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# *Understanding Adolescent Development*



## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- What Is Development?
- Why Do We Study Adolescent Development?
- The Study of Adolescent Development: Past, Present, and Future

## APPLIED QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- How does understanding development benefit those who provide educational, health, and social services to adolescents?
- In contrast to past beliefs about how adolescents develop, how have modern ideas about development affected the lives of teens?

WE BEGIN THIS JOURNEY INTO the study of adolescent development by first examining the concept of “development.” The word *development* is used in many ways and in various disciplines, but it refers to a very specific process in the study of the human life span.

To understand the meaning of adolescent development, it is important to first examine the broader concept of development overall. The adolescent stage of life does not occur in isolation from other developmental stages. Adolescence is part of a broader process of lifespan development. First, adolescence is an outcome of childhood. Second,

the adolescent years will impact adulthood in profound ways. Hence, the adolescent years are but a part of the grander journey through the life span. We will examine this intersection between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in future chapters.

At this point, we begin with the simple meaning of the word *development* and some common questions that arise in discussions about development. Next, we will examine why it is important to study development, particularly adolescent development. We will then travel back in time to review some of what previous generations thought about adolescents, setting the stage for an examination in the upcoming chapters of what we know today about this fascinating stage of life.

## WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

From the moment of conception, a new living organism is in a constant state of change. This change continues after birth and throughout the life span. Human development is this change. The term *development* does not imply a positive or negative process; it is just change, for good or for bad. One child may develop into a well-behaved student and a good friend whereas another child may become belligerent and aggressive. Regardless, they are both developing.

All humans experience change; however, not all human change is the same. Some people develop along one trajectory while others may follow a very different path. The study of development tries to understand the driving forces behind developmental change and the way these forces interact, resulting in differing paths of development for different people (Elder & Giele, 2009; Magnusson & Cairns, 1996). For example, consider an adolescent who is having major problems at home and at school. A developmental scientist would approach this problem by trying to understand the various past and present factors influencing these difficulties, such as genetic, social, and family factors. Why are these factors interacting in ways that, for this adolescent, are producing life difficulties whereas for a different adolescent they

are producing a very different, more positive life path? Studying development also helps us to understand, for example, the many factors that contribute to a young adult's adjusting to parenthood, or the variables linked with successful aging.

*What types of changes have you experienced during the past year or two?*

The study of development examines and assesses the fundamental questions asked about the process of development and what produces change (Miller, 2011). These questions include the issues of nature versus nurture, quantitative versus qualitative growth, and early versus late experiences. Let's examine each of these.

### Nature Versus Nurture

Are we born with an innate, specific natural program that will determine the way our lives will progress? Or will our course of development evolve based on how we are nurtured, our environment, and what we learn? Famously known as the nature/nurture controversy, this is the greatest question faced by developmental science. For example, when you see a teen who easily loses his temper and lashes out at others, would you say he behaves this way because of genes inherited from his hot-headed father or mother? Or would you say that he learned his behavior from growing up in a home where everyone was angry? This question is important because the way we answer it will influence our decisions about how to help people who are having difficulties in life. For example, if you believe that everything is nature, or genetic, what good will come from trying to help people with hardships? After all, it is all in their inherited "program."

*Which do you feel has had a greater impact on your life: nature or nurture?*

### Quantitative Growth Versus Qualitative Growth

Does human development progress very slowly and systematically, like a vehicle being driven up a ramp? Or does life progress in larger units? Do people stagnate for some time and then advance rapidly when they reach a critical point, stepping up onto a new, higher stage of life? Quantitative growth implies small, gradual units of development, whereas qualitative growth implies very noticeable differences from one life stage to another. Quantitative growth is also referred to as continuous growth, as the growth progresses in a continuity that is very measurable and systematic. Qualitative growth, in contrast, is referred to as discontinuous growth, as it involves moving in uneven bursts from one stage to another.

