Adolescence period and its ethical, moral and spiritual values

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ABSTRACT: Adolescence, spanning ages 13 to 19 and extending into the preteen years, signifies a dynamic transition from childhood to adulthood marked by substantial physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes. Initiated by puberty and persisting into the mid-20s, this developmental journey involves significant shifts in personal relationships, educational settings, and vocational pursuits. While adolescents actively shape their own developmental trajectories through exploration and experimentation, their need for scaffolding and supportive environments remains crucial. The interplay between biological, cognitive, and environmental factors intricately influences the transformative pathways to adulthood, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of this pivotal stage in human development.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood that occurs between ages 13 and 19. The physical and psychological changes that take place in adolescence often start earlier, during the preteen or "tween" years: between ages 9 and 12. **A**dolescence is a period of significant development that begins with the onset of puberty[1] and ends in the mid-20s. Consider how different a person is at the age of 12 from the person he or she is at age 24. The trajectory between those two ages involves a profound amount of change in all domains of development—biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional. Personal relationships and settings also change during this period, as peers and romantic partners become more central and as the adolescent moves into and then beyond secondary school or gains employment.

Importantly, although the developmental plasticity that characterizes the period makes adolescents malleable, malleability is not synonymous with passivity. Indeed, adolescents are increasingly active agents in their own developmental process. Yet, as they explore, experiment, and learn, they still require scaffolding and support, including environments that bolster

opportunities to thrive. A toxic environment makes healthy adolescent development challenging. Ultimately, the transformations in body, brain, and behavior that occur during adolescence interact with each other and with the environment to shape pathways to adulthood.

Stages of Adolescence

Adolescence, these years from puberty to adulthood, may be roughly divided into three stages: early adolescence, generally ages eleven to fourteen; middle adolescence, ages fifteen to seventeen; and late adolescence, ages eighteen to twenty-one.

- During adolescence, we start to form a deeper sense of who we are, what we value, and who we want to be. We become increasingly sensitive to social feedback and better able to think in abstract and complex ways that help us build a deeper sense of self around these questions related to identity. We think more about what it means to be a member of our particular social or cultural group or groups.

- Healthy development in adolescence involves creating a positive sense of self and belonging, based on our values and aspirations. This process can be challenging if we are facing racism, sexism, and other forms of bias and discrimination, which too often causes us to be defined by others in ways that are grounded in negative or otherwise limiting stereotypes.

- Adults can support this process of healthy identity development by providing opportunities for identity exploration, affirming expressed identities, and ensuring access to messages and feedback that support pride in one's racial and or gender or other identities.

Moral Reasoning in Adolescence

As adolescents become increasingly independent, they also develop more nuanced thinking about morality, or what is right or wrong. We all make moral judgments on a daily basis. As adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and social development continue to mature, their understanding of morality expands and their behavior becomes more closely aligned with their values and beliefs. Therefore, moral development describes the evolution of these guiding principles and is demonstrated by the ability to apply these guidelines in daily life. Understanding moral development is important in this stage where individuals make so many important decisions and gain more and more legal responsibility.

Influences on Moral Development

Adolescents are receptive to their culture, to the models they see at home, in school and in the mass media. These observations influence moral reasoning and moral behavior. When children are younger, their family, culture, and religion greatly influence their moral decision-making. During the early adolescent period, peers have a much greater influence. Peer pressure can exert a powerful influence because friends play a more significant role in teens' lives. Furthermore, the new ability to think abstractly enables youth to recognize that rules are simply created by other people. As a result, teens begin to question the absolute authority of parents, schools, government, and other traditional institutions (Vera-Estay, Dooley, & Beauchamp, 2014) By late adolescence, most teens are less rebellious as they have begun to establish their own identity, their own belief system, and their own place in the world.

Spiritual development

Spiritual development relates to fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life which affect everyone, and is not dependent on a religious affiliation. Spiritual development is not about becoming, more spiritual; it is about realizing or becoming more and more aware of one's natural, innate spirituality.

Adolescence is a trying time in a human being's life, as there are sudden changes in his or her physical and emotional self .The adolescent becomes awkward within his or her social setup, suddenly self-aware of who he or she is .At this stage of life, adolescents may find themselves confused and anxious as to whether they are fitting in with their social peers, often rejecting their parents' values. In their search for independence, and during their sexual maturity and moral dilemmas, the adolescent often feels isolated and misunderstood. Doka (2011) explains how 'throughout adolescence, the adolescent struggles with three core issues: independence, intimacy and identity.

