

Understanding Adolescence from Anecdotes of My Teaching Journey

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“Adolescence is a new birth, for the higher and more completely human traits are now born.”

—G. Stanley Hall

Every individual undergoes a series of transformations, right from conception till death, via the childhood – adolescence – adulthood process. Although the definitive period in years have been defined for each transition phase (stage) of life and is characterized by typical pre- defined norms, the behavioral characteristics specific to particular stages, and different dimensions ultimately makeup one’s personality.

Adolescence is the transitional stage of development between childhood and adulthood. It represents the period during which an individual experiences a variety of biological changes and encounters a number of emotional issues. It can be a turbulent as well as a dynamic period of one’s life. During adolescence, striving for autonomy, i.e., a sense of oneself as a separate and a self-governing individual becomes a salient task.

Psychologically however, adolescence as such is a vulnerable stage for both boys and girls of this age. They are easily carried away by perceptions, mainly generated by the lack of knowledge about a range of issues such as studies, career, sex, married life, society, religion, politics, or any relevant subject. The social implications of adolescent problems are dependent upon the social structure in a country like India, where family ties remain strong due to emotional, financial, and religious attachments. Thus, the gravity of implications is far less.

Adolescence can be a fairly stressful time for parents and for the family as a whole. Compared to parents, adolescents of all ages are generally less satisfied with the levels of adaptability in the family than their parents did. The main reason for escalation of conflict between them is that parents simultaneously treat adolescents like children and expect them to behave or act like an adult.

Effective communication is generally regarded as a focal point for good family functioning. Evidence from studies conducted on this subject suggests that loving parental behavior such as support, acceptance, approval, and nurturance augment a child’s self-esteem and improves their sense of competence. Conversely, having parents who are repeatedly disapproving, and insulting is also linked to low self-esteem in adolescents. Individuals subject to such condescending parenting need constant reassurance and may heavily rely on peers for affirmation of their self-worth. In some cases, the adolescents may also rely on their teachers to find much needed love, affection, understanding and a solution to their problems.

Socio-economic variations in a family environment may also affect the self- esteem of adolescents. Prior research studies on the socio-economic status (indicators being- income, education, and occupation) family

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functioning and human development indicates that social position influences families across time. Moreover, it was also observed that socio-economic disadvantages had negative consequences for both adults and children.

I too, am an individual who has passed through this adolescent phase. I have also studied in depth, the biological changes occurring in the body and the chemicals and hormones responsible for this transition. I have had the opportunity to peruse the theories of human development postulated by eminent personalities such as Freud's theory of Psycho-sexual development, Piaget's Cognitive (Intellectual abilities) Development theory, Erickson's Theory of Psycho-social development, and Kohlberg's theory of Moral development. Being the parent of an 8-year-old child and a teacher/mentor of senior class students for so many years, I can say this with confidence that what we are today and how we behave is largely affected by our family and social environment. Yes, other factors also do play their part but in the present scenario as care takers, our role is more challenging and demanding.

A common saying goes thus: *"A child's mind is like clay and can be molded into whichever shape desired. It is up to the parents and teachers to mold it into a beautiful and useful human being by inculcating good values in their young minds."*

I was lucky enough to be understood and motivated in the right way by my family and teachers. They were present when I needed them the most. I personally think this is the first and the most crucial thing to build a better relationship. My social environment was not entirely favorable, but as rightly said by Melanie Willard - *"Loss and hardships are unavoidable in life. However, how we deal with our pain is what will make us or break us."* I too gathered all my strengths to move ahead from all the adversities I've faced in my life.

I shall recount two anecdotes of my teaching journey here that will help you all to understand your child better. It doesn't matter whether you are a teacher or not because every child's first teacher is the parents and in each parent is a teacher, who wants to teach their children the beauty and the truth of this world.

Anecdotes

Coming of Age

What is the 'Coming of Age' that I am referring to here? I refer to the age when we all turn from teens to adults. It is the age when our body begins to develop and exhibit what is called as 'Growth Spurts'. This period is commonly referred to as '**puberty**'. During this time, our brain releases a specific hormone called **Gonadotropin releasing hormone (GnRH)** that kick starts the developmental changes.