The difference between these two kinds of growth can also be understood by thinking about people at various ages. Think about the differences, for example, in intellectual and emotional maturity between a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old, and then consider the differences in intellectual and emotional maturity between a 7-year-old and a 9-year-old. In both cases, the children are 2 years apart. The quantitative perspective would say that a 7-year-old is different than a 5-year-old in the same way that a 9-year-old is different than a 7-year-old, as quantitatively they are the same distance from one another, 2 years. The qualitative perspective would disagree and say that the difference between the two age gaps is not the same. A 9-year-old is more mature than the 7-year-old in different ways than a 7-year-old is more mature than the 5-year-old. According to the stage approach, development is not continuous; instead, growth progresses differently during each age interval due to dissimilarities in quality between each stage of life. Another way of looking at this question

*Can you think of some reasons why the answer to the quantitative/qualitative question is beneficial for helping humanity?*

is as follows: When children learn to talk, do they gradually use language in a slow and systematic way, word for word, adding to the quantity of their language abilities in evenly measured advances? Or does language develop in sudden bursts of capability, enabling the child to advance to a new stage of life?

### Early Versus Late Experiences

Are the early years of life what determine the course of all future development? Or do we develop and change throughout life? Developmental scientists with an “early experiences” orientation argue that what happens in childhood is the foundation for all future behavior, beliefs, and personality. Other developmental scientists believe that later experiences are as important as early ones. According to this perspective, development occurs throughout life and every stage has the ability to produce change. For example, if a child had an impoverished, abusive upbringing and grew into a very difficult and delinquent adolescent, would you say that this adolescent’s misbehavior and criminality is now an integral and unchangeable part of who he or she is for the rest of the individual’s life, or can later life experiences also be influential for this adolescent, possibly contributing to a changed

and more positive life for this person? The answer to this question is clearly an important part of determining how to help adolescents with difficulties in life. It would obviously be very difficult to help in these cases if we determine that once a person reaches adulthood, that person does not have the ability to change or be influenced. We will deal in much more detail with issues of the application of developmental science in later sections of this chapter and in the rest of the book.

#### CURRENT ISSUE IN ADOLESCENCE



Counselors working in university counseling centers report that many college students who have faced difficult life circumstances while growing up feel hopeless about the future. These students are convinced that the hardships they experienced have had such a profound impact on their lives that overcoming them is impossible. Without knowing it, these despondent students have taken sides in the question of early versus late experiences. They subscribe to the belief that what occurred early in life will determine the course of all future development. Can a college student with a troubled past have a promising future? What needs to happen for a healing transformation to take place?

The three fundamental questions of nature versus nurture, quantitative versus qualitative growth, and early versus late experiences guide the study of development and help direct the research and application in the various subdisciplines that focus on understanding the process of human development. However, it is important to understand that most 21st-century developmental scientists agree that development is ultimately driven by an interaction of both sides of these three questions. These questions are used as a framework to help us understand the various forces driving development. In the end it is clear that development is motivated by multiple interconnected components.

#### WHY DO WE STUDY ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT?

Humans have had a long history of being curious about their surroundings. Great scientists, explorers, artists, and architects have all been driven by the need to know and understand the world. The study

of human development is similarly driven by this quest for knowledge. However, in the study of development, our quest is amplified by the need to understand ourselves. Humans are a complex species, and in our daily interactions we are constantly asking why. Why does that child seem to be so happy? Why did that person say that to me? Why is she acting this way? Why am I thinking that? Why did I buy that? Why am I sad? Why is my sister so different from me? Why do I have difficulties developing close relationships? Why am I having a hard time with this new job?

The need to understand ourselves has been the focus of many disciplines for several millennia. From religion to philosophy and psychology, the goal has been to shed light on the mysteries of our thinking, emotions, and personality. The ancient Greek aphorism “know thyself,” found on many Delphic monuments and temples and quoted by Aristotle as a well-known saying, is motivated by this quest for understanding the human condition.

