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# The Three Dimensions of Adolescence

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Adolescence is a unique time in a person’s life where we go through many changes. These changes have lasting effects on us as individuals. There are many physical, psychological and social changes that occur in transition from middle childhood and throughout the stages of adolescence. Understanding these dimensions of development is imperative in understanding the behavior and thought process of an adolescent. Between the ages of 11 and 24 I engaged in many common adolescent behaviors. During my adolescence I went through many unique experiences and felt fluctuating emotions dealing the many changes of my body, mind and relationships that have led me to who I am as a person today.

**Biophysical Dimension**

The biophysical dimension of adolescence consists of all the changes the body goes through. Boys and girls experience many similar but also different physical changes during this time. I can remember around the age of 11 going through a growth spurt, I grew a significant amount in height but didn’t gain much, if any weight. I went from being average to being tall and skinny. This caused stress for me because I had not yet experienced menarche so I had the body, in my mind, comparable to a boy. Approximately one year later I experienced menarche, which caused even greater stress for me. I was so embarrassed that I hid it from my mom for weeks even though I had gone through sex education and knew what to expect I still felt for some reason, ashamed. After confessing to my mom about this she made me feel more comfortable and assured me that it was nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed of and in fact many of my friends also had the same experience. Some of my friends had much more prominent changes in their body than I did and this made me self-conscious. Their bodies were beginning to look curvier which in turn gained them attention from boys, which most teenage girls value and I did.

At age 14 I entered middle adolescence described by Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010), I began to become more comfortable with my body as my hips began to broaden and I began to see characteristics of a young lady, although middle adolescence came with its own biophysical stressors. Acne became a problem for me around this age. It was embarrassing and hindered my self-esteem. This is when I started to experiment with make-up. I grew up watching my mom and older sister do their hair and make-up and I began to emulate them. This helped me to cope with my self-esteem issues and I began to feel pretty and comfortable in my own skin.

At the middle stage of adolescence I also had an extremely fast metabolism; I could eat anything and not gain a pound. My lunches consisted of French fries and peanut butter cups along with many other unhealthy options. I remained very physically active during this time, participating in athletics which contributed to my fast metabolism and lean body. Later in adolescence I began to notice that my metabolism slowed and I could no longer eat whatever I wanted without consequences. I became more sedentary after high school without team sports and this took a toll on me physically and began to be a stressor. I had to make an effort to maintain a healthy weight, something I never had to worry about before.

**Psychological Dimension**

These biophysical factors lead to the psychological dimension of adolescence along with brain development and growing interactions with parents and peers. The psychological dimension of adolescence consists of cognitive development and information processing, communication, attitudes and emotions as well as social cognition and regulation (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010). There are many theories regarding the psychological dimension including Piaget’s formal operations stage in which “the adolescent is capable of abstract thought.” (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010) I can relate to this stage. Around age 12 I began to wonder, “what if” and thought more about the future and what it could be like if I did this or that. If I wanted something I began to think about what my options were and began planning how this would be fulfilled. I would observe my friends actions, for example how my friend might have gotten her way with her parents, and take that knowledge and enter it into my existing knowledge by assimilation as described by Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010). Later in adolescence I began to have a stronger sense of self and was able to adjust this thinking to fit my lifestyle and relationships by accommodation (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010).

In adolescence I began to communicate much more effectively due to my advancing cognitive development and the presence of strong feelings and opinions. At this age I began to value journaling and note passing with my peers. Most of my conversations at this age revolved around boys, gossip and making plans with my friends. With this note passing comes to idea of trust and confidentiality. I trusted my friends to keep secret any gossip or “boy talk” that I expressed in my notes and I remember being so embarrassed when teachers would catch us note passing and read the note aloud to the class. This was a complete breach of confidentiality and in turn made me lose trust in that teacher. Another situation where confidentiality was valued was when speaking with my school counselor in high school. I was having relationship problems and I remember being hesitant in opening up to my counselor in fear that she would divulge information to friends involved or my parents. As stated by Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010) “Adolescents have made it clear that in order for many of them to feel comfortable receiving services they want clear communication about confidentiality.”

Throughout adolescence my self-esteem fluctuated frequently. Friendships came and went and relationships changed. In early adolescence I was more vulnerable and self-conscious. I valued people’s opinions and was very sensitive to them; a petty argument with a friend or a rumor would sabotage my self-esteem in an instant. This type of thing happened often and the fluctuation in emotions was a constant roller coaster during this time, “the average adolescent can come down from extreme happiness or up from extreme sadness within forty-five minutes.” (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010) A part of this emotional fluctuation has to do with identity vs. identity confusion as explored by Erikson. Adolescents go through a time in their life when they are transitioning from childhood to adolescence called psychological moratorium (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010) . This confusion and cognitive development causes adolescents to think more rationally about possibilities. As adolescents go through these stages of moral development as explored by Kohlberg there are moments of extreme highs and lows which cause unpredictable emotions regarding moral reasoning. I can remember over thinking every situation in middle and high school, taking into consideration all aspects and reflecting on what the possible outcomes could be and what I needed to do in order to reach the desired outcome. Adolescents go through so many stages as they develop cognitively which causes their psychological state to change frequently and rapidly. As stated by Ashford & Winston Lecroy and defined by David Elkind these cognitive changes can result in egocentrism which are thoughts of being the center of attention and the idea that everything and everyone revolves around you (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010). I can remember going through this when I was in high school. I used to think that everyone was looking at me or talking about me which at times made me self-conscious but also made me feel good about myself. In reality these ideas were usually false but the thought of being unique and worth talking about was gratifying.

