

Young Adolescent Children: ages 12 - 15 Keys to Understanding and Helping

Summary: This paper is an attempt to share some insights about the emotional and psychological reactions of young adolescent children – children between the ages of about 12 - 15. The insights evolved from my work as a counselor and therapist for such children and their parents. The insights are based on concepts from evolution, from child development, and from an analytic-psychodynamic approach to human problems and reactions. Accordingly, these children are seen to be undergoing profound changes in their basic drives and needs, in their way of knowing, in their view of themselves and their feelings, and in the developmental challenges they face.

The insights I offer herein have proven to be quite helpful both to the children and their parents. "Insights" perhaps is the wrong word. What I offer are different lenses through which to view these children's problems and reactions. Looking through these lenses tends to reframe the issues, tends to help parents and other adults relate more constructively to the children, and tends to help the children understand what is happening to them and hence to find over time better adjustments.

1. Evolutionary and Developmental Perspective: Human infants and children are far more dependent on their parents, and for a far longer time, than any species on earth. Accordingly, evolution has arranged for very strong instincts in both parents and children to protect and promote the caregiving bond. Babies attach very strongly and without question to their parents and/or other caregivers. As cognition develops, and along with it the ability to see and experience pain and dysfunction in the child's caregiving (parental) world, evolution has designed psychological mechanisms in the child, the purpose of which is to protect the parent-child bond and thereby promote survival, even in very dysfunctional and painful circumstances. This psychological mechanism – essentially a trick – causes the child to assume that any pain or dysfunction experienced in the caregiving world must be the child's fault. The child's mind gets busy trying to figure out "What am I doing wrong, or what is wrong with me". Stressed and/or dysfunctional parents, society in general, and religions all give the same message as evolution – the child had better mend the deficits and find a better adjustment or the world could become a dangerous place.

This mechanism, this trick, is a marvelous thing. It does indeed account for the survival of children in even the most dysfunctional families and in the most dreadful circumstances. It is easy to imagine what would have happened to children without this mechanism. Very young children, as cognition developed, would see the truth – that their family environment was painful and not really adequate to meet their emotional and other needs. They would conclude, "I don't belong here." They would leave the cave, the sabre-toothed tiger would eat them up, and they would not survive to have their own offspring. The ones to survive were the ones who concluded, "I do belong

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here, I have to belong here, the problem must be me." And so this marvelous trick evolved to help protect the child's attachment and survival. This it does well.

Unfortunately, this mechanism also provides the foundation for all manner of problems in the areas of self-esteem, future relationships, and social adjustment.

Evolution, however, is not stupid. We humans need not only to survive our early childhoods, we also need to become strong, competent, and attached adults, capable of creating our own families and surviving as adults in complex societies. Evolution had to find some way of undoing the trick of early childhood. And so it designed adolescence. Adolescence is the undoing and reworking of the psychological mechanisms, tricks, and instincts of early childhood.

Adolescence begins slowly with the growth of new neural connections and the pruning of others, along with the circulation of various hormones. You can see it beginning in preteen children, acting less and less like the little boys and girls we once knew, and controlled. It is as if nature starts telling the child, "The joke is on you, kid. The purpose and imperative of your life is not really to fit with, and bond unquestioningly to, your parents. No, the purpose of your life is to develop your own thoughts and ideas, and to become the particular person and adult you were meant to be. And so to help you with this, I am taking away your instinct to fit without question, and I am replacing it with strong drives to define yourself. Oh, and by the way, I'm going to turn the lights on so you can see your parents and others more accurately. They never were as perfect as you thought. That notion was a trick I played on you to help you get along. Now I'm going to let you see them, and their differences from you, more accurately. This will be quite unsettling for a while. Are you ready? Of course not, I've been tricking you for 10 years. Sorry, it has to happen anyway." The child of course knows nothing of all this. It just happens, and the child just has different reactions.

Usually by age 12 or 13, in North America anyway, this process of self-definition, self differentiation from parents, and minor disillusionments about parents, is gaining momentum. Our little kids are becoming teenagers.

