

LINE ON LIFE

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Adolescence – Developing Independence

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For most, adolescence is a confusing time of change and growth. What is happening? How can we reduce the stresses that accompany this change?

Not all cultures have adolescence. In simpler cultures, there are either children or adults – but no adolescents. Various puberty rites initiate the child directly into the status of adult in these cultures. However, as societies have become more complex, more training was needed to be competent in the role of an adult. In highly industrialized cultures – especially the United States – a lengthy period of adolescence developed primarily due to the amount of education needed to obtain this competence. The requirement of four years of high school has postponed the attainment of adult status for young people in our society today.

Adolescence begins with **puberty**, a time of rapid physical growth and sexual maturation. However, even when adolescents are sexually and physically mature, they lack much of the psychological and social growth needed to function well in our society today.

In the United States, society adds to the confusion by conferring adult privileges and responsibilities in a "piecemeal" fashion. Typically, this first happens by confirmation or barmitzva – usually around the age of 13 – which makes the child an adult only in a restricted religious setting. Until various later ages, adolescents are not allowed to drive a car, marry without parental consent, drink alcoholic beverages, or vote. To add to the confusion, the age for any particular privilege may vary from state to state. These arbitrary differences suggest a lack of logic behind the development and enforcement of the restrictions. Whether it is legal or not, adolescents want to have the privileges – the freedom – they perceive as being given to adults. For many of them, it seems as if the time will never come. (Remember when you waited for the days to drag by before you could get your driver's license?) This quest for independence leads adolescents to challenge, bend, and possibly break some of these rules. To this, society too often responds merely by making even more rules or increasing the penalties for the already-existing ones.

**If teenagers don't get practice in making their own decisions,
how will they know how to make responsible decisions as adults?**

To adolescents, it seems as if they are not allowed to make any decisions on their own. They have to ask parents if they can go to a friend's home or to a dance. They are told what to wear and how to cut their hair. In school, they are told what subjects to take and what books to read. Their time is regimented and scheduled from the beginning to the end of the school day. Much of what they study seems unrelated to their everyday lives. To add to this, many teachers fail to explain the **relevance** of their subject matter to students. (No wonder many adolescents feel that high school is a "drag.")

Once they graduate high school, adolescents are considered to be adults in many ways. However, if they have been strictly regimented and not allowed to make their own decisions, they tend to be unable to make rational and logical decisions. They have not been allowed to develop **independent thinking**. In fact, many parents and teachers actively discourage independent thinking, fearing that they "*may not make the decisions we want them to make.*" In the short run, it seems much easier to make the decisions for them.

Encouraging independent thinking does not mean that adolescents can do "*anything they want.*" It means that adolescents are allowed to make decisions they are capable of making **within the limitations of the**

situation – home, school, society. To make these decisions, adolescents need to be made aware of several facts:

1. **Along with every right or privilege, there come responsibilities.** They are not merely tacked on. It is automatic, like a coin having two sides. When you get the coin, you always get *both* sides. You may only see, the "heads," but there is always a "tails" underneath. All of us need to be aware of the responsibilities that come with the rights and privileges we desire.
2. **There are usually more than two alternatives to choose from in making any decision.** Adolescents have a great tendency to view things in black-white, "either-or" categories. They need to be reminded that there are many variations of gray between the black and the white. Rather than merely doing something their way or your way, there is usually room for compromise between these two extremes.
3. **As much as possible, they need to consider the rewards, costs and risks that go along with each alternative.** With important decisions, it helps to write the alternatives. Under each alternative, have two columns. List the rewards for that alternative in one column and the costs in the other. Include the likelihood of both rewards and costs. In addition, several "backup" alternatives can be described for known risks.
4. Once all these points have been considered, **let the adolescent make the decision and assume the responsibility for carrying it out.** If they are allowed to make their own decision (assuming that it is legal), don't block them from carrying it out. If you don't agree with their decision, you can refuse to contribute your time, money or effort.

An adolescent does not automatically become responsible when s/he becomes 21. Independent thinking requires experience in using decision-making skills. Allow your adolescents this experience before they become adults.

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