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CONSIDERATIONS IN ADOLESCENT PASTORAL CARE

Pastoral care of adolescents is a specialist undertaking. While principles of general pastoral care practice are applicable, the uniqueness of adolescents means that the care we offer needs to be tailored to make allowances for the unique stage in life they are going through.



Reflect on your own counselling experiences with adolescents. What observations would you make to support the thesis that caring for adolescents is different from caring for adults? What do you notice some of these differences to be?

Developmental Considerations

Human development is a process that begins at birth and continues on until the day we die. Developmental psychologists generally agree that the first seven years of a child's life are crucial in setting the pattern for adult development, yet the adolescent years is the time at which the implications and significance of what has been laid down in these early years becomes evident.

It is also a crucial time to identify issues that will make healthy adult development difficult and to offer care and guidance to resolve these issues. Resolution generally becomes more difficult as the person moves into adulthood and unhealthy patterns of thinking and relating become ingrained.

1. Physiological Development

In relation to their physiological development, adolescents are commonly:

a. Insecure

Their bodies are changing at a rate unlike any other time apart from their first six months in life. These changes, which would be traumatic enough for us as adults, lead to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity that affects all areas of life. The body which they had become used to through childhood and which had gradually changed and grown is now, in their eyes, undergoing a metamorphous into something or someone else. Foundational to healthy development and healthy processing of emotional, social and spiritual issues is a sense of comfort or at least acceptance of our outward appearance, but the insecurity experienced at this foundational level makes it difficult to establish certain convictions at other "higher" levels.

b. Introspective

Insecurity leads to introspection and a preoccupation – with physical appearance and sexuality. This preoccupation contributes to inaccurate estimation of the physical dimension of personhood, meaning that those things (e.g. acne, delayed growth spurt, physical "defects") which an adult would consider minor in the context of life take on enormous importance for the adolescent.

Adolescents are going through a significant change period, characterized first by the need to adjust to a variety of physical changes, second by the influence of great social pressures, and third by the challenge of making life-determining decisions about values, beliefs, identity, careers, lifestyles, and relationships with others, including those of the opposite sex.

- Gary Collins!

2. Emotional Development

In relation to their emotional development, adolescent emotional experience can appear:

a. Incomprehensible

Many emotions felt are either new or are experienced with new intensity or in a new context. Adolescents struggle on two fronts:

- i. At times they lack the vocabulary and experience to even know what to label these emotions let alone how to describe them. Thus they can appear confused and reluctant to talk about these emotions.
- ii. They lack the maturity of adults to know how to appropriately express emotions. They lack the same social awareness and self control to process and express emotions constructively, leading to frustration both on their part and the part of adults.

b. Irrational

Adolescents are not always able to pinpoint reasons for the emotions they feel. While an adult might be able to say “I feel anxious because...” or “I feel down because...”, adolescents may experience such emotions and not be able to give a reason that seems rational to themselves, let alone anyone else. There are two primary reasons for this:

- i. Firstly, emotions are frequently affected by hormonal factors so that one day they feel full of confidence and in control, while the next they feel fearful and inadequate. Emotions swing rapidly and their experiences can be intense.
- ii. Secondly, their inability to correctly interpret the meaning and significance of life events based on a lack of life experience and immature cognitive ability.

Girls are especially prone to experience more intense emotional reactions because of cultural and social influences that encourage girls to express their feelings. Cultural influences discourage emotional expression in boys.

- Bruce Narramore²

3. Intellectual Development

There are two primary intellectual developmental tasks of adolescence:

- i. The ability to fully grasp abstract concepts such as freedom, love and responsibility.
- ii. The ability to apply formal reasoning or propositional thinking (“if... then...” patterns) to the situations they face.

As they endeavour to accomplish these developmental tasks adolescents can appear to adults to be:

a. Illogical

As formal reasoning develops the adolescent does not always process the implications of various courses of action accurately. Their thinking contains flaws which they are either not aware of or find too difficult to resolve satisfactorily. A further implication of intellectual development is that for the adolescent, actions do not always match belief. While adults may struggle to live up to the ideals, they have a greater awareness of their inconsistencies than does the adolescent.

b. Immature

Without a full capacity to think abstractly, adolescents can face life too simplistically and not fully grasp the depth of concepts they grapple with. This affects their moral judgements. The certainty about right and wrong that characterises childhood is dissipating as they realise moral judgements are not always black and white, yet they lack the maturity to make reasoned moral responses to issues that are shaded grey.

c. Idealistic

The ability to apply formal reasoning and to think abstractly enables the adolescent to begin to compare what is with what could be. They commonly take on a very idealistic view of life in which they compare reality with possibility. Yet this idealism means that their view of issues faced in their own life is not always rooted in reality, leading to unhelpful judgements and decisions.

