

Understanding **ADOLESCENTS**



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**Who may be
You Or Your Children**

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Understanding Adolescents

Who may be You Or Your Children

Myths about Adolescents

1.

All adolescents are highly excitable creatures, especially when they meet the opposite gender.

2.

All teenagers must continue to be seen but not heard as they are still dependents at home.

3.

Rural or small town adolescents are more naïve than urban ones.

4.

Most teenagers are unreliable and irresponsible as they function according to their moods most times.

5.

Youth cannot control their sexual drives as well as adults.

Adolescence: 12-20 Years

Key Word: UPHEAVAL
- Changes and Adjustments

In the life of a human being, adolescence is a stage of drastic physical, emotional, social and mental changes. This stage may be long and stormy or short and sweet!

The 'normal' adolescent usually shows some evidence of emotional turmoil and personality change. In fact, some experts would go so far as to say that if he does not, then he is "apt to be repressed" and is actually failing to deal with the problems of this phase of life. Consequently, unresolved personality disturbances (hang-ups) may surface in adult life.

Looking back at my own teenage years, I acknowledge that there is some truth to the above. To outsiders i.e. non-family members, I was developing normally and well, but my immediate family members and I knew that I was going through difficult periods when I tried to express myself in ways that were strange to my dear parents who did not understand what was going on in me. We grew up in relatively different family/social/religious/national eras and with almost completely different educational exposures.

Well, if my parents had been given the opportunity to study psychology, they could have tried to encourage me to openly talk so that I could explain my pent-up emotions and opinions. As it was, I was left to sort out my own thoughts and feelings. Often, with my pillow as a companion (it must have soaked up bottles of tears), I poured out my heart to my heavenly Father who knows everything, even those things that I myself could not fathom or express in words.

Thankfully, my parents loved me enough to be silent supporters. Even though I most certainly will not be able to understand some of my teenage children's struggles, by our heavenly Father's grace, I hope to be a silent supporter too.

Let us now get a bird's eye view of an adolescent's life from a physiological, emotional, mental and social point of view. This will be girded with the biblical presupposition that each person is wonderfully made in the likeness of the living and eternal God.

A.
Perspective of Being Human

The Biblical viewpoint gives us a linear worldview of life .

A Human Being enters this world once



The Human Being grows up



The Human Being exits from this world into another

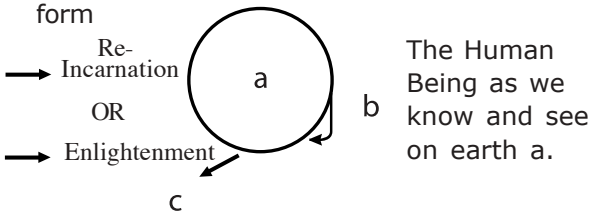
This means that:

Whatever we are and do has to happen and be done while we live on earth, with accountability to a higher Authority who decides where we will be after this earthly life.

Compare/Contrast

An alternative viewpoint gives us a circular worldview of life

We come from an Unknown previous life form



The Human Being as we know and see on earth a.

Becomes an Unknown life form at death and returns to earth b.
or Enter a state of unknown bliss c.

This means that if we fail to be and do something good now, there may be an opportunity to make up for it in the next life form.

In Either Viewpoint

(You Choose which You believe in),

According to what we see of life on earth now ...

Human life on earth may be divided into 8 stages, namely ¹:

Please note that changes occur in slow motion and not overnight, though infants do sometimes show such a phenomenon to doting mothers.

A person may be said to be mature for a particular stage when the milestone for that stage has been reached. The hope is, of course, that every person will reach the mature adult stage of life wholesomely.

P.S. If you see known adults somewhere in chart above, and think they have been fixated at a stage behind their age group, kindly abstain from comments ... accept and pray for them and love them. We may be in the same boat. We often have a little child in us that refuses to grow up now and then. We are not perfect yet.

