

Parenting: Preparing the Adolescents

SAROJ YADAV*

Abstract

Parenting can be the most rewarding work of adult life. Nothing brings more joy and pride than a happy, productive, and loving child. Each age and stage of a child's development has specific goals and tasks. For infants, it is to eat, sleep, and explore their world. For adolescents, it is to become their own person with their own group of friends. The world is shrinking. The effect of globalisation, modernisation and the media boom has made the life of adolescent, their expectations and values very different from those of older generation. This is more so in respect of reproductive and sexual health. Understanding adolescence empathetically and helping them to develop life skills to deal with the conflicting situations occurring due to oneself, peer, society and parents is not only the responsibility of schools but also of the parents themselves.

Adolescence has been described as a phase of life beginning in biology and ending in society. Indeed, adolescence may be defined as the period within the life span when most of a person's biological, cognitive, psychological, and social characteristics are changing from what is typically considered child-like to what is considered adult-like. For the adolescent, this period is a dramatic challenge, one requiring adjustment to changes in the self, in the family and in the peer group. In order to help them to grow as a responsible person, parents can play an importance role. (Robin 1998).

In order to be a good parent, there is a need to understand the profile of adolescents and this period of life.

Profile of adolescents

Adolescents in India constitute about 22 per cent of the total population of 1.028 billion, their number being over 220 million, males outnumber the females. This number of adolescent is still growing and India in near future may be the youngest nation in the world (Govt. of India 2000). The most important concern is the adverse sex ratio, which is 882 adolescent females per 1000 adolescent males, lower than the overall

* Professor and Coordinator of National Population Education Project and Adolescence Education Programme, DESSH, NCERT, New Delhi.

sex ratio of 933 females per thousand males and lowest among adolescents of 15-19 years i.e. 858. The phenomenon of gender differentials in mortality rates during adolescence is a matter of great concern. Nearly 20 per cent of the 1.5 million girls under the age of 15 years are already mothers (Census 2001). The pervasive gender discrimination, lower nutritional status, illiteracy, early marriage, complications during adolescent pregnancy and child birth contribute to high rates of female mortality in India. If we see the health profile of adolescents, more than 70 per cent girls in the age group of 10-19 years suffer from severe or moderate anemia National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2, 1998).

AIDS is the most critical concerns in view of the high vulnerability of adolescents to HIV infection (Govt. of India 2000a). Over 35 per cent of all reported AIDS cases occur among young people in the age-group 15-24 years. (UN 2006). More than 50 per cent of all new infections in young people 15-25 years (NFHS-2, 1998-99). Disability in adolescents also needs to be recognised (NFHS-3, 2007).

Substance (drug) abuse is another fast emerging as a problem. Twenty-four per cent of the drug users were in the age group of 12-18 years. The most worrying is that the age group taking drug is decreasing.

Crimes against adolescents are also increasing (Govt. of India 2007). Most of the rape victims are in the age-group of 14-18 years. In about 82 per cent of rape cases, the victims knew the offenders and in 32 per cent cases they were neighbours (NCRB 2001). The

enhancement of the gap between puberty and the age at marriage, peer pressure, increasing mobility make adolescents vulnerable to premarital and unprotected sex.

Understanding Adolescence

Knowing about the changes that occur during adolescence will help us to understand and manage teenager more effectively. We can see these changes in the way teenagers behave, express their feelings and the way they interact with their families (NCERT 2005, 2006). Parents need to adapt their parenting style to suit the changing needs of their children. These are biological, psychological and social in nature.

Biological Changes

Adolescence is a period of rapid change. The amount and speed of physical growth and change in adolescents is greater than in any other time in a person's life. These changes in terms of physical appearance varies from individual to individual. Often referred to as 'puberty', these changes can start in children as young as 8 or 9 years of age, but generally occur between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Growth patterns are often uneven and unpredictable and making adolescents look gangly and out of proportion for a time (Barkely 1995).