The capacity for abstract thought is the major developmental task for young adolescents. It enables them to imagine ideal possibilities and to compare reality around them to these fantasized states of perfection. The result is often criticism of parents, church, society and friends. This process helps the teenagers development by: assisting the process of separating from parents and other authority; helping them become increasingly independent; sharpening their thoughts and ideas about the personal qualities they do and do not wish to develop; and allowing them the opportunity to try out new ideas while still in a safe environment.

- David Elkind³

4. Pastoral Care Implications

The implications for providing pastoral care for adolescents as opposed to adults are as follows:

- a. Young people do not always possess the self confidence necessary to face life's challenges and navigate their way through them. Uncertainty about themselves and a lack of confidence can cause them to give up to easily. They need encouragement, and someone who believes in them in order for them to develop the resources necessary to move ahead.
- b. Young people won't always see the bigger picture. Their lack of life experience coupled with their tendency toward self absorption means that they can misinterpret the significance of situations they face. The pastoral care provided will need to help them gain a realistic understanding of their situation, by helping them see things from new and different perspectives.
- c. Young people won't always be aware of what exactly they are feeling and why. They will need help in articulating their feelings and in identifying possible reasons for these feelings.
- d. Young people have a greater tendency to be ruled by their emotions and to make choices and decisions based upon them. They need help to analyse the validity of these emotions and to apply reason in the process of decision making.
- e. Young people don't always understand the dynamics or the seriousness of what they are facing. They lack the full ability to think though issues and their implications and so have a greater tendency to make hasty assumptions and draw wrong conclusions.
- f. Young people lack the ability to clearly identify the consequences of various courses of action. They need pastoral care that can help them predict outcomes as they endeavour to put in place strategies that will see them work through the issues they face.
- g. Young people do not always see the dangers that certain courses of action place them in. An "it will never happen to me" attitude sees them place themselves in situations of unnecessary risk. They need help to critically evaluate their options and to gain a realistic understanding of the risks and dangers involved in various courses of action.

Maybe you don't feel equipped to help this unique generation of adolescents. Join the club. Many of us do not feel competent to counsel. But, believe me, you are better than you think – if you realise that the most important instrument you have in helping teenagers is yourself. Why? Because who you are as a person is more important than *what you do*.

- Les Parrott III⁴



Consider the implications for providing pastoral care for adolescents listed on the previous page. Which developmental consideration(s) does each one relate to?

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

Social Considerations

1. Developmental Tasks

Further to the developmental notes of the previous section are certain social developmental tasks which the adolescent is undergoing that affects the way we provide pastoral care. Briefly, these tasks and their implications for adolescent pastoral care are as follows:*

a. Individuation

This describes the task of early adolescence in which the young person begins the process of developing a life separate from the family and has a greater awareness of themselves as a unique individual.

b. Identity

This task involves the young person in a quest to “discover themselves” – to define who they are and what they stand for in life. Frequently this is evidenced by trying on different roles and observing reactions – both their own and others.

c. Independence

This task involves the young person establishing a life free from parental boundaries and control, and taking responsibilities for their own decisions. Symptomatic of this is the “rebellion” that goes on during adolescence in which the young person pushes against the boundaries and the parent relaxes them.

Early in life, children imitate and identify with their parents and family members. Later they model their behaviour after admired adults, develop relationships with peers, and then struggle, at least in our society, to develop their own self concepts, uniqueness, values, and identities. For many this can be a time of self-searching, anxiety, confusions, experimentation with lifestyles, and drifting goalless behaviour.

- Gary Collins⁵

* See workbooks: *Adolescence* (YouthTRAIN, 2000) and *Philosophy of Youth Ministry* (YouthTRAIN, 2004) for more detailed descriptions of these tasks.

These social developmental tasks have a number of implications for the pastoral care of adolescents:

a. Self Determination

Young people will be at various stages of willingness to take responsibility for their own problems. Depending on age and maturity, they may simply want the pastoral carer to make decisions for them rather than take responsibility for their own choices. Alternatively, they may be determined to make their own decisions and be unwilling to accept guidance out of a desire to prove their own competency.

b. Self Reliance

Young people lack the same personal convictions of adults. There are less non-negotiables in their life which govern the decisions they make in resolving problems. There are advantages in this in that they are more open to suggested courses of actions, but then they are less likely to have the conviction needed to follow through on them.

c. Self Confidence

Young people are more governed by what other people might think than are adults. Whether it be parents or peers, young people do not possess the same sense of personal security and confidence that would see them tackle problems without concern for what others might think.

d. Self Awareness

Young people lack the self awareness of adults. As they establish their own sense of identity they will grow in the ability to “know themselves” which will help them, both in understanding their problems and in putting in place realistic courses of action to overcome them.

e. Self Control

Young people are still learning to exercise their own effective self control. They are moving from a point in life where controls were largely imposed through extrinsic demands, and are learning to establish the ability to govern their own behaviour by personal, more intrinsic means. Consequently they need greater assistance and supportive accountability in following through on certain courses of action.