2. Psychodynamics:

The dramatic change in cognition – the explosion of new neural pathways and the emergence of new ways of knowing and thinking, along with the emergence of new drives, needs and instincts – has two effects that can cause strong emotional reactions in the young adolescent. The first are cognitive effects stemming from disillusionment, and the second have to do with the need to re-work repressed emotional issues from early childhood.

A. Cognitive Effects: Disillusionment and Secrets:

The ability to see the adult world more objectively, to see differences between self and parents, challenges the child's accustomed view of the parents and adult world. It is somewhat disillusioning: the young child's view of parents was indeed an illusion. In functional and "normal" families, this disillusionment is just unsettling, both for the

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parents and the child. The child notices, and takes exception to, any number of personal idiosyncrasies and stupid ideas seen in the parents. You know, the parents dress weird, talk weird, and have ideas and rules that just don't make sense. Parents, you see, can be quite embarrassing at times. This all happens little by little, involving relatively minor issues, as the child and parents adjust to this development. It is unsettling at times, but it is not overwhelming or traumatic. The parent-child attachment remains intact and is not threatened. The child fluctuates between the accustomed little-kid ways and the new emerging adolescent ways. The parent, while somewhat stressed, knows this is a positive and necessary development.

However, and this is key, if the disillusionment is too great it can be an overwhelming and even traumatic experience for the young adolescent. If when nature "turns the lights on" there is very bad news to be seen, a child's mind can be in danger of too much stress, anxiety, and dissonance. The child's mind will then develop defensive measures, which will manifest as behavioral reactions or as changes in adjustment.

There seem to be two ways that the disillusionment can be too much for the child's mind to digest. First is the situation where one or both parents have been moderately or seriously dysfunctional, or even mentally ill, for much of the child's early childhood. This means the child's mind has had to employ the evolutionary trick to a very dramatic degree, denying its own truth and experience in favor of protecting the necessary attachment to the parents. The child's compromised self-esteem, the radical reversal in the child's view of his/her world, and the accompanying very strong emotional reactions can be just too much to assimilate. The child's mind will react by finding ways not to think – video games, drugs, depression, isolation, cults, gangs, etc. – or by generating intense and distracting dramas – behavior disturbances, rebellion and protest, conflict with authority, etc. It is useful to remember that such reactions are often precipitated by too much disillusionment in early adolescence.

The second circumstance that can cause trouble, even trauma, for the young adolescent mind at this time of disillusionment is something new and unexpected that happens in the family. Marital breakdown, separation and divorce are the most common such events. But other serious parental crises, such as mental breakdown, addiction, affairs, identity crises, job loss, bankruptcy, etc. – can also be too much for the child's mind to digest and cope with. Again, the child's mind may find ways not to think, because the combination of "bad news" events in the external world along with the child's increased ability to see and know are just too much to cope with, both emotionally and cognitively. As the child's mind works hard not to see or think about the bad news, academic performance and motivation in general often decrease, while mind-numbing activities like video games or drugs or goofing off increase. It is useful to remember that many of the adult problems mentioned, such as addiction, affairs, and life crises involve a lot of denial on the part of the adult. Thus, the child's awakening mind has a lot of help from the family atmosphere to deny and not see what is going on. Also, the evolutionary "trick" could be seen as similar to denial. There is always great stress and pain as the human mind faces the collapse of long-term denial.

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"Secrets" are another circumstance always worth wondering about when faced with changes in a young adolescent's adjustment, behavior, or academic performance. Secrets that can be too much for the child to digest are of two kinds, external and internal. External secrets in the family are things like unknown affairs, secret but serious health problems (like cancer), secret addiction problems, and any number of "bad news" issues that parents try to protect their children from knowing. The family atmosphere contains a message that certain things are better not known, not acknowledged, and not thought about. Unfortunately, nature is giving the opposite message to the young adolescent – one of knowing, seeing new and deeper and hitherto hidden things, even at the cost of some unsettling disillusionment. The child's mind, sensing the existence of something scary and important that should not be known, often reacts with not thinking, with 'dumbing itself down', with consequent decrease in academic performance and motivation, or with various other types of withdrawal.