This uneven pattern of growth also occurs in facial features. A young person can't even rely on both sides of their body growing at the same rate. These changes in physical appearance can make adolescents feel a little insecure and unsure of themselves. Our society places a high value on physical attractiveness,

so it's not surprising that teenagers can become preoccupied with how they look and feel about body image. Parent and teacher's attitudes and reaction during this period influence the formation of body image.

Adolescent bodies also undergo other kinds of physical changes that are not visible. For example, there is a huge increase in the production of hormones associated with sexual development. There is a frequent mood changes reflecting feeling of anger, fear, guilt and love.

The suddenness and rapid pace with which the changes take place in the body and mind of adolescents, generate a number of problems and special needs which adolescents find difficult to understand on their own. Although they observe and experience the changes occurring in them, they are mostly unable to understand these developments. So far there is no authentic source readily available to them, through which they can get scientific knowledge regarding these changes. Since they need information regarding the changes and developments in them, they fall back upon the peer group that itself is ill-informed or cheap literature, which leads them astray. Being misinformed they fall prey to myths and misconceptions which adversely affect the process of personality development in them and leads them quite often to risky and irresponsible behaviour (NCERT 2007).

The psychological challenge

Children during adolescence become more critical and questioning. They can see new possibilities, and are less likely

to accept things the way they are or to believe in something just because an adult says so.

However, despite enormous developments in thinking ability, adolescents can make inaccurate and unhelpful assumptions. For instance, adolescents can make the mistake of one estimating the amount of influence they have on what happens around them. As a result, they can take things too personally and blame themselves unnecessarily when things do not go according to plan.

Adolescents may also fall into the trap of 'mind-reading'. Innocent actions of others may be taken as personal criticisms as the adolescent jumps to conclusions about what others are thinking and feeling.

This does not work in reverse. Adolescents often refuse to believe that anybody, particularly their parents, can understand the new and intense feelings they are experiencing (Robin 1998).

They also assume that they are invincible and that nothing bad will happen to them. This is one reason why adolescents engage in risk taking. They might know about the consequences of risky behaviour, but will assume that these consequences will not happen to them. They tend to give more weightage to immediate rather than long-term consequences. Take the issue of smoking as an example. An adolescent is more likely to be impressed by the possibility of looking cool, than the possibility of getting diseases. Adolescents need help to develop life skills from their parents and teachers to make decisions that have long term implications and risks (NCERT 2007).

Finally, adolescents aspire to be more independent and try to establish their own identity. They are driven to have more say in what they do, and to make more of their own decisions. This is a natural part of growing up into a responsible and independent adult.

Social Relationships

The most critical dimension of the process of growing up during adolescence relates to social relationships. Adolescents develop socially mainly by expanding and redefining their relationships with parents, peer group and members of the opposite sex. Although every child experiences different kinds of social relationships, during childhood its social environment usually centres on the home. Children almost wholly depend on their parents and grow under their care, protection, guidance and control. However, when they enter into the phase of adolescence, the physical, emotional and psychological developments, which take place in them trigger a marked change in the patterns of inter-personal relationship between adolescents and their parents, the peer group and the opposite sex.

Changing Relations with Parents

In our country, although adolescents leave their childhood behind, most of the parents want and continue to treat them as children to be cared, watched, protected, guided and controlled. Adolescents, on the other hand start defining their personal identity and assert their independence. They begin to shift from close parental care. While at home, they often prefer being alone.

Those preferences are normal but they may not seem so to parents. Adolescents may often have increasing conflicts with their parents over the amount of freedom they think they deserve. There are other minor issues of conflict and arguments in families with adolescents. These are like home work, household chores, dresses, life style, peers and televisions. These arguments in a way are a sign that the adolescent is doing their job of growing up, seeking independence and developing confidence for taking responsibilities. After all, arguing in family situations teaches young people how to express and assert themselves in a safe environment, before they assert themselves in the outside world. Parents treat these changes among growing children as a threat to their authority and opposed to parental code of conduct. Instead of accepting the youngster for what he/she is, they try to impose on him/her their views about what he/she should be and do. It is, therefore, not unlikely that stress and strain on adolescents are the product of the anxiety generated in parents. Under these circumstances parenting adolescents are characterised by increasing conflict between adolescents and parents. This is probably true in individual homes or in cultures where there is a tradition of marked parental domination (Stone 2007).