STAGE	MILESTONE-KEY WORD
1. Intra-uterine growth	Acceptance
2. Birth - 1 year Infancy	Security
3. 1 - 3 years Early Childhood	Independence
3 - 6 years	Initiative
4. 6 - 12 years Late Childhood	Sublimation
5. 12 - 20 years Adolescence	Upheal <= current stage of interest
6. 20 - 40 years Young Adulthood	Search for a Home
7. 40 - 60 years Middle-Age	Peak-Plateau
8. > 60 years Old Age	Stress

Reajustment

↓

Acceptance

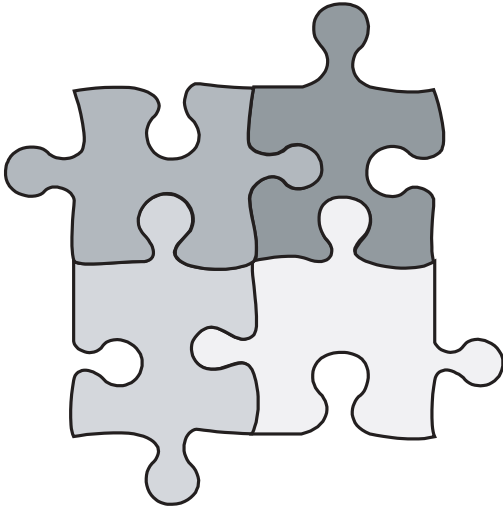
Reaction

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Depression

Being Human

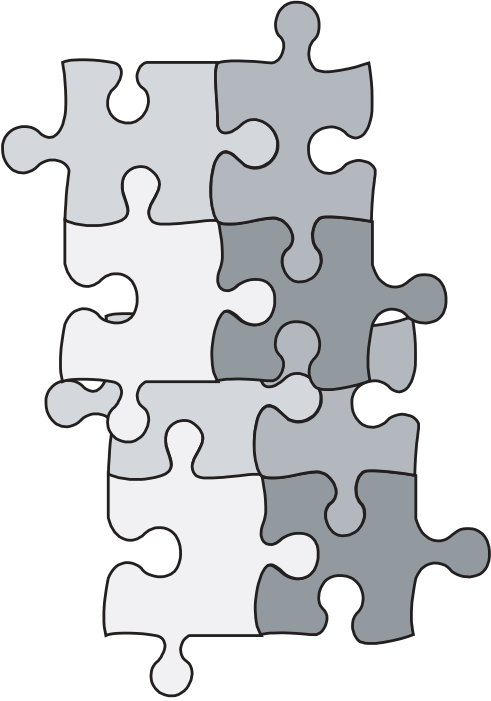
It's so Complicated ... !?!



??? ...

The Bible does speak of the soul, spirit or body of a person. Nevertheless, it is still a mystery to philosophers and scientists alike as to where e.g. a person's soul ends and where his body begins. But, basically, we may talk of the spirit as being created to communicate with God who is Spirit, the soul as that part of us which includes our mind (ability to think), emotions (ability to feel) and will (ability to decide).

*The pieces of life
don't seem to Fit ... ??*



Further more, this person does not live in isolation but in community with other fellow persons. Because God is spirit and is Three Persons in One (Living in Oneness of mind, emotions and will), to be made in His image means that we reflect His image together as the human race, not as individuals (Genesis 1:26). Hence, "No man is an island" is biblically sound.

We shall therefore view adolescents as people growing up in the milieu of the human community. We shall take into account how they relate with others. Their ability to grow through the earlier childhood patterns of behaviour (in their relationships with others), into later adult patterns, mark them out as to whether they have achieved the aim of simply being adolescents.

Question

Do you agree or disagree with the above research findings and why?

B. An Adolescent

You are at A Wonderfully Exciting Stage

You are at A Stage of Major Transition

From a Cocoon → You are
changing into
a Butterfly that
can soar ... !

From a Tadpole → You are
becoming a
Frog that can
hop out of
water ... !

“ BUT No uh ... ahhh ... ”
No, it is NOT a trick, *It's for Real*

- **A Stage of Tremendous Upheaval of:**

Thinking
Feeling
Powerful New Urges
Identity

- **A Stage of Learning How to Relate with Other Human Beings** all over again (since your early childhood stage ... probably in the subconscious now) so as to be accepted and caring and be able to proclaim ...

"I am NOT a CHILD ANY MORE!"

Therefore, the adolescent needs extra doses of *security, acceptance* and *stable guidance* before he can rediscover for himself his identity as a man or a woman, made in the image of the Creator God and Father of all mankind.

SOME DETAILS ...



Physical Growth

Secondary sexual characteristics, which appear and mature over a few years, is a natural phenomenon which attentive adults recognize in their children undergoing puberty. Younger teenagers, however, may feel awkward while adjusting to lengthening limbs and changing contours.

Mental Growth

From concrete thinking, where everything is clearly black or white, the teenager grows into the stage of abstract thinking where ideas may be increasingly grasped as symbols instead of reality. The idea of love as "pleasing the self" becomes more and more "a doing of good to the other".

