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Physical and Sexual Development

Understanding Adolescence

1. The Emergence of Adolescence

While the physiological and psychological changes of adolescence have always been evident, adolescence as a unique stage of life did not emerge until during the nineteenth century. There are reasons for this emergence:

- a. The age of puberty is now two to three years lower than it was a century ago, due primarily to improved diet and lifestyle. Along with this, the age of legal marriage has increased, leading to a significant period of life in which an individual has reached puberty.
- b. In pre-industrial times, young people commenced the adult world of work at a much earlier age and as such were considered adults. Young people now spend much longer at school in an environment where most social contact is with peers.
- c. The rapid changes in culture and society have made the requirements for entry into adulthood much greater and more complex. Young people have more to learn and understand than previously was true.

The concept of adolescence, as generally understood and applied, did not exist before the last two decades of the nineteenth century. One could almost call it an invention of that period.

*- John Demos
Historian, Harvard
University*

Physical & Sexual Development of Adolescents

1. The Perils of Puberty

Puberty involves a series of unknown changes that cause stress for the adolescent connected with their sense of personal identity. Stress comes through the fear being different from one's peers.

a. Perils for Girls

i. Height and Weight

On average girls begin their growth spurt at age 10 and finish at age 14. Seldom do girls grow beyond age 15. Self consciousness about height may be the first peril faced by an adolescent girl. One study suggested that 56 percent of adolescent girls are not satisfied with their bodies and that one major concern is being "too short".¹ Other girls become concerned that they are growing too tall and will therefore not be attractive to most boys.

Having lost "baby fat", both girls and boys can begin to put on fat prior to puberty, but when the growth spurt begins, girls lose some fat but not as much as boys. While the tendency to be overweight can be inherited, most heavy teenagers are overweight because they eat too much of the wrong food. For many girls especially, overeating becomes part of a vicious cycle: they are unhappy because they are overweight and so they eat to feel better.

ii. Breast Development

Our cultural preoccupation about breasts leads many girls to worry that their breasts are too small. On the other hand, adolescent girls who develop early are often subconscious of the size of their breasts and are embarrassed or uncomfortable at the interest and comment that they attract from boys. They frequently wear baggy clothing to hide their emerging figure, and are uncomfortable when going swimming.

Still other girls worry that their breasts are of a different size, even though this is quite normal during adolescence.

"Teenage boys, goaded by their surging hormones ... run in packs like the primal horde. They have only a brief season of exhilarating liberty between control by their mothers and control by their wives."
 - Camille Paglia, *U.S. author, critic, educator.*

"Few adolescents are as glamorous and self-confident as the magazine images suggest. Most need help and encouragement as they adjust to physical and emotional changes."
 - Nicholas Tucker
Human Development: Adolescents

¹ J. Norman and M. Harris, *The Private Life of an American Teenager* (New York: Rawson-Wade, 1981)

iii. Body Hair and Skin

The next peril girls commonly face is the appearance of body hair, particularly hair on the legs, arms and upper lip. Our society sees these as masculine traits and therefore unattractive for girls.

Increased activity of sweat glands can lead to acne problems for some girls. Despite the fears young girls have, acne is usually a temporary problem that does not persist beyond adolescence. Yet this does not minimise the self consciousness they feel when a clear complexion is seen as so desirable in our society.

iv. Menarche

The onset of menstruation usually occurs about two years after the commencement of breast development and after the peak period of growth in height. In some societies it is a public event to be celebrated, but our society views it as something private. Once it was thought of as some sort of “curse” but among adolescent girls today it is more likely to be viewed as an entry into womanhood and something to “get” before others.

a. Perils for Boys

i. Height and Weight

Height is probably the major concern for boys in a society that applauds the “tall, dark and handsome” image. Most boys have attained 98% of their height by age 16 but some can continue their growth spurt until 17½. Some further growth can continue up until the twentieth year. Boys who fail to achieve “average” height can feel that they are in some ways “less a man” than their taller peers who frequently need no reminder to point out the differences.

Weight is less of a peril for boys than girls although at least 30% of today’s adolescent males are considered overweight. This makes them less likely to excel at physical pursuits and less likely to be considered attractive by our society.

ii. Sexual Development

In a society which equates sexual development with manhood it comes as no surprise that of greatest concern to boys is the growth in size of the penis. Comparisons in communal showers and changing rooms after gym sessions or sport lead many to develop a sense of inadequacy, particularly when sexual development occurs at such different times and rates.

Are You There God?
It's Me, Margaret.
Gretchen my friend, got
her period. I'm so
jealous God. I hate
myself for being so
jealous, but I am. I
wish you'd help just a
little. Nancy's sure
she's going to get it
soon, too. Oh please,
God, I just want to be
normal.

- J Blume,

*“Are You There God?
It's Me, Margaret.”*

I'm real short and
everyone in my class
thinks I'm nothing but
a clown. It's true, I'm
apt to come up with a
fast remark and usually
can make kids laugh,
but sometimes I wish
they would treat me
like a real person, not
just a joke.