Social development is easier for those adolescents who feel that their parents love and trust them. Adolescents need to be given increasing opportunities for freedom and self-direction. Restrictions on them are required to be imposed only when needed and, that too, with due

consideration of their commitments and desires. Parents may display trust by granting their children the freedom they require.

Love – unconditional love – is the most important ingredient in any relationship. It is in accepting all aspects of the other person without judgment, and at all times acting in the best interests of the long-term happiness of all concerned. To live without judgment means to be fully content with yourself to recognise the special uniqueness of every other person you ever meet, to acknowledge their role in society, to respect them, to honour and to allow them the freedom of choice. And to do this, you must have respect for yourself.

An over-protected adolescent is likely to have greater difficulty in learning to act independently. A greater degree of separation shows more independence from, and affection towards, their parents. There is no strong evidence that adolescence is commonly a period of rebellion against parents. In fact, one of the latest surveys came out with the findings that in India a substantial majority of adolescents regard their parents as role models.

Adolescence is also a time when relationships with families and peers also undergo significant change. One of the most common concerns for parents is the influence of the peer group. It's unfortunate that the term 'peer' has negative associations, and the role of friends in an adolescent's life tends to be viewed with suspicion. Contrary to popular opinion, however, friends provide a lot of positives for adolescents; they act

as a kind of self-help group and provide important social support. Being part of a group of friends also helps a young person form a clearer sense of who they are and what kind of person they want to become.

In any case, adolescents tend to select friends who are like themselves. It is unlikely that a young person, particularly one with a trouble-free past, will develop persistent social problems purely from being in contact with friends who do have problems. What influence peers have is strongest in early adolescence, that is, up until around 14 years of age? After this period, peer influence begins to diminish considerably.

Despite children becoming more focused on their friends during adolescence, families remain an important influence. Ultimately, adolescents tend to follow their parent's lead, and end up being more similar than dissimilar to parents in their values, beliefs and behaviour. For example, adolescents tend to copy their parents' attitudes and behaviour in relation to alcohol and drug use.

During adolescence, some basic changes occur in defining relationship, particularly in the area of heterosexual relations. Adolescents suddenly discover their special interest in the opposite sex. Invariably they find it difficult to distinguish between *attractions*, *infatuation* and *love* with or without sexual orientation and *lust*. They tend to feel sex urge for physical pleasure and satisfaction and do not generally appreciate its sublime orientation.

Starting early the best way

Parents as well as teachers can prepare themselves and adolescents for a smoother transition and greater success in achieving the tasks of development during adolescence by:

- Providing a safe and loving home environment.
- Creating an atmosphere of honesty, mutual trust, and respect.
- Teaching basic responsibility for household chores.
- Teaching the importance of accepting limits.
- Teaching the importance of thinking before acting.
- Allowing age appropriate independence and assertiveness. Developing a relationship that encourages your child to talk to you the ability to talk openly about problems is one of the most important aspects of the parent and child relationship. Meal times, story telling, reading, playing games, outings, vacations, and celebrations are important

opportunities for parents to spend time with their child. Parents should also try to spend some individual time with each child, particularly when talking about difficult or upsetting things.

These processes occur gradually and start during infancy. A teenager's adolescent years will be less stressful when parents including teachers and child have worked together on these tasks throughout the developmental period.

We judge our children harshly and make them feel inferior when they make a mistake, or choose to do something differently. If a visiting friend accidentally carries mud into the house on the soles of her/his shoes or breaks any glass, we would no doubt brush it off, saying, "It's just a little mud! Don't worry about it" or "it happened accidentally." But if our own precious child makes the same mistake, we would react with anger: "Look what you have done? You can't see things properly etc." Why are we so thoughtless in case of our own children?

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