. Anfara, Jr., G. Andrews & S. B. Mertens, (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of middle grades education* (pp. 397-401). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
13. Scales, P. C. (2010). *Characteristics of young adolescents*. In this we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents (pp. 63-62). Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.