

Teen-STAGEers, Ages 14 - 18

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This synopsis applies to students of high school, the ADOLESCENT STAGE of ages 14 to 18,

Adolescence is the transition stage from childhood to adulthood. Originally considered the teen years, psychologists now extend the period of adolescence to age 25 because it takes some individuals longer to integrate security, autonomy, initiative, and industry into an identity that is capable of facing the challenges of an adult in community.

Adolescence is a time of rapid change physically, emotionally, relationally, and socially. Adolescent life is like riding a rollercoaster. It is a time of stress for teens, parents and teachers! It is an intense time marked by growth spurts, the appearance of secondary sex characteristics, sex glands, and acne; mood swings, sexual feelings, impulsive behavior, and general anxiety about growing up and facing the future. Adolescence brings a new sense of self that defines—and is defined by—attitudes and values as well as relationships with parents and peers; the ability to think abstractly, to theorize, hypothesize, analyze, and synthesize. Adolescents establish a sexual and social identity through friendships, crushes, and love.

THE EMOTIONAL-AFFECTIVE SELF

Adolescents, ages 14-18, develop habits of the heart in three ways:

1. Hone the values that were introduced in earlier childhood.
2. Develop age-appropriate ways to relate through affective skills like sharing, empathy, compassion, self-control, appreciation, sensitivity to others' needs, sympathy, sorrow, regret, and guilt.
3. Practice social virtues like patience, understanding, generosity, helpfulness, and respectful acceptance of differences.

THE SOCIAL SELF

Direct focus **now** to Stage 5 while you continue to strengthen previous stages 1-4:

Stage 1 task	Resolve the tension between <i>Trust vs. Mistrust</i>	(Birth--Toddler Stage)
Stage 2 task	Resolve the tension between <i>Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt/Compulsion</i>	(Toddler Stage)
Stage 3 task	Resolve the tension between <i>Initiative vs. Guilt/Inhibition</i>	(Pre-School Stage)
Stage 4 task	Resolve the tension between <i>Industry vs. Inferiority/Inertia</i>	(Elementary School Stage)



Psycho-social theory **STAGE 5** is the major psycho-social task of the high school years. A sense of *devotion* and the ego-quality of *fidelity* develop when adolescents resolve the tension between establishing a *positive identity* versus being in a state of confusion or isolation about their *role* in life. ***Identity is who I think I am at my deepest core.*** Objectively speaking, we are precious, irreplaceable gifts of God made in God's image. But subjectively we are capable of thinking of ourselves in negative terms. Thinking affects acting! ***Identity is the integration of life experiences into a unity and persistence in personality;*** it gives the person a basic confidence, an inner experience of continuity or sameness, even in the midst of confusion or change.

It is difficult to express adequately how essential the positive resolution of identity is to the welfare of an adolescent. A person without a well-formed identity will encounter one problem after another during his adult life. A person evolves into an emotionally mature adult only when he has satisfactorily resolved the developmental tasks of adolescence:

- (1) **setting and achieving goals**
- (2) **facing adult challenges**
- (3) **exercising mature relations with peers of both sexes**
- (4) **emotional independence of adults**
- (5) **accepting personal appearance**
- (6) **recognizing personal worth and competence.**

Suggested Teacher Practices: Encourage teens to take reflection opportunities in order to recall the character choices that they made in several instances and then to recognize the patterns present in those instances. Encourage short term goals. Provide teens with the support necessary to become organized and to follow-through with proactive behaviors. Mentor teens in financial matters: earning money, budgeting, managing finances and assuming financial responsibility in significant areas. Demonstrate recognition of the personal worth and contribution of teens. Expect teens to give accountable participation and contribution to family, teams, groups, friends, and responsibilities. Support occupational choices. Be respectful regarding a teen's efforts to clarify his/her sex role. Be sensitive and helpful to an adolescent's desire to accept/improve personal appearance.

THE THINKING SELF

It is not until the end of high school years that adolescents are likely to attack a problem by forming hypotheses, mentally sorting out solutions, and systematically testing the most promising leads.

- Reality becomes secondary to possibility.
- Teens enjoy thinking future, forming theories, and thinking about thinking!
- Teens anticipate possible eventualities.
- Teens make logical deduction by implication using forms of "if", "or", "then", "either."
- Teens begin to comprehend relationships of geometry and proportion.
- Teens develop the concept of probability.
- Their major interest centers in weighing, classifying, and evaluating differing social points of view.
- Teens can complete an experiment mentally and symbolically without needing concrete proof for final conclusions.
- Teens show the ability to formulate their own creative written and oral expressions.