Adolescents are also often affected by internal secrets. Internal secrets are experiences, or thoughts, or feelings that the child feels cannot be talked about, usually because they are felt to be bad or shameful, or because they are confusing and foreign. Thus, the adolescent mind is sometimes trying to cope with new personal experiences in the areas of sexuality, other strong emotions, new questions about life and self, sexual abuse, or other "secret" personal experiences. Here again, a certain amount of this is normal and able to be coped with, albeit with a certain amount of difficulty. However, if the internal personal secret or secrets are too emotionally challenging, the child's mind may resort to shutting down, or to the creation of various dramatic reactions.

When secrets, internal or external, are what is affecting the adolescent's adjustment, one common drama to emerge is that of lying, or sneaky behavior like stealing. The drama represents a message from the child's mind – "things are not really the way they appear, let me show you."

B. Re-processing Repressed Emotional Issues:

The second main theme arising from the developmental changes in the young (and older) adolescent mind is the reworking of the unfinished emotional business of early childhood.

We are all familiar with the notion that repressed emotional pain eventually finds a way to emerge and express itself. Emotional issues are repressed, avoided, or denied because the mind knows it is unable to face them at the time. The internal equipment and/or the external social circumstances are not adequate to cope with the emotional reactions. In the interests of survival, of somehow getting through it all, the mind puts the reactions on hold through repression or denial, until the internal equipment and interpersonal context are adequate to the task. Later, at some point, a crisis occurs as the issues re-emerge. We often find ourselves in a therapist's office at this time because our reactions seem unreasonable and out of proportion to our present circumstances, yet we cannot seem to stop them.

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The therapist (at least this author) relies on several assumptions: only a minor portion of the present pain and reactions is coming from the present circumstances; the major portion is coming from a reservoir of repressed emotional pain; the present circumstances are similar enough to the original emotional experience to trigger the re-emergence of the pain; and the mind is allowing and maybe even aiding this painful drama for several reasons – the old adjustment of repression or denial has successfully taken the person as far as it can; maintaining the previous adjustment/solution has become about equally painful to the original pain; and the mind knows it is now more capable of experiencing the pain and finding a new solution.

Early adolescence is often the first time in life that such a re-emergence of repressed pain occurs. The child is carrying a reservoir of pain from early childhood. Situations arise around the child that are similar enough to the original problem that strong reactions begin to occur. It all seems unreasonable, and the child's world tells the child to shape up, make better decisions, and learn there are consequences for such reactions and behavior. This is just like what happened originally in early childhood, from the messages of both evolution and society. But now repression and pretending (denial) are not so easy, and the child's unconscious mind knows that the present drama is important, and cannot be controlled in any event. The therapist knows that the reactions and drama are really a re-working of unfinished emotional issues from early childhood. Unfortunately, the child's mind does not know any of this and is not yet good at reflecting on itself, or at seeing the connection between earlier traumas and present reactions.

This is where the adult world can help, because adults can reflect and do know what is happening. I have found that it is almost always very helpful to look at adolescent reactions and problems through this lens, asking myself this question: what unfinished emotional issues from early childhood is the teenager's problem or drama trying to communicate, to re-process, to re-experience? What reservoir of pain or conflict is trying to be expressed and worked out? In going over the child's and family's history, answers to these questions almost always emerge. We can then help the child in a number of ways: by linking the present problems and reactions to past emotional issues and memories, by reframing the problem in a positive light as a necessary and legitimate opportunity to express and re-rework a reservoir of pain, and by introducing the child's mind to the saving ability to reflect on itself and find positive meanings for its troubling reactions.

3. Practical Applications: The above "lenses" through which to look at and relate to adolescent reactions were developed in the context of counseling and psychotherapy. I have found them particularly useful and effective in this context, where I work with both the child and the parents. This frame of reference leads to new and helpful processes: a beneficial reframing of the problem as an important opportunity or transition; enhanced confidence and self-esteem in both the parents and child; improved family attachments; and the overall beneficial effects of reflection, compassion, and lessened criticism and blaming. These things are all possible and expected in a counsellor's or therapist's office. Besides, the therapist does not need to worry about all the other lenses and

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issues: you know, like responsibility, consequences, discipline, and choices. Usually, these have all been dealt with, to no avail, before the child is brought to therapy.