However, the study of development is driven by more than just a need to understand ourselves. The benefits resulting from this understanding are immense. By comprehending how we develop and why we act the way we do, we have the ability to manipulate the areas of development that are in our hands and to help make life better for others (Elder & Giele, 2009). Knowing what variables play a role in positive development can shed light on what we as teachers, parents, social workers, psychologists, and policymakers can do to improve the human condition. The exceptional advances in many social services that we have seen over the past century have been driven by new and evolving science emanating from the study of development.

Many questions that are asked in relation to enhancing the human condition can be informed by the study of development. For example:

- When a woman is pregnant, what changes can a couple make in their daily behavior in order to improve the likelihood of having a healthy baby?
- What can parents do in their interactions with their infant to enhance the infant’s language development?
- At what age should children enter preschool or kindergarten?
- Is it better to place foster children with relatives or with unrelated foster parents?
- In cases of divorce when children are involved, should grandparents have visitation rights?
- Should adoptions be open or closed?
- Should adolescent offenders be treated differently than adult offenders?
- At what age is it too risky to have children?

- What can individuals do to transition well after losing a job?
- How can older adults adjust well to aging?

These questions are just a small sample of the many important issues that the study of development can shed light on. Using the information from research studies on human development can provide sound and testable conclusions to be used in making critical decisions about enhancing people's lives. Our approach to making individual and communal decisions about life is largely based upon our understanding of human development.

*What other questions can you think of that the study of human development can help answer?*

The study of human development can also inform our comprehension and treatment of developmental delays and psychopathology. Developmental science focuses on understanding the process of “normal,” or average, development. Hence, by truly understanding how the average course of development progresses we have the ability to make comparisons to this norm and determine when an individual's circumstance is abnormal enough to call for intervention. In these cases, understanding differences in development can also help to ensure that the intervention used is age appropriate. For example, when a 3-year-old is having difficulties with language, knowing the process of normal language development in children can help educators decide whether this child is following a normal course of language development, or whether these language deficiencies differ enough from the norm to indicate a need for speech therapy. Similarly, when an adolescent is experiencing difficulties with parents and friends leading to feelings of sadness, studies of average adolescents and their natural propensity toward difficulties during the adolescent years can help us assess whether this particular adolescent's problems go beyond the norm. Knowing when an adolescent is “just being an adolescent” can help us determine when and how to intervene in the life of this teen in an age-appropriate, meaningful, and effective manner.

Think of it like the science of detecting counterfeit currency. One approach the Secret Service may take is to study all types of fake money to know what to watch for. However, a better approach may be to become experts in the properties of real currency. By knowing what a real \$100 bill looks and feels like, you can immediately detect when you are looking at a fake note. Knowing what normal development looks like can help us detect when we are looking at a situation that is abnormal and requires professional attention.

All things considered, the reason we study development is to understand the process of normal human development from conception to death so we have the knowledge necessary to contribute to a better life for people.

#### IN THEIR OWN WORDS



This firsthand account by Trevor, a 15-year-old African American high school freshman, highlights the importance of understanding what normal developmental turmoil entails as opposed to adolescent issues that may be more clinical in nature:

Going to high school was a big difference for me. The school was much bigger and had a lot more people. I wasn't scared about changing schools because I did already know some people at the high school. Other things that were hard for me during the transition to high school from middle school was the length of the periods. The class periods got longer and more was packed into a day. I became a lot busier. The classes were much harder than middle school classes and I struggled more academically in high school than I did during middle school. But I played football so that helped me like and adjust to high school better. Socially I've always been around the same group of people, some friends even since elementary school. So having my friends at school was a help. I'm a fairly social person I guess, but I'm pretty content with just the friends that I have. I care more about hanging out with my friends than I do my schoolwork, but I do have plans to be very successful one day. I do want to try and do well in school; I try hard in all of my classes. Business subjects in school interest me the most. I'm going to go to college for Business, probably, so I need to work hard for that. No one in my family has gone, so I'd be the first. My teachers are usually pretty cool. I get in trouble for talking a lot. I've had a lot of detentions, but never for anything serious, just stupid stuff like forgetting to do homework or something. But when I do my schoolwork I usually always do pretty well on it. Sometimes I just don't care though, which might be kind of bad, but it'll work out I'm sure. My mom really wants me to go to college, but damn, that's expensive. It can be like, what,

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\$15,000? How do people do that? Gotta get a high paying job!  
That's for sure.