Suggested Parent Practices

- Explain ideas verbally and symbolically.
- Help the teen to master general rules and principles.
- Present moral dilemmas.
- Use scientific method.
- Encourage teens to hypothesize, to imagine how things "could be."
- Provide opportunities to theorize.
- Create situations that invite mental *disequilibrium* (discomfort)
- Engage the teen in higher level thinking activities of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

THE MORAL SELF

Stage Four people are oriented toward authority, fixed rules of society, and to maintaining the social order for its own sake. They adopt social expectations without considering the underlying ethical principles involved. Stage fours are characterized by responsibility to the system, a "duty first"

attitude, law and order thinking, assuming that leaders must be right, and feeling guilty about rule breaking. To a *Stage Four* mind:

- Right is fulfilling responsibility to the social system to which I belong.
- Good is keeping the system from falling apart and maintaining self-respect because I keep my commitments and I fulfill my obligations to society's rules.
- My internal law in late adolescence is "I'll do my duty."

Teacher Practices that transition a maturing adolescent from Stage 4 to Stage 5:

1. Encourage independent conscience based on self-respect and social responsibility.
2. Develop a sense of the common good.
3. Foster initiative and industry with emphasis on service to the human family.
4. Openly discuss ethical issues, controversial topics, and moral dilemmas.
5. Practice the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

THE SPIRITUAL SELF

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith Searching Stage

"During adolescence, children become aware of others. Peers become very important. They find that other people have different ways of understanding themselves and the world, and that even their own self-understandings may conflict with each other. They must decide which values will guide their lives. They also become very sensitive to the opinions of their peers. Faith at this stage, then, is *synthetic* because it involves piecing together a coherent sense of one's self and commitments. It is *conventional* because community values and attitudes are highly influential in shaping that faith. Faith at this stage is deeply held but is not very self-reflective. People know clearly what they believe, but may have difficulty saying why. The strength of this stage is the development of a personal sense of faith. The danger is that desire to please others can keep the child from seeking his or her own integrity."¹

Stage appropriate ways to foster faith at the adolescent stage include the following suggestions:

- Recognize that the young person is forming his or her own faith and that it will most likely be different from the faith of parents or teachers.
- Talk with teens about your own faith journey, how your own faith has grown or changed.
- Understand that younger adolescents (12-14) “build their faith identity upon the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the Christian community.”²
- Respect that older adolescents (14-17) “are beginning to reflect critically on the community’s faith, seeking to establish a personally-owned faith identity.”³
- Discover multiple images of God. Practice prayer of petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise. Continue guided meditation exercises. Practice Christian meditation, Centering Prayer, praying with the Scriptures, prayerful reading, praying the psalms, and prayer of the imagination. Maintain a journal (free-writing, composing unsent letters, writing dialog, prayer journal writing, conversing with the past, conversing with the present, conversing with the future). Create community prayers and rituals. Celebrate Eucharist with intention, attention, reverence and devotion. Explore the meaning within traditional prayers. . .⁴



THE RELATIONAL, SEXUAL SELF

Elements of our culture cause confusion regarding psycho-sexual development and the appropriate expression of adolescent sexuality. Too many TV shows, soap operas, movies, and MTV-style of music advertise promiscuity, disregard for human dignity, glorification of "party animal behavior," permissiveness, immodest dress, sexual body-language, the use of crude, vulgar conversation, and such. In this atmosphere it is no wonder that questions arise about what is acceptable behavior for adolescents who are in the process of sexual development. And on top of that, adolescence is a time when youth focuses on being accepted and wanting to be

included with the "in crowd." A teen hates to be singled out as weird, a "goody-goody," a nerd, or unpopular. **BUT** parents and teens need not be led astray or pressured to buckle under and to "go with the flow" if the flow is leading to dead-end choices.

Teenage years are the time for developing a personal identity that will carry us through adulthood.