By the very nature of their geocentricism, teenagers tend to block out much of the potentially helpful feedback that is offered to them. Responses from adults, particularly parents, are especially subject to being discounted as irrelevant and meaningless. As a result, the teenager is left swimming in rather confused circles of thoughts, feelings and fears.

- Keith Olson⁶

2. Parental Considerations

Unlike adults, pastoral care of adolescents is conducted in an environment where the role of the parents holds great importance and influence. While they might be in the processes of establishing independence, or even rebelling, as pastoral carers we cannot ignore the significance of parents. They bring a whole new dynamic into the pastoral care interaction. It is important that the one offering pastoral care keep in mind the following:

a. Co-carers

In offering pastoral care we do not do so in place of parents but alongside parents. Parents can offer us great insights into their young people and we are wise to tap into this knowledge. Understanding behavioural characteristics can be invaluable in all stages of the caring process: entering into their world and building rapport, examining the issue they face and understanding how they view it, and employing an action plan and resulting follow up.* Working as co-carers can also lead to pastoral care involvement in the wider family, adding a new dimension to the care we offer to the adolescent.

b. Convictions

Understanding the convictions of parents and how these convictions are viewed by the adolescent are important considerations for the carer. They will give insight into the influences and belief systems the young person has been growing up under that affect the way they behave. In addition, if the carer is to be working alongside the parent they must understand the parent's convictions and support these unless doing so significantly contravenes their understanding of Christian faith and behaviour. In this case parents of younger teens need to be made aware of how the convictions of the carer differ from their own.

c. Confidentiality

Confidentiality protocol differs in adolescent pastoral care from adult pastoral care. While parents do not need to know every detail discussed, the carer has responsibility to the parents to keep them informed regarding issues they need too, and have a right to know about. This is particularly true of issues related to the young person's personal safety and well being.

Without a doubt the most important resource in understanding and addressing a teenager's problem is his or her family. A systemic approach to counselling views the teenager's concerns in the context of the entire family. Adolescent problems can often be symptoms of larger difficulties in the family.

- Les Parrott III⁷

What is your obligation if parents want to know what their teenager is talking to you about? We've found it helpful to let parents know at the beginning of our work with their son or daughter that counselling is most effective if it private; and we ask for their parents' co-operation in allowing their teenager to have a confidential relationship in which to discuss his or her concerns. We assure parents that we will provide them with regular summaries of how their teenager is progressing and that we will inform them if anything comes up to suggest that their son or daughter is experiencing serious problems which place the teenager at risk.

- Les Parrott III⁸

3. Peer Influence

In providing pastoral care for adolescents it is important that we are aware of the power that peer influence potentially holds over them. It is significantly greater than the pressure felt by an adult from their own peers. This is due to the adolescent's:

a. Desire to be accepted

In seeking to establish a sense of identity and independence from parents the young person looks toward their peers for a sense of belonging expressed through acceptance, appreciation and affirmation.

b. Lack of self assurance

A young person is still developing ownership of their own convictions; and as such are vulnerable to influence by the convictions of others, most notably the peers from whom they desire acceptance.

Adults on the other hand are more likely to be comfortable in their own convictions, even if these contradict the opinions of peers and cause them to face rejection.

The implications for providing pastoral care to adolescents are as follows:

- i. Through the process of caring, young people need assistance in developing and owning their own convictions. We cannot assume these convictions exist already; nor can we impose our own. It requires patience on the part of the carer to carefully guide the young person to a point where they themselves are convinced that a certain course of action is the right one.
- ii. When planning change, young people need to reflect on the influence of peers and what their response will be when faced with pressure to act against their newly formed convictions. The carer can assist them in developing coping strategies that will see them stand against this pressure.
- iii. The carer needs to exercise a great deal of grace for those times in which a young person yields to the pressure exerted upon them by others. An appreciation of the developmental struggles and pressures they face along with the ability to patiently offer forgiveness and encouragement can assist the young person to forgive themselves when they fail, and to try again.