Emotional and Social Growth

Living life on a Tight Rope, the adolescent struggles to differentiate brotherly-sisterly caring from eros or male-female physical romantic attraction. This new experience may affect some harsher than others...mostly still within normal range of trials and errors.

Emotionally, the young teenager experiences the swings (or yoyos) of life.

We shall discuss four of them in order to better understand and love them unconditionally ...

I *Vacillation*

Vacillation of moods, views and relationships commonly express themselves in the form of fashion fads, pop star or sportsman fads and puppy loves. Because they are fads, by definition, these strong feelings do not last long. This is usually a more attention-seeking selfish desire than a self-giving love, though some who later wed their childhood sweethearts, for example, may disagree.

II *Dependence versus Independence*

The teenager is caught in between *wanting to be completely independent* and the *realisation that she is still dependent on her parents* emotionally and financially. It is a normal process whereby the child is given time and space to feel the adult world and yet is still under the protection of her guardians.

The teenager needs to learn to accept herself at that given time while looking forward to becoming a more mature person.

She also needs to redirect some of her dependency on parents towards new figures of authority e.g. teachers, lecturers and pastors.

The teenager needs to feel secure while gradually detaching herself from his parents in order to become an independent person.

He needs to accept new ideas in addition to earlier established ones taught by his parents without feeling rejected by them. If he feels prolonged insecurity in trying to develop his own thoughts, separation anxiety or depression may result.

III

Escalating Instinctual Drives versus External and Internal Controls

With increasing sexual desires, partly due to hormonal changes in his body, the adolescent has to struggle between *being physically too close* to a person of the opposite sex *and isolating himself* from those of the opposite sex *altogether* (if the isolation is temporary, it may only appear awkward e.g. at parties; if prolonged, it may become abnormal).

If we read Genesis 2:18-25 carefully, we will note that human sexuality is a wonderful gift from our Creator God. All the thinking and the feeling associated with our *maleness* or *femaleness*, therefore, are good and clean when used according to His rules. But, in our imperfect humanity, we have a high

tendency to misuse this gift. Just as the wild energy of a waterfall needs to be harnessed by proper control to produce hydroelectric power for good use, the power of our sexuality needs to be harnessed by the holiness and the love of God.

Paul the apostle, in
1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, urges believers,

*"It is God's will that you should be sanctified:
that you should avoid sexual immorality;
that each of you should learn to control his own
body in a way that is holy and honourable,
not in passionate lust like the heathen,
who do not know God;
For God did not call us to be impure,
but to live a holy life.*

*Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not
reject man but God, who gives you His Holy
Spirit."
(NIV)*

IV

Intimacy versus Isolation

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

As the adolescent ventures into the wider world, he needs to establish new relationships outside the home. This involves a deeper sense of equality and an acceptance of his own needs and others' needs. The prerequisite for such wider and newer involvement is to have a

strong sense of identity. He needs to know for himself who he is. Otherwise, he may be overwhelmed by the other person's identity, the new idea or new impulse that confronts him, and loses his balance in his daily life.

I have noticed that this overwhelming struggle to find his own identity seems more likely to *surface when Asians are exposed to another culture, especially a more liberal Western one.* This exposure may be within his motherland or in a foreign land, though it will be more intense if in the latter. I have come to conclude that this meeting of two cultures is good because the young person is then forced to differentiate between his own identity and his family identity. Traditional Asian families often take pride in family names, so much so that the self is often not significant apart from his family background, for better or for worse!

Problems resulting from such an exposure may surface in two ways:

Either
the person fears new ideas or advice
or
he rejects his background totally, the latter to the detriment of his relationships with his own family members.

However, if he finds his own identity realistically, he will be able to return to his family and appreciate them even more; at the same time, he is able to plan for his life independently.

The crucial sign of having matured through adolescence into adulthood is the formation of one's own identity. The adolescent or young teenager knows who he is.

Hey, WE

just got to know

WHO WE ARE

Identity?

Identity is the *rootedness* of the self; it is the knowledge that I am *not an anybody* or a *nobody*, but a person who is of intrinsic value and am basically similar to but different from anybody else. The Christian is greatly comforted, as he goes through this long stage of upheaval and chaos, to know that he is accepted and loved by God, who never changes. He is secure. However, in many Christian homes in Malaysia, we are seldom encouraged to think about our personal identity in this way.

Many of us were brought up to feel that we are who we are because of *our natural families*; hence, *being a faithful Christian comes after* being a faithful son or daughter in our families.

One example is the way many Christian parents still discourage their children from obeying God in their vocations if those particular vocations are different from what they have planned for their children.