Believe me when I say that it is not a laughing matter. Growing up is not an option, rather it's a necessity for the welfare of humankind. It happens to every teen, irrespective of gender, class, community, and our choices. During the onset of puberty, our body starts looking different on the outside. More than that, it brings with it some strong emotions and behavioral disturbances in the form of seeking identity, peer pressure, conflicting thoughts, mood swings, anxiety and feeling uncertain, being overly sensitive and constantly being conscious about one's own self.

For some new adults or better called as adolescents, puberty comes with a lot of excitement, eagerness and so many ifs and buts. Although they feel awkward in the beginning, by the time they get the hang

of the situation, most of them know how to handle it beautifully. But as every child is unique in his/her own way, so is their way of dealing with certain situations. Pubertal changes took a serious turn in the life of Niti.

Niti got her first menstrual period at the age of 12 (most common age for young girls to get their first period) while doing sports activities at school. Bear in mind that first menstruation is the sign that the hormones are working well in the body. In the midst of her sports class, she noticed that some of the notorious boys of the class were gaping and laughing at her. She immediately ran to the washroom and found that something thick and red was coming out of her vagina. It had leaked out onto her skirt and was now flowing down her legs. As she was not fully aware of this at that time, she started screaming. Luckily one of the senior class girls was there and helped her out in the best way possible.

After coming back home, Niti narrated to her mother everything that had happened. Listening to this, her mother had contentment on her face that her little girl had grown up. She explained in detail to Niti everything about the menstrual cycle. But Niti was disheartened, for just a few hours ago she had to deal with her menarche virtually all alone without her parents' help. There were so many questions swirling in Niti's mind for which she didn't have any answers. And perhaps these unanswered questions gave rise to feelings of frustration and exclusion in the girl. This led to her becoming insecure and lost in a completely different world. Next day, when she went to school, she was not the same confident cheeky girl as before but as a confused, shy, scared and a nervous child who was not sure of herself anymore.

The story of Niti is very common, as it generally happens with every second girl. But what is not so obvious and digestible for me is that if puberty is so common, then why the people of this 'sophisticated society' don't openly talk about such an important natural phenomenon? Why do teens like Niti feel anguished and anxious about their changing body looks? Don't you think it would be much better for us to discuss about these physical changes before they even happen?

It is certainly not easy to accept and understand the effect of moving hormones in our body that result in sudden weight gain, pubic hair, acne, body odor, chest lumps and voice modulation. Couple this with the double standards of our society, which on the one hand celebrates the attainment of a girl's menarche as a 'guarantee' card for her fertility and on the other hand considers the same girl as impure when she is menstruating.

Dear Parents and Society, as stated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, *"The age of puberty is a crisis in the age of man worth studying. It is the passage from the unconscious to the conscious; from the sleep of passions to their rage."*

We have to help our puberty-stricken teens to get through this crucial phase of life. In this case, I believe that the best solution is to provide them proper sex education at the right age. Our teens should get their answers about this 'social taboo' in an appropriate manner. As a parent or a guardian, show interest in your teen's school activities and encourage them to get involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, theater, and art. Create an amenable environment for them at home. Let them feel comfortable in their surroundings. Let them breathe easy without the fear of shame. Let them speak their heart out.

Let them embrace this new change. Let them enjoy their new identity.

NEET or JEE is not the End of Life

A 17-year-old Delhi boy tried to commit suicide for not getting a seat in the medical college of his choice.

With a cup of hot tea in my hand, I was turning the pages of the newspaper when I read this news. We often hear or read such headlines after the results of Board Exams or any other competitive exams. On reading this news, like any sane person, I too felt bad for the family. It also reminded me of Akshat. To give you, the readers, an idea about Akshat and what his story was, I would like to take you all back in time.

Akshat Jain, a student of Class XI in the medical stream, was a sober, disciplined and well-mannered child. He had an air of shyness about him too. I was the Class Teacher of his class. In those days, it was a rule that all the class teachers had to have their lunch sitting in their respective classes. It all seemed very bad in the beginning as I used to feel very uncomfortable having my lunch while sitting in a corner of the class, that too in front of so many senior students. I soon turned it into an advantage and started utilizing this time to interact with my students on a one-on-one basis to know them better. One day, after having my lunch, I called up Akshat. His head was down and was sitting quietly on the last bench.