The adolescent's social context provides the natural habitat for the nurture of a fully formed self. *Who am I?* is largely answered by the interpersonal environment of peer interaction. In the midst of these daily interactions, the middle adolescent continually reflects to herself, *How am I like you?* And *How am I unlike you?* Being on the bridge to adulthood is scary. Believing that one is alone on the bridge is terrifying. Friendships thus become the most emotionally prized part of a high school student's world.

- Richard Dunn⁹



Reflect back over the past two sections and assess your own effectiveness in offering pastoral care to adolescents:

NO YES
"I have a good understanding of adolescent development and its implications for pastoral care." _____

NO YES
"I encourage young people and endeavour to build in them a sense of self assurance." _____

NO YES
"I consciously help young people gain a broader more realistic understanding of the issues they face." _____

NO YES
"I help young people understand their feelings and suggest words to help them describe what they feel." _____

NO YES
"I help young people think through the full implications of the issues they face and of various courses of action." _____

NO YES
"I don't impose my own convictions on young people but assist them in developing and owning their own." _____

NO YES
"I help young people reflect on the influence of peers and reflect on how they might handle pressure." _____

NO YES
"I am patient with young people and express forgiveness and acceptance, when they fail." _____

Which two of these areas do you most need to work on? What specifically will you do?

1.

2.

Spiritual Considerations

At the heart of adolescent pastoral care is the desire to assist young people express and live by faith in Christ. However, the developmental and social tasks outlined on the previous pages mean that the faith they exhibit in adolescence is not mature adult faith. To provide effective Christian pastoral care means we need to first understand what constitutes normal adolescent faith development* and then examine those skills and strategies needed to assist them toward developing an adult understanding and approach to faith.

1. Developmental Tasks

In spiritual terms the adolescent is involved in three developmental tasks:

- a. Cognisance
 - Making sense of spiritual experiences.
 - Developing an understanding of basic faith tenets.
 - Resolving apparent inconsistencies and contradictions.
- b. Confession
 - Grasping the personal implications of faith.
 - Choosing to adopt faith as a fundamental rule of life.
 - Making public their confession of faith.
- c. Consistency
 - Endeavouring to match deed to word.
 - Developing a sense of one's own giftedness and calling.
 - Resolving personal issues through the use of faith principles.

In providing pastoral care, we need to be aware of the extent to which the adolescent has achieved and is still grappling with each of these tasks. This information, along with an understanding of progress in other developmental areas gives the pastoral care provider a grid through which they are best able to offer counsel.

Paul wrote in Colossians 1:28 that his verbal interaction with people (counselling?) always was designed to promote Christian maturity. Only the maturing believer is entering more deeply into the ultimate purpose of his life, namely, worship and service. Biblical counselling therefore will adopt as its major strategy the promotion of spiritual maturity. When we talk with other believers, we must always have in our minds the purpose of assisting them to become more mature so that they can better please God.

- Larry Crabb¹⁰

* See workbooks: *Adolescence* (YouthTRAIN, 2000) and *Philosophy of Youth Ministry* (YouthTRAIN, 2004) for more detailed descriptions of these tasks.

2. Difficulties

Caring for the spiritual wellbeing of adolescents raises a number of difficult questions:*

- i. What expectations should we have for adolescents? True, they are not yet adults, so should we expect them to make adult professions of faith (such as baptism or confirmation), and if so when? To what extent is it realistic to expect consistency of word and deed in their spiritual lives?
- ii. How do we determine whether an adolescent is truly born again? Do we regard as “Christian” the early adolescent who has grown up “believing” in a Christian environment but has yet to fully comprehend the need for a personal decision? Is such a young person filled with God’s Spirit and empowered to live the Christian life?
- iii. To what extent do we encourage young people in making faith decisions (and risk having them make premature decisions), as opposed to leaving conviction to the Spirit of God?
- iv. If faith in Christ is the ultimate source of wholeness and well-being, how effective can we ultimately be in providing pastoral care if a young person refuses to follow Christ?
- v. Where is the line between offering spiritual care and taking responsibility for Christian growth off the young person?

Experienced youth workers understand that spiritual transformation is mysterious and can't be quantified in four easy steps.

- Doug Fields¹¹



Reflect on the above questions. What answers would you give and why?