Trevor identifies some of the difficulties he faced when he transitioned into high school. He describes how the changes in the length of the day and the individual periods were a challenge for him. Trevor also points to the harder school content and some pressures about going to college as additional sources of stress in school. However, even with the difficulties experienced by Trevor it is clear that his problems are a part of the natural process of the developmental transition into high school.

Particularly when it comes to adolescents, it is important to have a clear grasp of what normal development looks like. As the upcoming chapters highlight, it is natural for the adolescent years to entail some type of turmoil in mood, thought, and relationships. Understanding normative adolescent development can help clarify for professionals working with teens if the issue they encounter with a client is clinical or developmental. This determination can help in devising a treatment plan appropriate for the specific adolescent being worked with. For example, as will be seen in a later chapter, adolescence is a time of mood fluctuation. The majority of the time, when a teen is experiencing sadness it is an expression of a normal part of the adolescent experience. However, in some cases, the mood problem may be pervasive and systematic, requiring a more intense clinical intervention. Understanding normal adolescent development can help in making these types of determinations thoughtfully, without jumping to conclusions and overdiagnosing adolescents with major depression when all they are experiencing is a normal developmental process.

#### ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT IN THE REAL WORLD



The study of adolescent development can be applied in multiple fields. Although this book highlights the application of adolescent development in many areas of work, as noted, particular attention will be given to the application of adolescent development in the helping professions.

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Yaela Samet has an associate's degree in nursing and is a registered nurse in the emergency room at Northwest Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Working in a community hospital, she tends to the medical needs of a variety of patients but has particular interest in adolescent care. She describes how she integrates adolescent development in her daily work.

#### In What Way Do You Apply Adolescent Development in Your Work?

"A lot of adolescents come in with their parents and are not always so forthcoming with information in front of their parents. I usually try to ask them some questions about school, favorite subjects, friends, and hobbies just to make them feel comfortable. I explain to them what kind of testing and wait time they will have. If I need to ask them if they smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, or are sexually active I will not ask in front of the parents; I want them to know they can trust me and that I will keep their answers confidential. If I can talk to them without a parent in the room I do that, or I will walk with them to the bathroom to get a urine sample and talk while we walk, explaining to them the importance of answering me truthfully and that what they tell me, I will not tell their parents."

#### Can You Describe a Case You Worked on That Involved an Adolescent?

"One night I had a 16-year-old boy who came in by ambulance stating he felt like he was having trouble swallowing and wasn't sure if there was anything in his throat or if he was imagining it. He did say he had a history of anxiety. While talking with my patient and getting to know him, I asked him if he had any suicidal or homicidal ideations. He admitted to me that he did have thoughts of hurting people, such as a teacher or classmate who upset him. He stated he never acted on his thoughts but he did have them and played them out in his head, getting pleasure out of winning the fights in his head."

#### How Did You Deal With This Case? What Was the Outcome?

"I listened and let the patient talk. I also needed to address his trouble swallowing. So first we had him examined by the doctor and his

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throat turned out fine. I then encouraged him to drink and brought him some foods that were soft and easy to swallow. Once he was stabilized, I was able to tend to his other, more psychological issues, and had him evaluated by our social worker. He was later admitted to a psychiatric hospital for further evaluation. The only way I was able to detect and take care of this bigger psychological issue was because of my knowledge and sensitivity to adolescent development.”

### THE STUDY OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Although the scientific study of adolescent development is a relatively recent discipline, the attempt to understand teens has had a long history. This history is important for several reasons.

Knowing what people thought about teens in the past helps us to understand them today. More specifically, knowing what people thought in the past can help us critically examine what current scholars believe about adolescents, perhaps avoiding repetition of past mistakes. By comparing what was suggested in the past with newly proposed advances in developmental science, we have an opportunity to challenge our thinking and clarify current approaches.

