

Helping Teens Answer the Question “Who Am I?”: Cognitive Development in Adolescents¹

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This publication is the second of a series that explores adolescence in terms of physical, cognitive, social, and moral development. This publication will focus on the cognitive development that adolescents experience.

The journey from childhood to adolescence is very challenging. Between the ages of 10 and 18 there are major changes in physical, cognitive, social, and moral development. The major task for adolescents is to establish their self-identity. By determining—as best they can—a sense of who they are, they attempt to move into a group that reflects or reinforces this self-identity. The group allows them to feel that they stand out from the crowd. This phase of development allows the adolescent to search for their sense of self. This is in order to answer the increasingly important question that they can not consider in earlier stages of development: “*Who am I?*”

Cognitive Development

Adolescents have the ability to begin moving from childhood toward adulthood due to their cognitive development. This is the ability of the brain to begin processing more abstract thoughts. Some of these thoughts, indeed many of these thoughts, are focused on themselves. By being able to think abstractly, which is a new developmental ability, they can begin asking themselves questions such as:

- *What am I good at?*

- *How do others perceive me?*
- *What will I do in the future?*
- *What are my personal characteristics?*
- *What kind of person am I?*

They may have asked themselves some of these questions before, but did not have the mental capacity to process the answers very deeply. Now, as adolescents, the journey toward self-reflection and self-identity, may begin. By asking clear self-identity questions, they may find answers that will be enlightening, even insightful and complex. They will strive to learn to make good choices and decisions toward their future as a responsible citizen.

This process is often difficult for adolescents. They may change periodically in terms of their self-concept. This relates to how they will answer the question: “*What kind of person am I?*” As adolescents enhance their understanding of themselves, they actually become more aware of their own emotions and feelings and how these feelings affect their daily lives. By gaining some emotional understanding of themselves, they are able to change their self-identity. This is how they perceive their characteristics and abilities fit with the opportunities that are available to them. These changes are now known to continue in our American society well into emerging adulthood (18-25). But many of

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the identity issues that begin during adolescence determine the paths an adolescent may take including future college, vocational or career choices, as well as other aspects of their lives.

Forming a Self-Identity

In order to understand some of this difficult search for self-identity, it is important to consider some of the components of the identity formation process. As adolescents mature physically, brain growth spurts are occurring at the same time. Peak periods of rapid growth occur during adolescence at around ages 12, 15, 18, and 20. This has the effect of changing certain psychological structures. These structures allow the adolescents to interact with their environment in a more complex way. For example, the capacity for abstract thinking begins around ages 11-12. This means that the adolescent may begin to reason much like a scientist seeking answers in a lab. This is different prior to age 11, when the last stage only allowed them to think about concrete things and events. Instead, they may now come up with logical rules that are based on their own internal reflection.

These reflections through abstract thought allow them to think about themselves in new ways. There are three aspects of adolescent egocentrism that are unique new ways for adolescents to think about themselves. Those are (1) Imaginary Audience, (2) Personal Fable, and (3) Optimistic Bias. When this is combined with the rapid physical changes we learned about, in *Helping Teens Answer the Question "Who am I": Physical Development in Adolescents* (Barnett, 2012), they begin to imagine what others are thinking about them. One way this appears is through what is called an **imaginary audience**. Teenagers think of themselves as always being on stage. They feel as if everyone is looking at them and paying attention to everything that they do, say, and wear. This makes them extremely self-conscious. They will do anything to avoid embarrassment and are also very sensitive to public criticism. They are horrified at the slightest comment about their appearance or performance in any area. By being aware of this distorted self-image, we can move more smoothly through our interactions with them.

Another way these abstract thinking patterns appear is through another cognitive distortion called the **personal fable**. As a result of thinking that everyone is looking at them all the time, teenagers begin to get an inflated opinion of themselves and their own importance. This will gradually go away, so be patient. While it is going on, they think that they will reach great levels of personal accomplishment.

You may hear them say that they will be rich and famous, be a professional athlete or singer, or be completely invincible. This is known as having an 'optimistic bias.' This can be a dangerous aspect of cognitive development. They may take risks that they think are adding to their uniqueness and invulnerability, such as driving too fast or having sex without contraceptives.

So think of the personal fable as "*I am going to be great*" and "*It can't happen to me*". You will begin to understand that this is a process that occurs while they are trying to learn how to use abstract thought. Once they begin to master it, these annoying and risky thoughts will eventually go away. In the meantime, these two main images, imaginary audience and personal fable, need to be recognized as part of the stage of maturation. Other abstract thoughts begin to appear in more typical forms, such as through sarcasm and satire. When you hear these sarcastic comments, keep in mind they are actually a sign of brain growth and maturity. This will help you tolerate them.

Tips for Agents and Parents

Now that we have a sense of some of the important cognitive changes that occur during adolescence, we can use this information to help us understand teens. It will also help us recognize their sensitive thoughts and feelings. Remember, they are struggling to find their own sense of self, and direct them toward positive behavior and outcomes.

By the beginning of late adolescence, many of these changes are nearing completion. This allows teens to gain more acceptance and ownership of their self-identity. By reminding ourselves of these changes, we can become more sensitive to teen development and treat them with respect, compassion, and consideration that will help them move smoothly through these cognitive transitions.

Parents can help their children by providing support and by being understanding and tactful during these changes. When a teen is being boastful, unrealistic, or hypersensitive, it is often difficult to stop and think that the reason is cognitive development. It is important, however, to recognize the personal fable and the imaginary audience when we see them, as these are signs that they are growing cognitively. The approach to these should be with gentleness and patience. It may be given in a manner that is very positive, explaining that it is "normal" to feel that everyone is watching you, for example, but in reality, they really are not. (They will probably insist that they are, too; so expect this answer!)

It is also all right to let a few unrealistic statements about goals pass by without reacting to them. A smile and a nod can say a lot to a teen about your acceptance of their search for self-identity. This works much better than disagreeing or telling them that they need to get more realistic goals. Once the adolescent understands that you support them, even with all of their fables and audiences, they will know that they can share more of their private thoughts and feelings with you. And this is, after all, what we really hope for in their best interest.

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