But what about other settings, especially schools? Schools, and other institutions, tend to rely on authority, structure, and compliance, as do parents and families to some extent. However, schools often have counselors, and wisely so. The counselor has two main functions: to help students effectively navigate the structure and system; and to help the child when things go wrong. This paper, hopefully, has provided some insights to help relate to and guide children when things go wrong. To sum up, here are the things to keep in mind, and some approaches to take, when a young adolescent's performance and motivation diminish significantly or behavior and emotional reactions emerge.

Remember, often the child does not know, or at least cannot explain, what is happening to him/her. Or why. When asked, "What is wrong," or "Why are you doing this," the most common answer given by the child is, "I don't know." We tend to forget that the child is telling the truth. Most symptoms, reactions, and "dramas" are not conscious choices or deliberate behavior. Rather, they are unconsciously motivated; or at least are coming from thoughts, feelings, or experiences that are new, confusing, and as yet ill-defined in the child's mind. The adult helps by acknowledging that at times there are things going on in a person's life that are hard to explain at first, but that these things are always important and part of growing up. Many teenagers, the adult might say, feel these things must be bad or embarrassing; but they are not – they are just new, and they are important, and invariably they are good and legitimate. You are trying to get the teenager curious about what is happening, you are trying to establish an open, non-judgmental atmosphere for looking at and wondering about it.

I always start by asking some questions, by establishing this curious and non-judgmental atmosphere, and by getting the child's perspective (if any) about the problem. The most common answer to my probing questions is "I don't know". After two or three of these, I smile and acknowledge that the child hasn't really thought very much about this. I tell the child that this is smart, because if he/she did think about it, it would probably be quite confusing. (As a therapist, I call this "acknowledging and blessing the resistance," which is always the best way, and most respectful way, to reduce resistance). After this – after establishing the non-judgemental and curious atmosphere, blessing the resistance, and acknowledging that the child really is at a loss to talk about it right now – I like to tell some stories and give some examples from other kids I've seen in the past. Of course, since I know the child's history and family circumstances, I tailor the stories to possibly fit with, or at least open up, issues the child may well be experiencing. A school counselor may not have this advantage. Still, stories and examples can be given that might be somewhat similar to the problem the teenager is experiencing. I sometimes call this process "flying kites." Some kites fly and many don't. But a process is being fostered, a process of wondering and reflecting, of assuming there are legitimate and important issues behind seemingly bad or problem behavior, of putting confusing emotional issues into words, and of having confidence that awareness

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and understanding will lead to new solutions. The stories and examples I give – the kites I fly – are based on the issues and insights presented earlier in this paper.

Remember, there are two main factors to keep in mind as keys to understanding and helping the young teenager who is showing behavioral or academic problems: the present personal and family circumstances, and past unfinished emotional issues from early childhood.

When more straightforward and common-sense approaches fail to help a struggling or troubled young teenager, it is often very helpful to open up, delicately, conversations about the child's current circumstances. One might tell the child that sometimes teenagers have a lot on their minds: like trouble at home, like parents not getting along, like finding out upsetting and surprising things about people, like feeling caught in the middle, like new experiences that are hard to make sense of, like new thoughts and feelings that are unsettling. We can make comments like these: sometimes it is hard to think or concentrate and it just feels good to zone out. Sometimes we are suffering more inside than anybody knows. Sometimes we don't even know how to talk about it, sometimes there just isn't anybody we feel would understand. We might ask, "Do you feel there is anyone who really gets you, who really understands, and to whom you can talk?"

The above are a few approaches and ideas that often help. Remember this: even though many, maybe most, of these approaches do not get an immediate response, they are like seeds planted in the child's mind. They may take a while to sprout and grow, but they do have the effect of reframing issues, of instilling hope and faith, of normalizing what the child and others may see as disturbance, and of building trust in the counselor.

Gary Kneier, Sept. 2014