The historical understanding of adolescence was driven in part by what was traditionally believed about children. We begin this brief review of adolescent development in history with a short look at what was known about children. We then examine more specifically how this view on children evolved into the view past generations had on adolescents.

#### What Was Thought About Children?

Archeological findings from the Middle East, North Africa, and ancient Greece reveal pottery art and engravings depicting childhood play. Apparently, these early civilizations gave children the time and resources to indulge in their need to play, similar to the way Western society views childhood today. Nevertheless, under early Greco-Roman rule children were typically seen as less valuable than adults and were often subjected to harsh treatment, neglect, and abuse (Bakke, 2005).

In Europe during the Middle Ages (500–1500 CE), the pervasive approach to child-rearing was based on the religious concept of

original sin. Children were seen as being born sinful and possessing an evil inclination from the first moment of life. The Bible contains several passages depicting children as sinful (“every product of the thoughts of his heart are but evil always” [Genesis 6:5]) and advocating harsh discipline (“He who spares the rod, hates the son” [Proverbs 13:24]).

By the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Enlightenment, a new approach toward children began to surface in the writings of the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) he described the mind of the newborn child as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. Blank slates are neither evil nor good; they are blank, like a white sheet of paper ready to be written on. Individuals become a function of the environment they grow up in. According to this view, children’s “slates” (i.e., their minds, their personalities) are “written on” by the people, places, and things they know, which in turn makes them the way they are.

In his book *The Social Contract* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), another Enlightenment philosopher, introduced the

*Which view do you think best characterizes the nature of children: original sin, tabula rasa, or innate goodness? Can all three be accurate?*

third historical approach to children. Rousseau believed that children are born innately good; in his view, if we allow children to develop uninterrupted they will naturally mature into good adults. He further suggested that bad behavior later in life is a function of the society in which individuals developed that corrupts their natural good.

### What Was Thought About Adolescents?

Elements of these three views on children can be seen in the historical view on adolescents with some uniqueness ascribed to this evolving stage in life. The focus on adolescence as being a distinct and somewhat tumultuous stage of development can be traced all the way back to the Bible. Written, according to the most egalitarian views, beginning at about 900 BCE (Ehrlich, 2009), the Bible, in the 37th chapter of Genesis, recounts the story of Joseph, the second-to-last son of Jacob. The chapter elaborated on this 17-year-old “youth,” or “Na’ar” in biblical Hebrew, who is extremely idealistic, is obsessed with his appearance, is engaged in conflicts with his siblings, and is having a hard time communicating with his father. It sounds like the Bible is

describing a teenager living in suburban Chicago rather than a religious figure living in the wastelands of Canaan.

A bit later in history, the Greek philosopher Plato (424–348 BCE) believed that adolescents had a growing capacity for reason, which, in turn, allowed for the beginning of the study of science and math (Arnett, 1999). His disciple Aristotle (384–322 BCE) stated that adolescents were “heated by nature as drunken men by wine.” By comparing adolescents to the intoxicated he was suggesting that adolescence is a time of great volatility and turbulence. Now you know why schools have a zero-tolerance policy for drinking; just imagine what would happen if you combine a naturally intoxicated adolescent and alcohol.

Fast forward to the Middle Ages, during the height of the crusades, when a group of youths decided to organize the Children’s Crusade around the year 1212 (Runciman, 1951). Many teens from various areas in modern-day Europe decided to march in their own crusade with a goal of reaching modern-day Israel, the Holy Land, and usher in the days of the Messiah. They marched south through Italy toward the Mediterranean Sea with a goal of crossing the sea and reaching the Holy Land. Along the way many of these adolescents were taken advantage of by locals and were abused; others died during the journey. The survivors reached the tip of Italy and tried marching through the ocean waters, expecting that God would part the sea for them as he did in biblical times for the wandering Jews en route from Egypt to Israel. As they entered the waters expecting a miracle, many of the youths drowned, ending this tragic episode. This historical incident is emblematic of the idealism and the unpredictable nature common in adolescents. The combination of these adolescent characteristics often leads to self-destructive behavior, as seen from the outcome of the Children’s Crusade. Similarly, during the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau described the adolescent period as the “stormy adolescence,” believing that adolescence was a tumultuous time of life.

