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## MODULE 15

# Adolescence

### Module Preview

Adolescence typically begins at puberty with the onset of rapid growth and sexual maturity. Jean Piaget theorized that adolescents develop the capacity to reason abstractly. Following Piaget's lead, Lawrence Kohlberg contended that moral thinking likewise proceeds through stages, from a morality of self-interest to a morality of universal ethical principles.

Erik Erikson theorized that a chief task of adolescence is to form one's identity. This struggle may continue into the adult years as new relationships emerge and new roles are assumed. The time from 18 to the mid-twenties is an increasingly not-yet-settled phase of life called emerging adulthood.

### Module Guide

#### Physical Development

- ▶ Exercise: Introducing Adolescent Development
- ▶ Projects: Interviewing Adolescents; Writing About Puberty
- ▶ Lecture: Is 16 Too Young to Drive a Car?
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *Teen Boys: Emerging Sexuality; Teen Girls: Emerging Sexuality; Do Adolescents Lack Empathy?*

15-1. *Define adolescence, and identify the major physical changes during this period.*

**Adolescence**, the transition period from childhood to adulthood, typically begins at **puberty** with the onset of rapid growth and developing sexual maturity. A surge of hormones triggers a two-year period of growth that begins in girls at about age 11 and in boys at about age 13. During the growth spurt, the reproductive organs, or **primary sex characteristics**, develop dramatically. So do the **secondary sex characteristics**, such as the breasts and hips in girls, facial hair and a deepened voice in boys, and pubic and underarm hair in both sexes. The landmarks of puberty are the first ejaculation (*spermarche*) in boys, which usually occurs by about age 14, and the first menstrual period (*menarche*) in girls, usually within a year of age 12. As in earlier life stages, the *sequence* of physical changes is more predictable than the *timing*. Early maturation is good for boys but may be stressful for girls, depending on how people react to their maturity.

Brain development includes a selective pruning of unused neurons and connections. Frontal lobe maturation that improves judgment, impulse control, and the ability to plan for the long term lags the emotional limbic system. The pubertal hormonal surge, early development of the emotional

limbic system, and later maturation of the frontal lobe help explain teens' occasional impulsiveness, risky behaviors, and emotional storms.

## Cognitive Development

- ▶ Exercises: Formal Operational Thought; Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development
- ▶ ActivePsych: *Digital Media Archive*, 2nd ed.: *Moral Development: The Heinz Dilemma A–H*; *Scientific American Frontiers*, 3rd ed.: *Moral Thinking and Emotion: A Challenging Dilemma*

15-2. *Describe adolescents' reasoning abilities and moral development, according to Piaget and Kohlberg, and note the impact of emotional intuitions on our moral judgments.*

During the early teen years, reasoning is often self-focused. Adolescents may think their private experiences are unique. Gradually, adolescents develop the capacity for what Piaget called *formal operations*, the capacity to reason abstractly. This includes the ability to test hypotheses and deduce consequences. The new reasoning power is evident in adolescents' pondering and debating such abstract topics as human nature, good and evil, and truth and justice.

Lawrence Kohlberg contended that moral thinking likewise proceeds through a series of stages, from a *preconventional morality* of self-interest, to a *conventional morality* that cares for others and upholds laws and rules, to (in some people) a *postconventional morality* of agreed-upon rights or basic ethical principles. Kohlberg's critics argue that the postconventional level represents morality from the perspective of the European and North American educated middle class, which prizes individualism and is biased against the moral reasoning of those in collectivist societies, whose morality may be based more on a sensitivity to group goals. Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist explanation is that moral feelings precede moral reasoning, and so moral judgment involves quick gut feelings. Character education programs teach children to empathize with others and to *delay gratification*. As thinking matures, behavior also becomes less selfish and more caring.

- ▶ Exercises: Erikson's Stages; Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status; Who Am I?; The Life Cycle; Gender Differences in Smiling
- ▶ Project/Exercise: Applying Erikson's Psychosocial Stages
- ▶ PsychSim 5: Who Am I?

## Social Development

15-3. *Identify Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development and their accompanying issues, and discuss how forming an identity prepares us for intimacy.*

Erik Erikson theorized eight stages of life, each with its own psychosocial task. In infancy (the first year), the issue is trust versus mistrust. In toddlerhood (the second year), the challenge is autonomy versus shame and doubt. Preschoolers (age 3 to 5) learn initiative or guilt, and elementary school children (age 6 to puberty) develop competence or inferiority.

A chief task of adolescence is to solidify one's sense of self—one's *identity*. Adolescents usually try out different "selves" in different situations. Often, this role confusion gets resolved by the gradual reshaping of a self-definition that unifies the various selves into a consistent and comfortable sense of who one is. The part of our self-concept that comes from group memberships is our *social identity*. In some cases, adolescents may form their identity early, simply by taking on their parents' values and expectations. Others may adopt an identity defined in opposition to parents but in conformity with a particular peer group. Erikson believed that forging a clear and comfortable identity is a precondition for establishing close relationships.

For young adults (twenties to early forties), the issue is *intimacy*, the ability to form emotionally close relationships, versus isolation; for middle-aged adults (forties to sixties), the issue is generativity versus stagnation. The challenge of late adulthood (late sixties and older) is integrity versus despair.

- ▶ Lectures: Adolescents' Friendships; A Generation Gap?; Emerging Adulthood
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *Echo Boomers: Understanding Today's College Students*
- ▶ Videos: Module 22 of *Psychology: The Human Experience: Adolescence: Independence From Parents and Identity Formation*; Program 6 of *Moving Images: Exploring Psychology Through Film: Do Parents Matter? Peer Influence*

15-4. *Contrast parental and peer influences during adolescence.*

As adolescents in Western cultures form their own identities, they become increasingly independent of their parents. Nonetheless, researchers have found that most teenagers relate to their parents reasonably well. Positive relations with parents support positive peer relations. Teens are herd animals and they talk, dress, and act more like their peers than their parents. Although adolescence is a time of increasing peer influence, parents continue to influence teens in shaping their religious faith as well as college and career choices.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

15-5. *Discuss the characteristics of emerging adulthood.*

Clearly, the graduation from adolescence to adulthood is now taking longer. In the United States, the average age at first marriage has increased more than four years since 1960. The time from 18 to the mid-twenties is an increasingly not-yet-settled phase of life, which some now call *emerging adulthood*. During this time, many young people attend college or work but continue to live in their parents' home.