**Social Dimension**

The social dimension of adolescence is the time when we begin to explore relationships and form strong meaningful bonds. This is also the time when the relationship with my parents began to suffer. This reflects the theory of control vs. autonomy (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010). Control vs. autonomy is the theory that “as young people move into adolescence, they begin to process of acquiring more independence, and parents to begin the process of granting more independence” (Ashford & Winston Lecroy, 2010). I can remember this being the hardest part of my adolescence. My parents were authoritative parents in that they positively encouraged me and were very involved in my life and my success, they trusted me to make many of my own decisions, some which with they disagreed. My friends had a huge impact on this aspect of my adolescence as well. Some of my friend’s parents were more permissive neglectful parents and would let them do anything they wanted, so in turn I thought that my parents should let me do what I wanted. This was the basis for most if not all of the arguments between my parents and me. I would argue and cry until they eventually gave in because it wasn’t worth the fight anymore, which I am not proud of. I look back now and feel so terrible with how I reacted to and treated them which shows that my moral reasoning has evolved.

Friendships were beginning to be much more involved and hold meaning at this age as well as the yearning for friendships with boys. Adolescents spend more time at school with their peers than at home with their family, therefore we begin to learn from our peers and our environment. This is discussed by Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010) as Bandura’s social-learning theory. I went to a small school with a definite line between the “popular” kids and everyone else. There were many cliques of which I was a part of several, one year I would be best friends with the really popular group, the next year I would be best friends with people from another group and back and forth. I remember when I was friends with the popular group I was pressured into treating others badly in order to maintain my “cool” image to my peers. To me, reputation was everything so I was willing to do whatever in order to maintain my friendships with the ones that were considered cool. As stated by Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010), “Reputation based refers to the adolescent’s crowd affiliation, which suggests the attitudes or activities with which one is associated by peers.” When these friendships ended it was a catastrophe to me and I suffered emotionally. Relationships with the opposite sex began to become more desired and the expectations greater as I entered high school.

Around the age of 13 I had my first “crush” and boyfriend, when which the term boyfriend meant something completely different than it does now in my 20’s. Boyfriends at this age served the purpose of boosting self-esteem and reputation. The relationships existed at school and occasionally on the weekend for a movie but the relationships were very platonic. As I got older and entered high school I valued these relationships much more and expected more out of them. I put more into these relationships and therefore expected more out. I began to think about the future together and making potential plans in my mind. This served to be non-productive because when these relationships ended I would be crushed unlike when I would just move on to a new boyfriend the following week when I was 11, 12 and 13.

With these growing relationships and the growing trust and independence granted by my parents I entered the world of peer pressure. Given the opportunities and permission to go to parties in my junior and senior year of high school I was tempted by drugs and alcohol. All of my peers that I looked up to as being popular would drink on the weekends so I followed suit, wanting to fit in. I never had a problem with drinking but the pressures I felt to drink by friends and boyfriends were hard to ignore. According to Ashford & Winston Lecroy (2010),”the most recent data find that the majority (72%) of high school students report using alcohol…” This statistic is not surprising to me, the stigma among peers that goes along with occasional drinking is that if you drink you will have more friends and be well liked, and this trend was affirmed by me during my adolescence. The social dimension of adolescence consists of growing valued relationships and with those relationships comes peer pressure and expectations by others that add to the pressure on adolescents today.

**Conclusion**

Adolescence serves as a time of physical, psychological and social growth and learning for youth. This time of growth and learning can be a stressful time for many adolescents as they deal with their changing bodies, ideas and relationships. We become growingly comfortable in our own skin and our growing bodies and have times of self-doubt and self-consciousness. We become more competent in right and wrong and begin to understand what is expected of us and consequences. This is the time when we begin to plan for our future and contemplate how our actions will affect us later in life. Our relationships grow and become more crucial to our happiness and we begin to explore relationships with the opposite sex. With all of the dimensions accounted for, adolescence is a time when we mature and grow as human being, build meaningful relationships and better understand the world around us and how we fit in it.

# References

Ashford, J. B., & Winston Lecroy, C. (2010). *Human Behavior in the Social Environment: A Multidimensional Perspective.*