By the end of the 19th century, a new focus was emerging on adolescent issues. In the United States, this “Age of Adolescence” (1890–1920) ushered in new laws mandating school attendance and limiting the number of hours adolescents could work, changing the daily activities of adolescents in a profound way (Lleras-Muney, 2002).

The scientific study of adolescence began with the work of the first president of the American Psychological Association, G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924). Hall coined the phrase “storm and stress” to describe adolescence. In his seminal two-volume book *Adolescence* (1904), Hall suggested three key characteristics of the adolescent experience: conflict with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behavior.

The next shift in the historical thinking about adolescence came with the work of anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978). Mead spent a considerable amount of time studying adolescents in the South Pacific island of Samoa, where she observed that their transition into adulthood was marked by very little strife. As a result, she concluded that adolescent “storm and stress” was not universal. Instead, she suggested that the stress found in Western cultures was based on social and cultural elements (Mead, 1928).

### Present and Future

Several of these past ideas about the nature of adolescent development have served as the foundation for the overarching theories of adolescent development that guide current research and practice in the field. Elements of the original sin view can be seen in psychoanalytic theory, which will be examined in the next chapter. The blank slate idea is the forerunner to behaviorism and its emphasis on the environment as the driving force behind development. Finally, innate goodness can be seen as the foundation of some of the assertions of the humanistic theory of development, which highlights individual choice and our need to fulfill potential. Although less influential in the modern world of adolescent development, these ideas have had a profound impact on the conceptualization and treatment of adolescent psychopathology.

The modern study of adolescent development is grounded on a group of developmental theories reviewed in the upcoming chapter. As you will see at the conclusion of these theories, ultimately the current study of adolescent development requires an integration of theories and brings a multidisciplinary perspective to research and practice concerning adolescents.



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## REVIEW OF CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT



Development is the constant state of change that occurs in living organisms from the moment of conception and throughout life. Although all humans experience change, the change for all humans is not identical. The study of development involves learning about the different paths people take in life. It tries to understand the

driving forces behind developmental change and the way these forces interact, resulting in differing paths of development for different people.

The study of development examines three fundamental questions about the process of development. Nature versus nurture refers to the question of whether we are born with an innate, specific natural program that will determine the way our lives will progress, or whether our course of development is not predetermined but will evolve based on how we are nurtured, our environment, and what we learn. Quantitative versus qualitative growth asks whether development progresses very slowly and systematically, like advancing up a ramp where every increase on the ramp of life entails a minor upward progression, or whether life progresses in larger units of development where people stagnate for some time until reaching a critical point at which they make significant advancements in little time, simulating stepping up onto a new, higher stage of life. The third question concerns early versus late experiences—are the early years of life what determines the course of all future development or do we develop and change throughout life?

By comprehending how we develop and why we act the way we do, we have the ability to manipulate the areas of development that are in our hands and assist in creating a more adaptive life for others. Knowing what variables play a role in positive development can shed light on what we as teachers, parents, social workers, psychologists, and policymakers can do to improve the human condition. The exceptional advances in many social services that we have seen over the past century have been driven by new and evolving science emanating from the study of development.

During the Middle Ages the pervasive approach to children at the time was termed *original sin*. This approach, based heavily on religious teachings, describes children as being born of sin and possessing an evil inclination from the first moment of life. By the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Enlightenment, a new approach toward children begins to surface in the writings of the English philosopher, and first of the British empiricists, John Locke, who described children as being born with a “*tabula rasa*,” or blank slate. In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes children as innately good. The focus on adolescence as being a distinct and somewhat tumultuous stage of development can be traced all the way back to the Bible and can be seen in the writings of Plato and Aristotle as well.