- Quoted in
E C Winship, *“Reaching
Your Teenager.”*

2. Behavioural Characteristics Related to Physical Development

a. A preoccupation with appearance

It is not uncommon for teenagers to be preoccupied with appearance. They may exhibit some (or all) of the following behavioural characteristics:

- Longer hours spent in the bathroom and in front of a mirror, trying to make themselves look right.
- Experimentation with different “looks” or styles.
- An heightened interest in clothing and fashion.
- Physical exercise (particularly boys).
- Dieting (particularly girls).

Since teenagers are too old to do the things kids do and not old enough to do things adults do, they do things nobody else does.

- Anonymous

b. A fragile self esteem

An adolescent may focus on one aspect of their appearance and become obsessed by it to the point that any remark remotely associated with the characteristic can send them into depths of despair or heights of delight. Their whole self esteem becomes bound up in what for adults are relatively insignificant issues such as height, breast size, acne.

The thirteenth and fourteenth years commonly are the most difficult twenty four months in life.

- Dr James Dobson

c. Energy and Strength Levels

The physical changes associated with puberty bring increased energy and strength yet the adolescent experiencing a growth spurt can tire easily. They can be bursting with energy one minute and lethargic the next.

d. Awkwardness

An adolescent whose body is growing rapidly frequently appears awkward as they cope with their “new” body. A male in the midst of a growth spurt, can appear “all arms and legs” and will lack co-ordination as their brains adapt to their “new” body.

e. Growing Pains

About one in five young people experience growing pains in the form of aches in the shins, calves or thighs of both legs. The attacks are often short (lasting a few minutes or half an hour) and most often happen at night.

3. Behavioural Characteristics Related to Sexual Development

a. Sexual Thoughts

Puberty not only brings changes in the sex organs - it signals the onset of sexual thoughts. For the adolescent this can be an exciting yet confusing time. The appearance of the opposite sex can trigger sexual thoughts which take time for the adolescent to understand and label. Young boys will become interested in the bodies of girls - their shape and softness, their hair and eyes. Young girls on the other hand, will be more fascinated by the boy himself, the way he talks, thinks and acts. Both males and females will begin to develop sexual fantasies.

b. Sexual Feelings

Hormonal changes bring new feelings associated with sexual thoughts and the early adolescent struggles to understand what to do with these feelings. They lack the wisdom and experience to differentiate between love, lust, and infatuation, and frequently confuse these. Yet they know enough to understand that it is seldom appropriate to express these feelings openly, much less to seek to satisfy them. Young people who are from homes where there has been a lack of intimacy and affection, frequently experience sexual feelings more acutely than those from secure and loving families.

c. Sexual Temptation

Society's preoccupation with sex only serves to heighten the adolescent's new sexual curiosity, and the many conflicting messages about morality can add to the confusion that they feel. Sexual temptation of some kind is inevitable and the adolescent is now required to begin making important moral choices. They need to make moral judgements on issues such as masturbation, and various levels of sexual conduct, from petting to intercourse. For males in particular, all this occurs at a time where they are rapidly approaching their sexual peak.

d. Sexual Experimentation

Temptation can lead to experimentation. For most this begins with masturbation and may lead to petty, heavy petting and intercourse.

e. Sexual Guilt

Sexual experimentation frequently leads to guilt particularly if the adolescent has acted against their own moral convictions or those of their parents or church. Some guilt is misdirected, such as guilt over sexual thought and feelings, yet the adolescent again lacks the knowledge to differentiate between genuine and imagined guilt.

Speaker Josh McDowell conducted a survey of teenagers from evangelical churches and discovered they had learned about sex from the following sources (respondents could select more than one):

- friends (28 percent)
- movies (26 percent)
- classes at school (23 percent)
- parents (23 percent)
- television (22 percent)
- church (7 percent).

*- From Group, cited in
Teens & Trends,
12/88-1/89.*

The Implications of Physical and Sexual Development

1. Ministry Strategies for Helping Adolescents

Youth leaders can help young people cope with their physical and sexual development and successfully achieve the required developmental tasks. They can do this through the following strategies:

a. Personal acceptance

- Accept teens as they are. Do not relate to them on the basis of how they look. Don't spend more time with the attractive young people and ignore the less attractive.
- Do not draw attention to differences, even in a light hearted way. Even insensitive comments about a new hairstyle or clothing can devastate a teen. Do not draw attention to clumsiness or a lack of physical athleticism or prowess.
- Offer genuine, sincere and appropriate compliments on their appearance. Reassure them that there is nothing wrong with them and that young people develop at different ages and rates.

b. Wise instruction

- Discuss and expose society's unattainable and superficial standards of physical appearance.
- Teach them (and their parents) about the changes that occur during adolescence.
- Discuss sexual activity and sexual responsibility. Help them discover Biblical guidelines and standards and the reason for them.

b. Sensitive programming

- Provide opportunities in the youth programme for physical activity and exertion.
- Play games and engage in activities that do not disadvantage or embarrass less well developed teens.
- Don't reinforce cliques based on appearance through groupings within programmes.

Because most high school students have already passed through puberty, most adults assume that high schoolers are prepared for the emotional and physical consequences of puberty. Not so - helping high school students deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of puberty and their emerging sexuality is one of the major goals of an effective ministry to high school students."

*- Mike Yaconelli and
Jim Burns, "High
School Ministry"*

Proceed to page 1 in the workbook and complete the questions