“So, how much you scored in Physics? You have gotten the exam papers back, right?”

“I could not score well in any of the papers ma’am”. Saying so, he started sobbing uncontrollably. Within a few minutes, the bell rang, and I had to rush to another class. I told Akshat to meet me after all the classes were done for the day. After the school was over, he came to me and said in a forlorn voice, “Ma’am, I know I am not performing well in any of the exams, but I am trying my best to excel.”

“So where is the lack?” I asked him and continued “I have observed that you are a hardworking and sincere student who listens to his teachers carefully. But why is it not reflecting in your result? Is there any problem?”

“Yes Ma’am!” he replied in the same sad tone. “The problem is I did not want to study Science at all. I wanted to join the National School of Drama as I had always dreamt of being a famous Theater Artist. But my father wants me to be a doctor.

“Ma’am, I know that I am neither talented enough to clear NEET nor do I have any aptitude or interest in this field. I talked to my father many times about this and tried to convince him so many times. But all of this went in vain. My previous teachers know about this. Even the school counselors had a word with my father at the time of stream selection.” Akshat paused for a second and continued.

“My father was dismissive and told them to wait for my Class X results. During those 1.5 months, I was praying for my good scores but simultaneously, I was also feeling anxious about my future as I did not want to quit my passion and opt for science.” Akshat’s voice had become stronger and confident, now that he had someone to voice his feelings to. I let him continue talking and did not interrupt his flow.

“When the results were announced, I had scored a 9.6 CGPA. And this score pushed my father to think that I have the acumen of studying Science. The real problem is that I am not ready to put in the necessary efforts for studying Science” I thought that the last sentence was merely his perception and not the truth but chose to remain silent.

“Ma’am, my father is even ready to pay a hefty amount to buy MBBS seat from brokers if I cannot make it to any prestigious medical college on merit. Now it has been almost 3 months and I am struggling with understanding Physics, Chemistry and Biology. I really do not understand what to do.”

Akshat went on speaking everything, pouring it out altogether, as if for the first time he had gotten a chance to lighten his heart in front of anyone. After hearing his story, I could visualize where the problem was. I comforted him and said, “For the time being, you just focus on studies. Let’s see what can be done.”

Although it was not something new for me, it compelled me to think that how the fake ambition of parents to make their child a doctor or an engineer, forces the children to live their golden moments of life in anxiety and depression. A vast majority of parents want to fulfill their dreams and their ambitions through their children. I have seen that some parents put so much unrestrained pressure to make their children top their class that the natural development of the child stops. In India, hundreds of thousands of students are being taught the same syllabus and our so called ‘Modern Education System’ does the evaluation and grading of the child in such a way that there is no scope for creative learning or thinking out of the box. I want to share an excerpt which I had read somewhere, and it clearly highlights the lacunae of our education system.

In the forest, all the children of animals were asked to undertake an examination to award ranks. The sole criterion for awarding the rank was by the ability of the animal child to climb a tall tree. Our education system is somewhat similar to this, for in this exam, the child of the poor elephant will fail, and the child of a monkey will soar high.

Word spread like wildfire -- one that climbs the tree in a hurry would be considered the most successful. Everyone else’s life suddenly became meaningless. For all those animals whose children could not climb the tree immediately by jumping, coaching institutes were opened where children were taught how to climb the tree.

The elephants, the giraffes, the lions, the bulls, the buffaloes and all the fish of the forest enrolled their children in the Coaching Institute. Our son will also climb the tree and make our name proud, proclaimed the father elephant. And when the elephant’s son couldn’t climb the tree, the son committed suicide.

Know what your child is.

Are they elephant or lion, cheetah, hyena, giraffe, camel?

Or fish, swan, peacock, cuckoo?

Do you know if your child is an ant?

And if the child is, don’t be frustrated and disappointed.

The ant is the hardest-working animal on earth and can lift a thousand times more than its own weight.

