



Adolescence Leaders' Notes



The process of growing up can be a difficult one and it is important for parents, teachers and youth leaders to have an understanding of the changes through which the young people are going. Jesus himself was once an adolescent and so has an understanding of what it is like. Whilst his culture was different to ours, he had to be counter-cultural in some ways and that brings its own challenges.

Puberty or adolescence is the term we give to the stage of life when someone is changing from a child into an adult. It usually begins around the ages of 10-12 and for some the changes are not complete until they are about 20. It is a process which involves physical, mental, and emotional changes and pressures which make adolescence a difficult time.

Many children are entering puberty at an earlier age than they once were, although there will always be some late developers. For both early and late developers, puberty can be particularly difficult. Girls usually start puberty at a younger age than boys.

Many of these changes are controlled by **hormones**. 'Hormone' is Greek for "to set in motion". They are complex chemical substances that are secreted into the blood stream and carry messages from one cell (or group of cells) to another. In many cases, one hormone may regulate the production and release of other hormones. They are produced in many parts of the body including the heart, stomach, kidneys, pancreas, testes and ovaries. They regulate body functions such as metabolism, growth, the immune system, sexual reproduction and fight or flight reactions. They are controlled by the pituitary gland near the centre of the brain.

The hormones which affect sexual development and reproduction are androgen and testosterone produced by the testes in boys, and oestrogen and progesterone produced by the ovaries in girls. From the age of about 7, there is an increase in hormone levels in both sexes. Puberty begins when the pituitary gland sends out messages to these glands to increase the production of these hormones further. This can happen as young as 9 in girls. It will be some time before any physical changes will be apparent but it can result more immediately in mood changes.

Physical changes

Girls

- Increase in hormones
- Growth spurt
- Skin & hair become more greasy
- Breasts start to bud
- Body hair growth – pubic & underarms
- Development of sweat glands
- Menstruation (not before 45 kg / 7st) - can be irregular at first and can sometimes make girls feel ill.
- Pelvis broadens
- Full adult height achieved

Boys

- Increase in testosterone
- Growth spurt begins
- Skin & hair become more greasy
- Development of sweat glands
- Testicles grow; penis grows
- Body hair growth
- Sperm producing cells become active
- Beard
- Voice change
- Body becomes more muscular
- Full adult height achieved

Acne/pimples

Hair follicles contain a gland that produces an oily substance to keep the skin lubricated. Increased hormone levels lead to an increase in the production of this oil as well as an increase in the production of the top layer of skin cells. Sometimes the oil becomes trapped under the skin and this results in a spot or pimple.

Pre Menstrual Tension

Each stage in the menstrual cycle is controlled by a system of interrelated hormones. The monthly cycle of hormonal change can affect mood and produce certain mental or emotional changes such as increased irritability, aggressiveness and depression. Physical changes include a slight increase in weight; bloated stomach; tender breasts; swollen ankles and lower abdominal pain. Some of these are due to fluid retention.

Emotional Changes & Experiences

“The hallmarks of adolescence are self-consciousness, self-awareness and self-centredness. Coupled with these is an inner conflict that seems to be a pre-requisite for growing up – a stubborn determination to assert independence along with a continuing need to rely on adult support.” (The New Macmillan Guide to Family Health)

Hormones produced chemical changes which have an emotional effect. At the same time the adolescents' emotions are deepening. They experience emotions they have not encountered before, such as infatuation.

If these changes coincide with major social/educational change such as moving to secondary school, life can be particularly difficult.

Times of change cause us to be very emotionally vulnerable.

The pre-teen years 10-13 can be especially difficult for our children. Girls can feel tearful or giggly without understanding why and boys can feel angry. The emotional roller-coaster they experience is probably the hardest part of adolescence. They are neither teenagers nor children. The girls may be holding their make up in one hand but still holding on to a cuddly toy with the other hand.



Dr James Dobson talks about the 'grand canyon of inferiority' into which many of them fall at this time. The majority of them don't like something about their appearance, be it height, weight, hair, freckles, spots or something else. They worry that others won't like them, especially those of the opposite sex, and they tend to believe that everyone thinks they're stupid. (James Dobson: Preparing for Adolescence)

- Self-conscious stage – what is happening to me?
- Confusion
- Embarrassment
- Irritability
- Feel insecure
- Mood swings
 - Boys become more aggressive
 - Girls become weepy & giggly
- Emotionally vulnerable & easily upset
- They have mixed feelings over whether they want to grow up, but of course they have no choice.

Spiritual Changes

- Their understanding deepens – need to be taught in greater spiritual depth
- Looking for a faith which WORKS
- Search for reality – an experience of God
- Looking for role models
- Jesus at 12 was searching for a deeper relationship with his heavenly Father
- Extremely important to link the Bible to their own lives & show it's relevance

Intellectual changes

During the early teen years, the brain also undergoes a growth spurt. Different parts of the brain mature at different times. The areas which control memory and emotional reactions develop more around now. The part which controls the ability to make sound judgements is not fully developed until early 20's.

- Think differently/ more deeply about things
- Develop the capacity for abstract & hypothetical thought e.g.
 - Things could have been different
 - Things should have been different
 - Things could be changed
 - Things are not the way they seem
- Idealistic
- Simplistic
- Dogmatic
- Analytical
- Talents & skills start to emerge

This leads to changes in their relationship with parents

They can see their parents' faults much more easily.

This can be disturbing and irritating because they think that parents are 'supposed to get it right'

Even Jesus had a misunderstanding with his parents at the age of 12.

Jesus was once an adolescent

Hebrews 2

¹⁷Therefore, **it was necessary for Jesus to be in every respect like us**, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. He then could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. ¹⁸**Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted.** NLT

Hebrews 4

¹⁴That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, **Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him.** ¹⁵This High Priest of ours **understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do**, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it. NLT

Further Reading / Sources

The New Macmillan Guide to Family Health
Human Body – Ted Smart – Dorling Kindersley
Andy Back: Children's Ministry Guide to Working with 9-13s
James Dobson: Preparing for Adolescence
Rob Parsons: Teenagers – what every parent has to know
Violet Lopes: The Child
Notes from a 'Children Worldwide' training seminar

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