- It is the time to learn our own personalities by relating with others.
- It is a time to learn how to name, claim, and tame our emotions.
- It is a time to develop self-respect, and that implies giving respect to others and becoming responsible and accountable for choices and the results of our actions.
- It is a time to apply what the Ten Commandments teach about relating with other people. The bottom line of Commandments 4 through 10 is that **people are precious gifts of God who are made in God's image. People are expressions of God -- not objects to be used, misused, abused, or discarded.**

Adolescence is a time to discover and develop the "I." Only a healthy "I" is capable of a mature relationship. A marriage requires two individual healthy "I's" in order to be a healthy "We." When adolescents jump into a serious relationship they stunt the growth of the "I." Once the relationship becomes sexual, it grabs most of the energy and it puts a freeze on development. Sexual relationships are intended for people who have already matured past their adolescence and who see that sex is but one facet of a permanent relationship. Mature people know that LOVE is far more than a feeling. It is a choice to do what is best for another person, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. A musician friend of mine expressed it this way: "Sex is just one high note in an opera. It is the hundreds of other notes that make the opera memorable or enjoyable." Adolescence is the time to develop all the hundreds of OTHER notes so that when the time is right, sex will take its healthy, holy, proper place.

Everything in creation has a GOOD, LIFE-GIVING purpose. When we use our gifts as they were designed, goodness follows. We are able to look others in the eye, be proud of our choices, experience joy, lightness, and have no need for secrecy. SEX is a part of God's design. Therefore sex is a gift, too. When used as it was intended -- **within marriage** -- it is freeing, a celebration, and private but not secret. Within marriage sex carries no sense of shame. It brings joy, well-being, hope, and all good things. It creates life. SEX includes foreplay, that is, activity that causes sexual arousal and readies the body for intercourse. For that reason, foreplay is reserved to married couples so that the God-given gift of intercourse can be enjoyed, bond the couple more closely into a unity, and possibly lead to new life. In a truly loving relationship, human dignity is safeguarded.

Age 11-15 is a time to develop MANY -- not exclusive -- relationships with people of the opposite sex. Adolescents benefit from joining group activities like dancing, bowling, swimming, and games that involve intellectual and social skills. Early adolescence is a time to be learning what qualities you like in people of the opposite sex. It is a time for self-reflection to identify what gifts you bring to a relationship

ADVICE:

Often, sex has a different meaning for boys than for girls. Frequently, hormones motivate sexual drive in boys while girls view sex as a way to experience intimacy, closeness, preference, and belonging.

Help boys to understand the dignity of women. Discuss how love protects the reputation of the girl, does not put pressure on her, wants her to be able to hold her head up high, to be honest with her parents, etc. Discuss with the boy that if he is not able to provide a home, steady income, health care, education for a child, and the intention of fidelity for a lifetime, he is not ready to father a child and, therefore, he is not ready for a sexual relationship with a girl.

Help girls to recognize that abstinence (self-control) eliminates the possibility of unwanted pregnancy, venereal disease, ruined reputation, "freezing" her emotional development, and the choice between adoption, abortion, and motherhood while still being a child herself. Discuss that "intimacy" and "sex" are not synonyms.

Suggest to both boys and girls that a good rule of thumb is "Make choices that you would do in front of your parents or grandparents, or someone whose opinion you respect deeply." Parents help adolescents by establishing mutual respect, responsibility, and self-control as the standard for social engagement. These qualities differentiate love from lust, the topic of a concluding poem:

Love vs. Lust (by Sebastian Temple)

**Love is a silence; lust is a roar.
Love is satisfied; lust wants more.
Love is a giving; lust only takes.
Love is a mending of hearts lust breaks.**

¹ Kille, D.A. (2004). Stages of Faith and Suggestions for Cultivating Spiritual Development. Unpublished manuscript.

² National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. (1986). *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*. Washington, DC: National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, Inc., p. 6.

³ National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. (1986). *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*. Washington, DC: National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, Inc., p. 6.

⁴ Koch, C. (1995). *Prayer Ways*. Winona: Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press., pp. 51-101.

and what qualities you still need to develop in yourself in order to maintain a healthy relationship.

Around age 16 or 17 adolescents benefit more from double-dates than private single dates. Teens who are mature are probably capable of keeping single-dating in a healthy, respectful level but it still diverts their energy and focus from the tasks of adolescence. [Refer to the section "*Social Self*" for the Tasks of Adolescence.] Single-dating invites temptation. It may take self-control to avoid "occasions of lust" but love does such things! Holding hands and goodnight kisses and walking arm in arm can be healthy, holy expressions. BUT "making out," that is, prolonged kissing with arousal as the goal, is in the "foreplay category." That's another reason for double-dating. It is a safeguard and natural support for abstinence.