3. Dangers

When providing pastoral care for the adolescent, we need to keep in mind a number of dangers we face. To some extent these same dangers are present when providing pastoral care to any age, although due to developmental considerations, the dynamics vary somewhat with adolescents.

a. The danger of dependency

The more that we, as carers, exhibit empathy and provide stability and wisdom, the greater the risk that a young person facing turmoil and lacking love and acceptance will develop an unhealthy dependence upon us. Evidence of this is an unwillingness to take initiative in moving toward wholeness on certain issues, or in the raising of new issues that demand the carer's time and attention. Often what is needed is a form of "tough love" in which the carer puts the responsibility back on the young person to show evidence of effort and progress before more time is invested in them.

b. The danger of manipulation

It is helpful for the carer to reflect on what the young person really wants. As they are still developing their own convictions about right or wrong, young people commonly look to us to sanction behaviour that they at least suspect to be sinful. This may be through the telling of half truths or of failing to relay the full picture. We must ensure young people's stories "check out" and that we are being told the full story. Another form of manipulation in young people is that they use the fact that we are talking through issues with them as a means to please parents or friends but have in fact no personal desire to change.

c. The danger of unmet personal need

In providing pastoral care for adolescents we are working with people growing through the same stages of development as we ourselves have passed through. However, if we have been unsuccessful in accomplishing the tasks of adolescence ourselves we face the possibility of finding that the helping relationship meets our own deep needs and are therefore vulnerable to the temptation of maintaining the helping relationship for our own purposes. If the carer finds that the helping relationship is meeting their own needs for significance and affirmation, or are finding that they are using the helping relationship to come to terms with their own needs and find healing, they are wise to refer the young person on and go and seek their own counsel.

Suppose that you have a strong sexual or romantic feelings toward your counselee, that you are tempted to hover over and protect the counselee, that you fantasize about the counselee between sessions, that you find ways to avoid clients whom you dislike but spend extra time and longer sessions with others, that you have a constant need for a counselee's love and approval, or that you feel so close to a counselee that you cannot separate your own feelings from those of your client. These can all be indications that your own needs and problems are intruding on your work as a counsellor. Perhaps you have become so emotionally entangled that your objectivity, and hence your counselling effectiveness, has been lost.

- Gary Collins¹²

4. Demands

Providing pastoral care for the adolescent, places a number of demands upon the carer. In particular:

a. The Demand for Wisdom

Because adolescents lack the life experience necessary to realistically analyse and understand the problems they face, a carer needs wisdom to impart fresh understanding and mature thinking in order to help them gain perspective and chart a helpful way ahead.

b. The Demand for Understanding

When providing pastoral care for other adults we generally have a good grasp of the way they think and perceive the world. This is not so easy with adolescents whose thinking is less developed and whose emotional responses are less predictable. An effective carer will develop the ability to understand how the troubled adolescent views the world, what they believe about themselves, and the assumptions they make when confronted with problems.

c. The Demand for Compassion

Young people are not always easy to like! Yet an effective carer will exhibit a genuine love for young people and a real empathy for what they are going through, and a non-judgemental attitude toward them. Young people spot insincerity a mile off. They know when an adult really cares, or when they are simply performing a duty.

b. The Demand for Spiritual Knowledge

Young people lack the spiritual understanding and discernment of most adults in the church. They are more susceptible to be led astray by false teaching, or to make assumptions about faith based on limited knowledge. They also have a tendency to ask different questions from those posed by adults – questions that are more simplistic in some ways, yet questions that challenge those things adults would take for granted. In providing pastoral care we must be sure of our ground and ensure we are using scripture accurately and wisely.

Helping students see that God is up to something in them in spite of their brokenness is essential to the process of drawing meaning from suffering. Through your compassionate and wise counsel, young Christians can see that God turns into good what others meant for evil.
- Les Parrott III¹³

¹⁵ Work hard so God can approve you. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth. ¹⁶ Avoid godless, foolish discussions that lead to more and more ungodliness.
- 2 Timothy 2:15-16



Reflect on the dangers and demands of providing pastoral care to adolescents. Assess your own pastoral care using the questions below:

NO _____ YES
"I recognise when an unhealthy dependency is developing and have the ability to exercise tough love."

NO _____ YES
"I am wise to manipulative techniques young people use and am able to confront them when necessary."

NO _____ YES
"I have sufficient self understanding to know when I am being tempted to have my own needs met in caring."

NO _____ YES
"I have sufficient life experience to be able to help young people overcome their problems."

NO _____ YES
"I have the ability to understand what young people are going through and the way they think."

NO _____ YES
"I have a genuine love and real empathy for young people which is clear for them to see."

NO _____ YES
"I have a good grasp of basic Christian doctrine and am able to answer most questions young people ask."

Which two of these areas do you most need to work on? What specifically will you do?

1.

2.

For Further Thought...

Reflect on the various characteristics of adolescents and the implications for pastoral care outlined in this session. Note down some pastoral care situations you have been in, in which you encountered these dynamics.