Dear parents, please test your children's ability. Encourage them to move ahead in life rather than to follow the crowd blindly. Let them listen to their heart otherwise they might spend the rest of their life wishing they had. Remember, **someone has been awarded the Bharat Ratna even after playing the Shehnai**. And my dear students, who are appearing for Board Exams or any other competitive exams, please remember that you are the best in your own way. Just be confident of yourself, your abilities and strive to do your best in whatever you choose to do.

"Don't be a lost human being. Always walk with your head held high, with the values you inherit and learnt, not with the burden of regrets and hopes of life."

Reflections on Handling Adolescents

Impressionable children such as adolescents learn more by observing us, our behavior, and the general attitude of the society. So, if we want to mold a child in a particular way, we have to give them our undivided time and be a role model for them first. Therefore, we have to work on our own selves first. The following presents a few points on how we can go about in achieving it.

- Do you want your child to disown his/her principles and values of yours if incompatible? We have to understand them from their point of view, without imposing our thought process, perspectives and our expectations on them. We need to know the reason what makes them the way they are.
- Whatever lies around us in the form of non-living and living beings differ from each other in many aspects and we humans, the ultimate creation of God are no exception to this. Each one of us has our own individuality and certain distinctive abilities. Try to understand these individual differences.
- Do you remember the story of the hare and the tortoise? The moral of it was that *slow and steady wins the race*. Don't consider your child like a machine or a computer processor unit in which you will feed the input and get output in no time. Meaningful knowledge needs time to be assimilated in the mind. So let children learn at their own speed and interest level. In addition to this, discuss with them that 'Winning is not everything'. Sometimes learning lessons from failures is equally worthy.
- Let them explore, experiment and experience. Learning by doing is the best way to solve a problem.
- Did you ever compare your child with others and wish if he/she was like them? As we are living in a competitive society, it is no surprise that we expect excellence from our child. But this is not good for their mental health. Emotions may take the place of rational thinking and they might follow the wrong path to fulfill your expectations.
 - Don't humiliate or belittle your child in front of others, especially their peers. Sarcastic comments are always demoralizing. Keep your criticism specific to the behavior or an issue rather than making personal statements on character and personality.
 - Were you available whole heartedly when your child was lonely, stressed or lost? In that case, did you listen to him/her and comforted him/her or just scolded him/her without knowing the root cause of the problem? Remember the key is-- Deal with their aggression and negative behavior in a calm and constructive way. Encourage them to develop and follow a set of rules to abide by the society.

- We have to offer them positive support and show confidence in their abilities and delegate responsibilities to them.
- The gratification of desires needs motivation and positive reinforcement. There is an important term in Psychology called ‘Conditioning.’ It is the process of making a person believe in something or behave in a certain way by rewarding or punishing him each time an action is performed.

We are all exposed to conditioning in our day to day lives. For example, a father, when he comes home from office, always rebukes and punishes his child without caring to know the basic reason, may condition his child to fear him or develop anxiety at the time of the father’s return. Similarly, a teacher with defective methods of teaching or improper behavior may condition a child to develop distaste and hatred towards them, the subject they teach and even the school environment as a whole.

In a more complex case, a young woman who has had several unfortunate encounters with adult males may become so conscious in the presence of any adult male that she is unable to have normal social relations with them, let alone satisfactory sexual ones.

Thus, much of our behavior towards interests, attitudes, habits, sense of belongingness, criticism, moods, and temperaments, is to a great extent learned. This learned pattern of one’s behavior is acquired through conditioning. Conditioning not only helps in learning what is desirable but also helps in eliminating, avoiding or unlearning undesirable habits, unhealthy attitudes, superstitions, fear and phobias through de-conditioning.

So, proper conditioning of the child, particularly related to manner, behavior and beliefs during childhood and adolescence phases of life is imperative in today’s world.

- Being kind, considerate, honest, generous, and respectful towards each other can work for all situations.
- And if it is difficult to understand or evolve with them, then give them unconditional love without any doubt or any question.

Having mentioned these points, it doesn’t mean that we as a parent, teacher or a well-wisher should blindly accept what today’s teens demand and expect from us. We have to be a source of support and guidance. We should try to be a friend with them rather than being strict or authoritarian. Providing a stable, safe, and loving home environment and creating a culture of open communication is a must to avoid the conflicts between you and the child.