A young person who has found his identity in God will not feel so rejected if his parents' plans are not in line with what he thinks God's plans are for him. He will be able to understand better that the difference may not be so much in matters of loyalty to either God or parents but in whether he could learn to know God's will through parental advice. This also does not imply that obeying God always entails disobeying our parents. Far from it; God gives us parents to protect and guide us as we learn to follow Him and to make decisions of our own.

What, then, are some indicators that the adolescent has achieved a relatively secure sense of identity?

As the teenager achieves his own identity, he is able to take his place in a network of family and social relationships. He is able to accept that if others disagree with him on certain issues in life, they are not rejecting him; and if he disagrees with others' views, he is not rejecting them either. He is able to think seriously about:

- a. a vocation, and pursue after it.
- b. his modified new responsibilities to his parents and siblings, and later on, to his spouse and children.
- c. his social roles (in terms of community life) as
 - ... a brother or sister in Christ.
 - ... a friend to those he knows.
 - ... a co-worker in his work place.
 - ... a citizen in his country.

He is also able to increasingly integrate these roles and to draw boundaries to limit his responsibilities to each one as well as to sort out his priorities.

Observation:

We sometimes wonder how many adults are psychologically fixated at this stage of adolescence with dire consequences to self, family, colleagues and the wider society. If you should recognize yourself here, please seek out a pastoral counselor for help so that you may continue to grow in maturity as God's child.

In this process of growing up, he will learn to relate to each one in an acceptable manner and not feel unnecessarily guilty if he should fail to meet up to the expectations of others. If we should trip while learning to run, it is not a sin. Actually, false guilt may cause more trauma as an emotional trap, especially for believers of the Lord. When true guilt is confessed, on repentance, it is instantly removed by God who has sent His Son, Jesus, to take the punishment of sin for us. False guilt, however, may psychologically trap a person who then continues to feel guilty and worthless even after repeated confessions of the same thought or deed since there is nothing to forgive. The treatment is to recognize and reject false guilt in Jesus' Name. Revelations 12:10 may give you some insight into the cause of such emotionally tiring viscous cycles caused by false guilt.

Some Common Problems Faced

- The adolescent may rebel against authority as an expression of his search for his rights to be himself - whom he may not yet know very well. (This reaction is opposite to that of becoming shy and inward looking because of over-dominating parents or those in authority over him.)
- He may develop examination anxiety leading to neurotic symptoms e.g. tics, such as a rhythmic jerk of the head.

Explanation:

If good examination results are his source of acceptance by others and self, then to be a good student has become his sense of identity. The fear of losing that identity may create an excessive fear of failure. This in turn causes much anxiety which may be pent up and re-channeled to a certain seemingly harmless behaviour for release, often subconsciously.

That behaviour is called a neurotic symptom. Out of fear of losing a primary gain, he develops a secondary gain. This is an area

where the Lord often uses general revelation (as in scientific psychology) as well as specific healing prayers to minister to the sufferer. ²

- Difficulty in concentration in daily affairs such as studies, personal hygiene, household chores. This is due to his attempt to balance the fast flow of new ideas and responsibilities. This is more common in the early teens.
- Irresponsibility may be prominent as a subconscious cry for help. He may be feeling he has little in him that he feels proud of.
- Strong sexual urges that seem to suddenly overwhelm the boys and gradually dawn on the girls in wave after wave of seemingly powerful emotional upheavals that sometimes almost overcome common sense and wisdom. These experiences vary in intensity and in timing with each individual and are no respecter of person. Yet, the Christian teenager must know that no temptation is beyond the Holy Spirit's control if he would but listen to Him and take the way of escape that He provides (*1 Corinthians 10:13*).

Common symptoms of failure to cope with the adolescent's emotional upheaval

- sexual acting out i.e. behaviour motivated by desire to attract those of the opposite gender thinking that such relationships may fulfill her emotional needs.
- immature decision to want to be married
- suicidal gestures (call for help)
- overeating causing obesity - some boys or girls subconsciously want to be **un**attractive due to fear of someone of the opposite gender getting too near to them. They may be also be over attached to their parent(s). They are afraid of deeper relationships due to poor role models of fathers and mothers at home. (There are other causes of obesity, of course.)
 - use of drugs and alcohol
 - obsessive compulsive activities
 - failure to achieve a personally attainable academic or social level
 - running away

Great News!!