Identity is an essential part of spirituality. People form identity and spirituality by integrating aspects of their social environment into their identity and spirituality. Sax (2010:181) explains how the core of a person's 'identity is all about the spiritual journey'. Hence, identity and spirituality go hand in hand. Identity formation is the development of a person's unique sense of self that is distinct from other people. Identity develops from 'the dialectic between individual and society' (Berger & Luckmann 1976:195). The construction of an individual's reality, in

dialectic with the world or society, is how the individual forms identity as he or she finds his or her place within the world. People do not just 'take over' society from 'autonomous creations', but they 'take over' the world from people who live in the world (Berger 1969:150). Children learn from their parents, engaging with their parent's world to form identity. Children begin to shape, form and then later challenge this world, as their linguistic skills improve. Hay and Nye (1998:4) explain that children's transcendent experiences are not 'culturally constructed illusions, but have an objective reality'. Hence, children's spirituality is not only formed by cultural illusions, but is grounded in experiences that help in the search for meaning and may even help transcend and transform their ego (see Finnegan 2008; Harris 2007). In a world where multiple discourses take place at the same time, all the time, especially through social media, the adolescent in his or her journey into adulthood may be inundated with what he or she is assimilating from his or her social environment.

The importance of spirituality in the adolescent life

Witmer and Sweeney (1992:140) explain that people need to have the following five 'characteristics of wellness' to have a healthy life span: spirituality, self-regulation, work, love and friendship. These five characteristics are part of a 'wheel of wholeness'. 'At the centre of wholeness is spirituality' (Witmer & Sweeney 1992:140). Spirituality helps people cope with everyday stresses by giving them hope and meaning in life through the values they live out on a daily basis (Witmer & Sweeney 1992:141). Hence, spirituality is a vital part of a human being's everyday life experience. According to a study conducted by Raftopoulos and Bates (2011:163), spirituality is an 'important aspect of adolescence' in adolescent resilience. It appears that spirituality helps adolescents recover from the low points experienced in their lives. 'Spirituality fostered perspective by providing a sense of protection, security and comfort' in the adolescents who were questioned in the study (Raftopoulos & Bates 2011:163). Adolescents primarily search for spirituality from religions (those of their parents or may explore alternative religions) and youth or popular culture (the books they read, the music they listen to, the movies they see and so on). There are adolescents who refer to a personal relationship with God (Raftopoulos & Bates 2011:157), while other adolescents have 'New Age ideas of the spirit' (McAvan 2012:8) referring to angels, demons, aliens and other supernatural beings. Clark (2002:795) calls this supernatural tendency by adolescents to search for spirituality as the 'funky' side of religion.

Kessler (1998:49) explains that in extreme situations, adolescents may turn to 'drugs, gang violence, and even suicide' as 'a search for connection and meaning and an escape from the pain of not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfilment'. There are also adolescents who suffer from a mental-health problem, such as aggression, depression and anxiety, as a result of the high divorce rates, adolescent pregnancy and unstable environments, who find spirituality to be a coping mechanism to counter these issues (Bruce & Cockreham 2004:334; Raftopoulos & Bates 2011:151).

CONCLUSION

Being an adolescent is a difficult time for young people. Adolescents are awkward, and insecure, and do not want to be left out of what their peers are doing. The adolescent may feel isolated from his or her family if he or she is doing things that he or she knows his or her family would disapprove of. However, if the adolescent is complying with what is expected of him or her at home, he or she may feel isolated from his or her peers. At this stage of their lives, adolescents struggle to make a connection with what they have, up until now taken for granted as their spiritual identity, and try to carve out a spiritual identity that is unique to them. Hence, adolescents may make choices at this stage that may inadvertently shape the rest of their lives.

Research shows that adolescents look to their youth culture to explore, understand and experience their spiritual selves, shaping their identity. By being allowed to explore and live out spiritualties in their own way within their own youth culture, supported by the adults in their lives, may allow for a happy adolescent. Adults can act as guides to adolescents to make spiritual connections within the adolescents' own social contexts. In this way, the adolescent may move into adulthood as a person that will take on the responsibility of being an adult not only within/his or her personal life but also a responsible member of the community.

However, popular or youth culture is multi-layered with many aspects to be taken into consideration. Adolescents are bombarded by social media within their social context or youth culture. While some aspects of popular or youth culture offer healthy spaces for spiritual exploration, others, like some forms of social media, can cause unimaginable damage. There are spiritualties that are damaging to the adolescent, and guidance from an adult may prove to be of great value to the adolescent.

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