CHAPTER 15

Adolescence—Social and Emotional Development

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Emotional development in adolescence By adolescence, cognitive processes are mature enough to support the regulation of emotions. In addition, cognitive advances allow adolescents to consider the complexities of many situations and are likely to express contradictory emotions. Adolescents develop emotional self-efficacy, or the ability to accept and feel control of one’s emotions.

II. Emotional states in adolescence Although the evidence is mixed, some research suggests that adolescents experience more negative emotions than children of other ages. For instance, one study showed that when asked to randomly record emotional states, ninth graders reported more negative affect than fifth graders. However by tenth grade, these emotional states had become more stable.

III. Emotional regulation in adolescence How adolescents manage their emotions can be a significant predictor of their mental health. Internalizing problems refer to problems with mood, such as anxiety or depression. Externalizing problems are seen when adolescents show outward directed behavior, such as aggression or temper tantrums. Adolescents use a wide range of strategies to deal with negative emotions, ranging from expressing their feelings to rumination.

Atypical Development: Adolescent Depression and Suicide

Approximately 35 percent of adolescents experience a depressed mood, and 7 percent are classified as clinically depressed. The causes of adolescent depression are complex. Depressed children often have depressed parents, raising the possibility that there is a genetic component. However, depressed parents often display less effective parenting skills and may model negative ways of dealing with emotions. Changes in self-image and adjustments in peer relationships may contribute to adolescents’ vulnerability to depression. Additionally, hormonal changes during adolescence may activate genes that put individuals at risk for psychological problems. Somewhere between 6 and 13 percent of adolescents attempt suicide. It is among the leading causes of death for children and young people between ten and twenty-four years of age. Males are more likely to succeed at completing suicide because of their choice of more lethal methods. A number of warning signs are summarized and strategies for reducing the risk are discussed in the text.

IV. Attachment and adolescence Secure attachments are related to positive developmental outcomes in both cognitive and social realms. The effects of early attachment may even carry over into adolescence where individuals who were securely attached as infants display more positive emotional ties and high self-esteem. Even adult parenting behaviors are influenced by the attachment patterns acquired in infancy. Perhaps an internal working model of relationships is established during secure attachment in childhood that continues to influence emotional ties with family, friends, and romantic partners.

V. Development of self in adolescence As children approach and enter into the adolescent years, they view self in terms of more abstract and increasingly differentiated qualities. They are also able to view self in terms of multiple and conflicting perspectives. Teens are sensitive to the social implications of their self-portrayals; however, if they have major inconsistencies between their
outward portrayal and their “true self,” depression may occur. Teens gradually move to a more self-reliant and principled standard for evaluating themselves. Differences in self as a result of cultural influences are substantial.

A. **Self as subject** A component of the subjective self is the sense of agency, the belief that one can influence and control one’s surroundings. As children mature, they acknowledge their own efforts and the contributions of others. In addition, they tend to incorporate their own reasoning, and have a strong sense of individuality. A child’s sense of individuality and stability changes throughout childhood. The sense of reflection may not emerge until late adolescence and may form the basis for distinguishing conscious and unconscious psychological processes.

B. **Self-esteem** Individuals who evaluate themselves in terms of positive feelings are said to have high levels of *self-esteem*, or self-worth. As children get older, social acceptance appears to become more important. Self-esteem, especially for girls, tends to decline in early adolescence, perhaps because of the many important transitions taking place at this time in development. However, there is more variability in self-esteem within groups of boys and girls than there is between them. When adolescents retain a warm orientation towards others and perceive their parents as supportive, they are more likely to maintain high self-esteem through school transitions.

C. **Identity** The growing sense of self serves as the basis for the construction of an *identity*, a broad, coherent, internalized view of who a person is and what he or she wants to be. Although an *identity crisis* may occur during adolescence, it is not universal. Conflicts with family members increase during adolescence and mood changes are likely to be greater than at other times in development. Cultural factors seem to play a substantial role in the likelihood of adolescents’ experiencing an identity crisis.

1. Ethnic identity, the sense of belonging to a specific cultural or ethnic group, is another factor that impacts identity development. Identity with a minority culture does not appear to lead to conflict, and in general self-esteem is strong among minority children. Ethnic identity formation includes group self-esteem, or feeling pride about belonging to an ethnic group, and exploration, attempting to learn more about being part of an ethnic group.

VI. **Moral development in adolescence** In adolescence, moral development emphasizes the relationship between growing cognitive skills and children’s responses to moral situations. Violent crimes among juveniles have declined substantially in the past twenty years, although if an individual is going to be involved in serious violence, adolescence is often the time when it begins. Many researchers now call for a focus on positive youth development, promoting well-being and other positive traits in adolescents.

A. **Conduct disorders** Children with conduct disorders display a wide range of unacceptable behaviors; however, their behaviors share the common problem of violating or seriously disregarding the social and moral values of the community. Many different factors contribute to the display of conduct disorders. Evidence exists that among them is the absence or reduction of empathy toward others in emotionally laden situations, as well as genetic factors. The effectiveness of various therapeutic approaches for dealing with conduct disorders is mixed. However, one approach that may prove useful is to promote more empathic understanding in children who display conduct disorders.

B. **Volunteering and community service** Almost 60% of high school students engage in community service activities. Volunteering influences identity development, feelings of connectedness to society, and political awareness.

VII. **Gender roles in adolescence** Conflicting research exists concerning gender development in adolescence. How children think about gender changes to some degree in adolescence. Sex segregation becomes less pronounced by adolescence as children begin to engage in heterosexual
interactions, and adolescents show a greater tolerance for cross-sex personality traits. Later in adolescence, gender stereotypes increase, a phenomenon described as *gender intensification*. However, some research shows this is not a robust occurrence.

A. **Sexual harassment** Approximately 80% of students report sexual harassment from either a peer or adult. Although sexual harassment can be common, consequences can range from feeling embarrassed to extremely upset. Adults are not always ready to challenge adolescent behavior, and even adolescents themselves do not label some harassing behavior (such as sexual remarks) as harassment.