Common Signs of Achievement of Maturity for an Adolescent Ready for Adult Life:

- *Ability to leave parental home for studies or work without too much anxiety.*
- *Ability to exercise self-control over own emotions and actions, especially with regards to the opposite gender.*
- *Ability to shoulder responsibility for one's relationships with others inside and outside the family circle.*
- *Ability to do good to others, and not harm.*

Example of Psychological Fixation

Mr.Y is married and have 3 children. As a CEO, he has no problem with meeting the financial target of his company. However, whenever he cannot have his own way at home and at social functions, he throws a temper tantrum, to the embarrassment of friends and foes alike. As a child, he had doting grandparents who would side with him whenever his parents would not give in to his excessive demands. From the perspective of milestones (which is no excuse for not taking responsibility for personal sin), he seems to be fixated at the 1-6 year old stage: he wants to be independent and to take initiative to make demands, but has not learnt to sublime through trying to please others through good behaviour, especially towards his parents. Poor wife, poor children, poor friends and poor church members!

Reflection for the Adolescent

Take your time to Reflect, Journal and Pray during your daily communion with God alone. You may like to share with a confidant later on and pray together.

Take a few minutes to Experiment with the Exercise below...

Practical Suggestions for the Older Adolescent

- i. Think about who you are in relation to:
 - * God
 - * self
 - * parents
 - * siblings
 - * friends
 - * teachers
 - * pastors and church members
 - * those under your care e.g. church children, other young people

- ii. Think about how to build each relationship in order of priority.

- iii. Think about God's purpose for you, what your personality and spiritual gifts are, and how to match them to the work you feel is right for you.

- iv. Write these thoughts down.
- v. Look for someone you admire and trust, and discuss what you have written with that person. Many adults are more willing to help than teenagers think they are. Just approach them politely - they do not usually bite! If they cannot help, they may know someone else who can.

The actualisation of the dreams God implants in you may take months or even twenty years to realise. It took Moses 80 years; Mary, the wife of Joseph, 33 years. For Christ, the Son of Man and the Son of God, it was the cross before the glory!

***This same Jesus said,
"Anyone who resolves to do
the will of God will know whether the
teaching is from God..."
(John 7:17).***

For Parents' Self-Assessment ...

In Order to Help Identify with Teenagers

1.

*Recall the times when you were about
12 years old.*

- a. What did you look like? Did you like yourself and why ?
- b. How did you feel as a girl or boy?
- c. What did you like most?
- d. What were some of your ambitions, dreams and fears?
- e. How did you respond to stress i.e. by working it out with someone or by acting it out in some way?
- f. How did you view your father, mother and teachers? Did you trust them?
- g. How did the adults around you respond to your behaviour? [If negatively, what did you do after that e.g. cry, keep silent, felt hurt, go out with friends, smoke, use foul language?]

2.

*Recall the time when you were about 15 years old.
Repeat the questions above.*

- | | |
|----|----|
| a. | e. |
| b. | f. |
| c. | g. |
| d | |

3.

Recall the times when you were waiting for your Form 5 public examination results.

- a. How did life feel or appear to be e.g. scary or fun, bright or dark?
- b. Did you have a purpose in life then?
- c. Did have immediate and long-term goals? If so, what were they? If not, why didn't you?

4.

How has your childhood affected your adult life e.g. lifestyle, worldviews, ideas of God, self and others?

5.

How may your answers above affect your understanding of your teenage child's emotional, mental, physical, social and spiritual needs?

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About the Author

Dr. Lee Bee Teik (MBBS, Monash University) practised medicine till she turned fulltime homemaker.

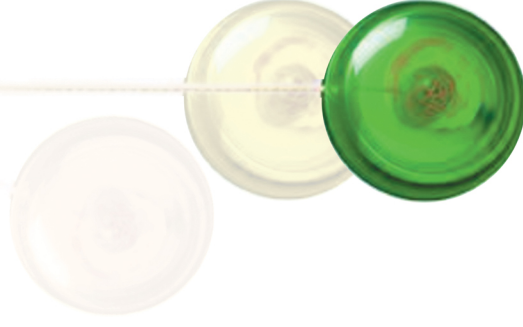
She is married to Dr. Hwa Yung and they have three adult children.

Having heard God's call for her to write in 1992, Bee Teik has penned books on prayer, pastoral counseling and her experiences as a Malaysian Christian woman.

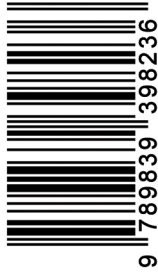
This series of 18 titles, classified under the overall theme, *On Being Human*, is drawn from the positive feedback from her seminars.

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